New Archives

SUMMER 2016 - SUMMER 2018
POP CULTURE / CONCEPTUAL ART / BODIES OF WORK

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The Fast and the Furious: Remembrances

An unrealized work for collaborative film

Proposal:

A collaborative work, encompassing dozens of short films.

For each film in The Fast And The Furious series, we will take note of each time there is an accident or action in which a non-character was likely killed (For example: cars which are severely rolled, crushed by tanks, when entire buildings full of bystanders are destroyed via safe-pulling, etc. etc.)– and for each of these fatalities, we will create a short [fictional] "remembrance" film from the perspective of the bereaved person or persons who survive the victim.

Process:

- We will watch each of the F&F films, and take note of the time of each fatality (or fatalities), which we will collate into a large, online user-editable spreadsheet.
- Writers, actors, videographers, and other artists would be invited to participate, by claiming a victim (or victims) and creating a short remembrance film.
- The remembrance films should be approached with creative freedom; however, generally I would recommend viewing this project as an exercise in expressing bereavement and loss with a eye towards sincerity in a fictional context.
- Each remembrance film should be 5–10 minutes long. For the later films in the series, I would not be surprised to find the total length of the remembrance films actually exceeds the length of the feature itself.

Presentation:

As an installation, we could run the feature film (muted) side-by-side with a playlist of the remembrance films. The timing aspects of this would need to be considered; as most of the largest chase sequences in the F&F films happen in the 3rd act– meaning running the remembrances concurrently with the on-screen action would lead to a temporally lopsided experience.

Realistically, likely the best way to present this would be to select only the most destructive sections of the F&F films to be played (muted) alongside the remembrances– this would lead to a dizzying, non-stop deathfest, alongside these sincere, heartfelt expressions.
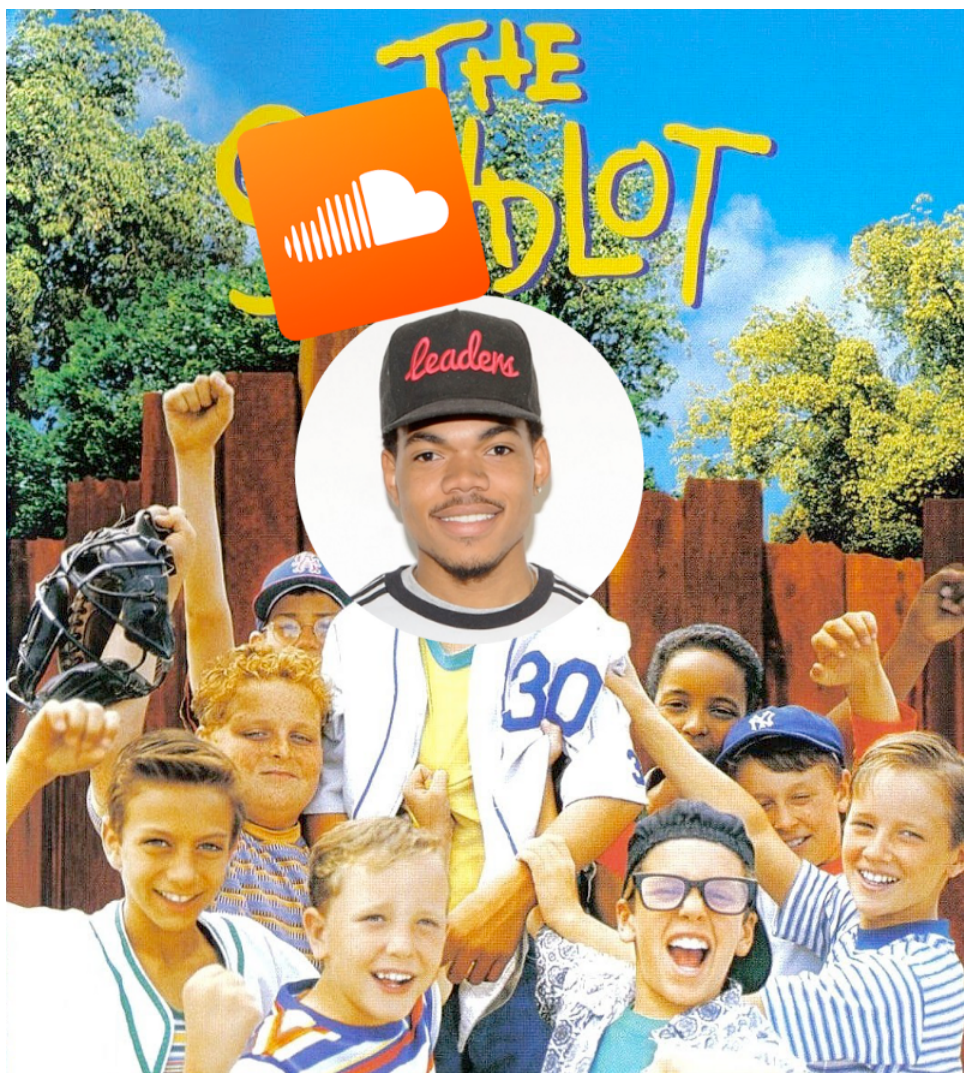
The Soundlot: A Bizarre Hypothetical

*What if Chance The Rapper leads a rag-tag group of underdogs
to save SoundCloud from Len Blavatnik's Access Industries?*

The hubris-and-downfall saga of SoundCloud careened into what might be its final climactic chapter this week upon reports that the struggling company had unexpectedly axed 40% of their staff, closed two offices, and only had enough cash to last until Q4 (about 50 days from now).[1]

While SoundCloud disputed that last figure and defended the firings as necessary for keeping the company long-term viable,[2] it's difficult to imagine that even these drastic cutbacks could bring the company's costs (and debt obligations) down to a level which their income streams could realistically cover. Because of this chronic inability to sustainably monetize—even after hundreds of millions in venture capital—SoundCloud's been on the ropes for years.

In 2016, Spotify was looking at buying SoundCloud (they didn't), and the roundabout asking price has plummeted from around $1B to $250M since then. In the mean time, SoundCloud continued to lose users as it failed to become profitable and made some questionable financial moves to prevent from completely imploding (like taking out $70M in debt financing earlier this year, as the VCs turned off the tap, declining a $100M ask).[3]

The VCs are getting desperate for some kind—any kind—of exit strategy.

The news of these most recent cutbacks broke only a week after reports that Deezer is now in talks to purchase SoundCloud. Deezer is a France-based streaming service which operates kind of like Vevo [ie: exclusive licenses for particular record labels and publishing companies in particular international regions]... and as of September 2016 is now majority-owned[4] by our favorite Ukrainian Oil Oligarch: Len Blavatnik of Access Industries (whom I wrote about extensively in an article about the finances of Katy Perry's "Chained to the Rhythm").

IF Deezer/Access Industries does buy SoundCloud, this would create a situation where both the "Big 3" juggernaut Warner Music Group and punky DIY SoundCloud would be passing their money to the top of the same food chain: a gigantic multinational conglomerate which owns or hold shares in everything from petrochemical giants like LyondellBassell and EP Energy to luxury resorts like the Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat (the premier "Palace" on the French Riviera).

Just as all of this was sinking in, an Unlikely Hero stepped up to the plate...

Chance The Rapper ✔
@chancetherapper

I'm working on the SoundCloud thing
11:09 AM - Jul 13, 2017

♡ 143K ○ 38.5K people are talking about this

I love this. Who better to shepherd SoundCloud through its darkest hours than a brilliant musician who used free online platforms to reach an audience in a way which would have been completely impossible before the circumvention of traditional industry gatekeepers which this technology allows?[5]

But here's the rub: Blavatnik is a multi-billionaire. In 2015, he was the richest man in the UK with a net worth of £15B. His company Access works on the kind of financial scale that's hard to conceptualize, where (for example) they had enough in the coffers to pay $3.7B in cash for Warner Music Group during the nadir of the Music Industry Contraction in 2011.

Now, Chance the Rapper is currently doing quite well, but his net worth is measured with Ms, not Bs.[6] The fact is, without some kind of outside help (or going into massive debt), Chance isn't anywhere near SoundCloud's estimated $250M asking price.

But what if he puts a team together?

Like Bruce Willis and his band of orange-suited misfit oil rig buddies slow-motion sauntering to their space shuttle; or superstar lawyer Gordon Bombay, forced by his own irresponsible behavior to reluctantly coach the floundering Mighty Ducks —what if Chance the rapper acted as the spearhead for a group of rebellious upstart musicians to save SoundCloud from the clutches of a billionaire industrialist?

This isn't exactly far-fetched, rap artists have a long history of engaging in commercial endeavors (from Adidas to Cîroc to Vokāl to Beats)— but the peculiar socio-cultural-economic factors of the late 2010s present a completely unique take on this idea:

In the 90s, popular rap artists often presented themselves in narrative contexts as lone-wolf mafiosos in a winner-take-all quest for the almighty dollar. In the 2010s though, both chart-topping rap artists like Drake, Future, and A$AP Rocky, and notable independents like Chance and lil Yachty now operate in narrative spaces of extreme ambiguity, both emotionally and economically. As Drake lackadaisically comments on If You're Reading This, It's Already Too Late, "10 bands, 50 bands, 100 bands... Fuck it, man. Let's just not even discuss it, man."

Just a few weeks ago, the New York Times ran an in-depth, 2,500-word article attempting to introduce their readers to the new crop of ascendant (though occasionally troubling) "SoundCloud Rappers" who have already captured the hearts and minds of The Youth.[7] That some of these artists bristle at being labeled a "rapper" and prefer "rock star" is illuminating; and as they adopt the DIY fashion aesthetics (and creative philosophy) popularized by punk bands formed in Thatcher's England... one wonders if particular parallels in the level of political turmoil and economic unrest between these two eras might result in some of these new artists adopting similar collectivist economic philosophies. Like, what happens if Lil Pump and Smokepurpp end up getting super into Crass?[8]

All this is to say: Chance can't do it on his own. But... he doesn't necessarily have to cozy up to giant corporations or reach for the poison chalice of Venture Capital. As the internet age moves irrevocably towards flexibility in all forms, the time for ambitious, large-scale collectivist experiments has never been more ripe.

And what better place to start than SoundCloud? Millions of people use it every day, and the primary reason it's currently circling the drain doesn't have anything to do with the actual website or the services it provides—it's purely a monetization and financing issue. If our hypothetical Chance-led collective can pony up the dough to allow the VCs to wash their hands of this whole debacle with some kind of reasonable exit... then all bets would be off, strategy-wise.

Combining the quick-pivoting (and fail-faster-ing) management of a tech company with (literally) radical new ideas from young musicians with enough wherewithal to participate in a project of this scope could prove to be a revolutionary experiment. What if we pivot SoundCloud into pressing vinyl, like Bandcamp? What if we pivot SC into a live event juggernaut, using data analysis to inform the touring routes and lineups? What if we pivot SC to exclusively selling fidget spinners and vape pens?

Even if this experiment crashes and burns in the most spectacular fashion, I guarantee the world will benefit from its existence in some way. After all, the Oneida Colony might not have survived the 1880s, but their afterlife as a silverware manufacturer has now completely eclipsed their, uh, youthful dalliance with experimental sexual and economic collectivism.[9]

In any event, if the alternative is the exact same multinational conglomerate owning one of the three most dominant commercial music groups and a streaming website that's designed to cater to completely independent artists… maybe adding one final insane chapter to the SoundCloud story before running the whole thing into the ground is the preferable option?

So here you have it. The Sandlot is slated for development, and the asteroids are heading for Earth… Chance the Rapper, it's time to get the crew together and win the championship / save the planet. I believe in you!

Notes

[1] https://techcrunch.com/2017/07/12/soundshroud/
[2] http://variety.com/2017/music/news/soundcloud-responds-to-techcrunch-article-claiming-it-is-almost-out-of-money-1202494837/
[3] https://www.recode.net/2017/3/23/15040560/soundcloud-70-million-debt-funding
[4] http://rainnews.com/access-industries-takes-majority-ownership-of-deezer/
[5] And, frankly, which might be increasingly impossible as these same online platforms institute new algorithmic gatekeepers to ensure their continued existence via the very same monetization stability which Soundcloud has failed to achieve.
[6] https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/richest-rappers/chance-rapper-net-worth/
[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/arts/music/soundcloud-rap-lil-pump-smokepurrp-xxxtentacion.html
[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crass
[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneida_Community

Fact Checking PBS' Soundbreaking

If it sounds too good to be true...

At the risk of undermining my own position, PBS' Soundbreaking is a series I would easily recommend to anyone who wants an intro into the history of music production and a light overview of post-1930s popular music.

But... the editors of this show have a nasty habit of including hyperbolic interviews clips which even a Wikipedia-depth fact check or 101-level understanding of music history would reveal as misleading or outright false. A giant asterisk needs to be inserted whenever you hear the word "First" or the phrase "The first time we..."

Eleanor Rigby's Danceable String Section

Discussing "Eleanor Rigby", Producer Tony Visconti comments, "For the first time, you're hearing a string octet and you're tapping your foot," conveniently hand-waving several centuries of popular European dance music for orchestra, Duke Ellington, Gershwin, Copland, etc. etc.

Bing Crosby Finally Makes Lyrics Relatable

Writer Gary Giddins tells us that "Crosby was the first pop singer to make you hear, and understand, and contemplate the meaning of a lyric." This quote is in reference to Crosby's revolutionary use of microphone technique and popularization of the "crooning" style of singing. It also effectively negates the contributions of every vocalist who ever delivered a popular song prior to the year 1931...

One wonders why a vaudevillian would even bother purchasing and performing one of the thousands of popular works from the Tin Pan Alley publishers, seeing as though any delivery of these songs would be met with a resounding shrug and yawn by an audience incapable of hearing or contemplating the lyrics' meaning.

Presumably at least one vocalist delivering one of Edvard Grieg's beautiful light songs, or an aria from one of Mozart's light operas might have prompted a listener to consider the lyrics of the material.

The Beatles Blow The Orchestra's Mind

George Martin remarks that when he instructs the orchestra to play a sliding passage with indeterminate pitches during the recording of The Beatles' "A Day in the Life", "[They] hooted with laughter. All their lives they'd tried to play as one man, and it only took a few minutes with The Beatles to change all that."

While it's possible they might never have performed this sort of material, presumably the members of a professional pickup orchestra would have at least a passing familiarity with contemporary orchestral works.

Iannis Xenakis employed graphical scores, indeterminate pitches, and soundmass writing for orchestra as early as 1953. Krzysztof Penderecki's Threnody drew international attention at its premier in 1960 and won the UNESCO award the following year; it was widely known in both the music and the broader art communities. Cage, Young, and the Fluxus #squad were well-known for using chance and other musical ˜weirdo stuff˜ in solo and ensemble settings well before '67; and Ives was doing orchestral weirdo stuff pre-WWII (although his work wasn't recognized until much later).

Wait... Is That Really How A Talkbox Works?

The editors of Soundbreaking decided to use Singer/Songwriter Ben Harper's explanation of a Talkbox... which is fun, but completely wrong. Even a 1-line email or quick chat with literally any musician who uses one would have informed the editors how bonkers his explanation of this item is. Here's how it actually works:

1. You plug your instrument into the box.
2. The box has a small amplifier and a small speaker.
3. The speaker is hooked up to the plastic tube which goes into your mouth.
4. What goes through the tube is not electricity, but soundwaves in the form of air. You use your mouth to form the words, in effect using your head as a resonator.

This is why Talkbox players still get up on the mic when they're performing. They're super fun to use, and will vibrate your skull a bit—but if you have "an electrical current" shooting down your throat, it means something has gone terribly wrong and you need to check the grounding on your mic or something. Sheesh!

The Beatles Invent Tape Manipulation

Radiohead's longtime producer Nigel Goodrich comments, "On 'Rain', it's the first time there's anything backwards on a record—and you could say that from that moment on, the rulebook's out the window."

Perhaps he is simply unaware of the work of Egyptian composer Halim El-Dabh, or French composers Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, who (among others) were experimenting with tape manipulation through the 1950s (El-Dabh as early as 1944).

Don't get me wrong: I love The Beatles. They were/are phenomenal musicians and songwriters, and their openness to incorporating material from the orchestral tradition, experimental techniques, and beyond the western sphere made an enormous and lasting impact on popular music—but there's no need to muddy the impact and reach of these artistic decisions with inaccurate and hyper-inflated claims. In many cases, the real history is actually much more interesting.

In Soundbreaking, Tape's origins are left a mystery—as if this medium simply descended like mana from heaven; rather than being a part of an ongoing series of fascinating fits-and-starts, including a detour into some WWII-era intrigue.

The discussion of synthesizers begins with Moog, leapfrogging the bizarre early experiments in electronic instruments, including machines like the near-200-ton Telharmonium; and more relevantly, Moog's primary early influence: Léon Theremin.

Nowhere in the episode about electronic music do we hear about Bell Labs, CCRMA, or IRCAM, where exciting and ~far out~ experimentation was being done in digital audio and synthesis. Just because these engineers and musicians weren't making pop music doesn't mean their work doesn't count.

These comments are focused on early 20th century and electronic production because that's simply the stuff I know offhand. Soundbreaking does a reasonable job of covering the blues, jazz, and gospel roots of popular music... but I lack the historical background to respond to those subjects in an immediate way. I'd be interested to hear from people knowledgeable in these areas.

In any event... I would hope that in the future, the editors of Soundbreaking and PBS would take a moment to consider weather the clips they are running are accurate (or at least "truthy"), instead of just picking the snappy sound bytes. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is—there's no need to bring internet-level clickbait quotes into these already rich narratives.

Requiem for a Quirk

A short preface to "Stop The Haunting: 1,000"

During the back half of the 2000s I worked for a small production company, making incidental music for TV shows, commercials, websites, etc. etc.

One of the funny things this job entailed was interpreting emails from advertising-side clients, who would often describe the music they were looking for in nebulous aesthetic prose. It wouldn't be out of place to receive a request along the lines of "Fluffy cloud music," or "The hardest music in the world. So hard it would make you pass out if it hit you."

This could be frustrating, but it also allowed for a fair amount of flexibility. Different producers in our company might have different ideas about what sorts of instrumentation, tempo, or production styles might be suitable for "Fluffy cloud music"—and our variety of creative voices was an asset when we were squaring off against other production houses for jobs.

But there was one request which popped up so frequently that it became a kind of in-joke: "quirky music."

Let's take a step back for a moment and consider what "quirky" might mean in a musical context: A quirk is an unusual behavior or characteristic; so in a musical context, we might consider a quirk to be a writing or production element, or a creative decision which is unique to the creator or piece.

For example: a rap song where the vocalist inflects upward at the end of every phrase would be pretty quirky. How about a string octet featuring a vocalist doing brutal pig squeals? Or a bluegrass song whose lyrics are a fiery, long-winded rebuttal to Jane Jacobs' seminal urban planning critique The Death And Life Of Great American Cities? As a producer, I tend to favor non-sine wave vibrato effects on lead instruments, which is slightly quirky, but also easy to miss if your ears aren't accustomed to picking up this kind of technical detail.

Sadly, none of this is what the advertising folks meant when they requested "quirky music" – what they actually meant was "An upbeat, mid-tempo, major-mode song with ukuleles, hand claps, whistling, and glockenspiel."

Exactly and only that.

Chances are, you will be able to instantly conjure this music in your mind's ear; but if you need some help, well... here you go.

We'd get a "quirky music" request once or twice a month, and we'd dutifully tune up our ukes, dust off our glocks [ed:!!] and rip through a couple of these puppies in an afternoon. By the time I moved away and started my next gig, I must have produced dozens of these tracks—and I was only one of usually four or five producers demoing for these spots... and that was just from our production house.

Joining the ranks of "Literally" and "Inflammable," these advertising folks had begun using "Quirky" to indicate it's exact opposite: to ask for a specific, uniform, codified style of music—devoid of any identifiable quirks.

I bring this up to illustrate how variable communication about art can be among people with varying degrees of technical experience and from differing perspectives.

Enduring a full hour of Leonard Bernstein using Chomskian linguistic theory as a framework for formal analysis might, in reality, communicate less about a piece of music to the Average Joe than a cute cartoon which provides a helpful visual context for the emotional and narrative flow of the music. This is perhaps an apples-to-oranges comparison, but it highlights the delicate position in which an art writer finds herself.

Living in the context-focused postmodern age adds further wrinkles to this balancing act; wherein process, externalities, or other meta-considersations may supersede or even obviate discussion of the artifact itself. Or to put this in a less academic way: sometimes the fact that a legacy band got back together and made a new album is more important than what's actually on that album.

On top of all this, workaday writers and editors must now contend with much more than simply writing to communicate their thoughts. As engagement analysis utilities begin to codify the diction and syntax used in online art writing, the tone and sentiment of language drift ever towards the repetitive, samey extremes encouraged by this practice—regardless of topic.

Lest I be unfairly characterized as keeping the dubious company of "Concerned Adults Everywhere", nervously hand-wringing over a world careening down the wayward path of above-the-knee hemlines and that newfangled Rock And Roll Music– allow me to clarify my position:

    As an artist, I have a vested interest in the way art is discussed and written about, and this is simply where I have most clearly observed certain detrimental shifts in writing tone and structure. I am critical of online art writing because I want it to be better. Not just in the odd corners of academic-leaning or technically-focused publications, but everywhere.

I face, perhaps, the uphill slope of the eternal optimist, but I will climb this slope with a jaunty whistle and a dopey smile.

Stop The Haunting: 1,000

A Pet Peeve Gone Nuclear. A Deep Dive Into The Internet's Favorite Art Word. A Modest Proposal For Online Publications.

Ever notice how frequently music and art writers use the word haunting? If you keep an eye out, you'll start to see it everywhere.

In the summer of 2015, I had an interesting experience: I emailed one of my favorite publications[1] when I noticed they had used the word haunting in several headlines over a short period. My (frankly) annoying emails received only a curt reply, but they did ease off the word for a little while.

I became interested in examining this over a wider swath—and luckily, I know just enough programming to do so. Over the next six months, I scraped, browsed, collated, formatted, and posted haunting quotes from popular music, art, and culture sites.

I've spent the last decade employed as a musician, and I've started writing only recently. I freely acknowledge the sweeping hubris of this project's scope, as I am still often making rookie mistakes in this medium. So, take this as it is: an artist writing about writers writing about art. Sometimes it's helpful to get a view from the other side.

As I closed in on 1,000, it felt like a decent place to stop and dig into all these hauntings. I'll get into the technical process a little later, but for now let's just dive right in. You can browse the tumblr archive or download the XLSX File for the full set of quotes. I've also built a lightweight guessing game!

Haunting Trends of 2015
Right off the bat, some broad trends became apparent...

Haunting Covers Were Definitely A Thing
Music writers kept their ears to the ground for the next Gary Jules. Additionally, recording haunting covers seemed to be a good way for musicians on the rise to get a foot in the door with some good press: the allure of familiar material coupled

with an excuse to employ the word haunting feels intuitively like an engagement home run.

The Haim sisters' ghostly, gorgeous rendition sounds like they filtered the song through stained glass quicksand—garbled, electronic low end replaces the original's slick, ethereal R&B sheen, projecting an ambiance that would be haunting if it weren't so damn catchy.
   Paste Magazine, August 6, 2015

Her haunting rendition of the former chart-topper represents "a sound I've always wanted to play with," as she told Rolling Stone.
   Billboard, October 8, 2015

For the film, the not-so-elusive chanteuse serves up a haunting, soulful rendition of the Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black."
   Vulture, October 8, 2015

The singer dropped by the BBC Radio 1 live lounge where she performed a uniquely haunting rendition of Sia's "Elastic Heart" (we didn't think it was possible, but she proved us wrong).
   The Huffington Post, September 10, 2015

...etc.

Hello From The Haunted Side...

As you might have gleaned from the last four quotes above, writers found themselves thoroughly haunted by Adele. To be fair: judging from Twitter's collective emotional collapse upon Hello's release, a more accurate thought might be "Critics: they're just like us!"

Adele's New Single 'Hello' Is Another Hushed, Haunting Piano Ballad To Break Your Heart
   NME, October 23, 2015

The interview's publication was preceded by the video for new single 'Hello', a haunting piano ballad, which she addressed during the chat, while we also learned

that 25 features collaborations with Danger Mouse and Bruno Mars and even sees Adele go disco on 'When We Were Young'.
   NME, October 27, 2015

Bruno Mars assisted with the showstopping diva's anthem "All I Ask," and Danger Mouse helped her channel "Sealine Woman"–era Nina Simone on the haunting "River Lea." Even pop-radio whisperers Max Martin and Shellback show up, for the playful, inevitable smash "Send My Love (To Your New Lover)."
   Vulture, November 20, 2015

And, of course, the singer's soaring voice took center stage, rising throughout the haunting chorus: "Hello from the other side."
   Consequence Of Sound, November 29, 2015

I dismissed the flood of Adele chatter much like I did every other public trend and went about my business. Case and point: To this day, I have yet to read Harry Potter. It was a few days later when a slip of the finger accidentally switched my Pandora channel from "Spring Break 1995" to "Today's Hits" that the haunting female vocals of Adele's "Hello" infiltrated my eardrums. The melodious powerhouse rocked me to my very core and I stopped mid-walk in the crowded city streets to collect myself.
   The Huffington Post, December 11, 2015

Ethereal, Melancholic, and Spare
Writers inked their quills and elegantly inscribed these Victorian-Era throwbacks. Keep in mind these are only examples where the words in question are used in the pull quote, meaning these three words are likely underrepresented here. Bonus points for elegiac.

She graced a cover without actually gracing the page, and all we really know about her is that she once wore a dress made out of meat. Haunting, ethereal artist Tula Lotay, taking a break from Warren Ellis scripts between Supreme: Blue Rose and the forthcoming horror title Heartless, joins the crew this week to finally put this least-seen goddess in the spotlight.
   Paste Magazine, August 4, 2015

What makes it of a piece with her earlier work is the tone—haunting, elegiac, and drenched in gloom—and her ethereal-but-raw voice.
  A.V. Club, August 7, 2015

Corey Hawkins nails the ethereal essence of Dr. Dre. Casting O'Shea Jackson Jr. as his dad Ice Cube was a stroke of genius and is absolutely haunting.
  The Huffington Post, August 7, 2015

This is best displayed in a run of three tracks during the album's second half. 'Near to Fire for Bricks' is genuinely haunting, almost reminiscent of the best of Coil or Current 93 in its mystical etherealness.
  Drowned In Sound, October 26, 2015

There's the ethereal, haunting organ music that opens, but there's also time for some doomy stomp, some post-rock stargazing, and a groovy, guitar-solo led climax.
  Brooklyn Vegan, October 29, 2015

Nearly three years after its homeland debut—and two years since it made its way to SundanceTV in the U.S.—the program is back, for eight more episodes of haunting, elegiac mystery.
  A.V. Club, October 30, 2015

It's both haunting and exhilarating, with Baar's brooding vocals crooning over melancholic pianos and thundering drums.
  Consequence Of Sound, October 5, 2015

It's hopeful and haunting, as weighty piano accompanies Nelson's melancholic croon over stadium-sized drums.
  Spin Magazine, October 9, 2015

And to me, this is one of the most beautiful sounds that I've ever heard in the Arctic, hearing this haunting kind of melancholy call of the red knot over the tundra.
  NPR, October 20, 2015

...etc

Process

Reminder: this is not data science, this is an art project. This distinction is important, because these workflows weren't designed to test a specific hypothesis or adhere to scientific rigor, but rather to capture a snapshot of a particular current in online art writing. I'll keep this overview brief, and use the footnotes for the nitty-gritty details:[2]

I pieced together Google search strings using publication URLs, date ranges,[3] and keywords.[4] These results were manually scanned to find quotes which met the following criteria:[5]

1. No real-life news which could be considered legitimately haunting.
2. No articles about the recently deceased, or artists who met untimely ends in recent memory [eg. Kurt Cobain, 2Pac, etc].

A round of scripted formatting was applied to the resulting quotes, and they were queued into social feeds. From there, everything basically ran on autopilot until I hit 1,000.[6]

I started this project around the beginning of the year, so I decided (arbitrarily) to begin the collection date range six months prior to give myself some wiggle room in case I needed it.

> Collection Dates: July 29th, 2015—January 31st, 2016
> Posting Dates: January 4th, 2016—July 28th, 2016

The posting range was 206 days, which averages out to 4.85 hauntings posted per day.[7]

The Publications
These quotes are drawn from 45 publications, which fall into the following rough categories:

• Content Aggregators / Clickbait (HuffPo, Buzzfeed, Thrillist, etc.)
• Print Magazines (Rolling Stone, Paste, NME, Spin, Wired, etc.)

- Music (Pitchfork, Drowned In Sound, Sputnik Music,[8] Consequence Of Sound, etc.)
- Culture (Vulture, Pop Matters, A.V. Club, Grantland [RIP])
- Games (Kotaku, Polygon, Kill Screen, RPS, etc.)
- ~Fancy~ (BBC, CBC, NPR)
- Hometown Heroes (The SF Examiner, The Miami New Times, etc.)

These were selected haphazardly: by familiarity, recommendations (both algorithmic and from friends), and through checking an author's other writing credits. There were some additional technical considerations which—unfortunately—prevented some publications from inclusion.[9] See [Appx A] for the full list. Quote Concentration:

The top 7 publications represent 50% of the total number of hauntings:

1: The Huffington Post	131 quotes, RT: 13.10%
2: Pop Matters	73 quotes, RT: 20.40%
3: Paste Magazine	72 quotes, RT: 27.60%
4: Sputnik Music	67 quotes, RT: 34.30%
5: Rolling Stone	65 quotes, RT: 40.80%
6: A.V. Club	52 quotes, RT: 46.00%
7: Consequence Of Sound	46 quotes, RT: 50.60%

While picking on The Huffington Post is a time-honored tradition, I think HuffPo's (winning?) score of 131 is misleading. I suspect we're looking at an XKCD population heatmap: i.e. HuffPo probably had the most hauntings simply because it published/aggregated the most content.

Though pinpointing the exact amount of content a website publishes is becoming increasingly difficult,[10] my friend Patrick suggested I could ballpark a "Haunting Score" by using the average articles/week stat displayed on some RSS readers.

These RSS numbers proved to be kinda wiggly…[11] but as we had guessed, ordering the publications by quotes per weekly average bumps some of the lesser-known ones into the top spots:

Publications by Quotes/Weekly Avg. [wiggly]:

1. Paste Magazine .960
2. Pop Matters .785
3. Drowned In Sound .667
4. Spin Magazine .420
5. Thrillist .354
6. Consequence Of Sound .264
7. Rolling Stone .258
8. Pitchfork .161
9. Stereogum .160
10. A.V. Club .138
11. The Huffington Post .135
12. Brooklyn Vegan .134
13. DIY Magazine .133
14. NPR .122
15. Kill Screen .115

Temporal Distribution

Skewing the numbers here, I was actively adding publications to the group through the first couple months, so the lower numbers through September are to be expected.[12]

December was by far the most haunted month. I have a few observations here:

- Year-end best-of lists and retrospectives appeared to be the major contributor. 60(!!!) of the quotes pulled in December come from these lists. Check [Appx C] for this full set of quotes.
- Q4 is a major "thing" for pop music.[13] There were likely more hauntings in December simply because there was more music being released. 2015's Q4 saw full-length releases from: Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, Elie Goulding, Grimes, One Direction, and (of course) Adele... alongside many other smaller artists. Additionally, The Force Awakens (released December 14th) also accounts for a small handful of late-December hauntings.

Hauntings / Week
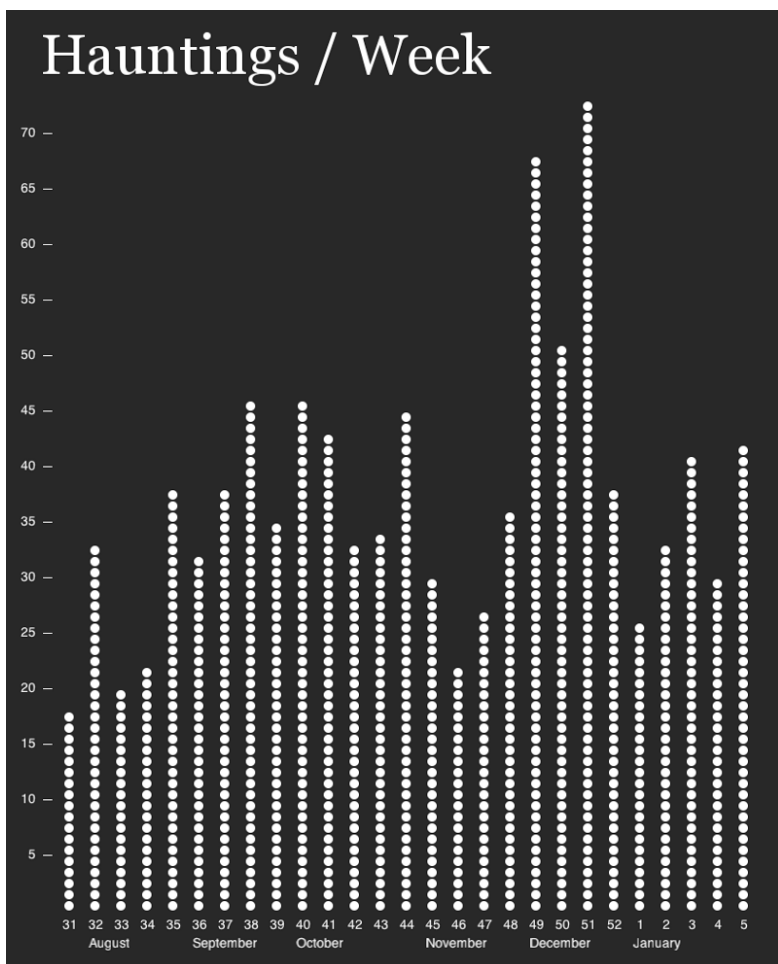
- I was surprised to find half a dozen articles referring to various Christmas carols as haunting. Perhaps this speaks to the nature of writers, who may be more acutely susceptible to those nagging Christmastime doldrums which sometimes affect the artistically-inclined. Hang in there, writers—don't let the winter get you down.

Lastly, I have a suspicion that the dip at the beginning of November represents a kind of "Halloween Haunting Hangover"; wherein writers and editors were so sick of October's spoOoOoky articles that they temporarily struck all spooky language from their pages (haunting included).[14]
Gone But Not Forgotten

There are a few key mass-haunting events which are not represented in these thousand quotes, but bear mentioning:

The primary one was the passing of David Bowie on January 10th, along with the release of Blackstar and its accompanying videos (which fell under rule #2). A Google search for "David Bowie Blackstar Haunting" returns 159,000 results.[5]

The release of Radiohead's "Moon Shaped Pool" on May 8th (2016) fell within the posting time frame, but not the collection time frame, and so is not included. Rolling Stone ran the headline "Radiohead's 'A Moon Shaped Pool' Album Is a Haunting, Stunning Triumph", because of course they did. This Twitter search for "Radiohead Haunting" paints a pretty good picture of how many sleepless nights Radiohead inflicted not just on members of the press, but the public at large. [Puts on reading glasses, sips chamomile tea, opens leatherbound book] "… Whither Haunting?"

I believe the pernicious omnipresence of haunting in online art writing comes down to 3 primary factors:

1. Lack of Specificity

With these workflows, you could insert literally any word into the code, and come up with hundreds or thousands of results.

For example, if you were to pull articles which use the word "brutal", you would get hits on the majority of writing about Metal. Likewise, the word "Sexy" probably appears often in writing about R&B. But these are siloed terms: you won't find many R&B album reviews using the word "Brutal", or metal albums using the word "Sexy".[6]

Haunting, on the other hand, is a linguistic freeby which can be comfortably sprinkled into any setting… and this set of 1,000 quotes absolutely bears this out.

Their subject matter runs a motley, absurdist gamut: from Alanis Morisette's "Thank U", to a viral video of a man accidentally lighting his house on fire, to the vocal quality of Don Dokken, or the haunting flavor of a particular NY Pizza.

Google's knowledge graph defines the adjective form of haunting as "poignant; evocative". Like haunting, evocative is an intensely general term—and is essentially meaningless if not followed by a description of what is being evoked.[17]

To put this a less generous way: haunting is filler. It raises your word count and "sounds appropriate" for art writing.

2. The First-Person Nature of "Haunting"

Here on the internets, we like our writing with a hearty dollop of personal context and anecdotes. This becomes most apparent in retrospective articles about the music of an author's youth, which often intertwine personal narratives with the additional layer of meaning the music in question brought to her life (or vice-versa).[18]

When an author uses the word haunting, there is an implicit first-person sentiment being communicated:

- The statement "The painting is red" is an observation of an objective quality of the art...
- but the statement "The painting is haunting" implies that the author is haunted by the art.
- When used as an adverb ("The painting is hauntingly red"), we get the best of both worlds: we know what objective quality of the art has been keeping the author awake at nights.

Throwing a sentence with haunting in an article can be a simple reminder that the author is present. It's a lowkey way to keep a quasi first-person tone active—which can be particularly helpful if the author doesn't have a prior history with, or strong personal connection to the material.

3. Optimization vs. Language

Any business which monetizes via advertising or engagement rates must take into consideration how to optimize its content to maximize these revenue streams, and the business of online writing is no different.

A quick scoot through the clickbait nightmare that is Medium's "Writing" tag ordered by most-shared provides a good introduction to the myriad tweaks writers and editors can employ to catch more engagement... This teeth-grinding post remains the gold standard.

I prefer to visualize this process as a complex ritual of bone casting to curry favor with a set of unseen internet deities—but I imagine this joke becomes less funny when your next paycheck rides on how many clicks you can pull for a listicle of Disney gifs.

Having spent the first few years of my career grinding out Major-mode, midtempo ukulele/glockenspiel/clapping/whistling tracks for commercials, I can empathize with the peculiar balancing act between marketplace demands and artistic output required of workaday writers.

I suspect engagement optimization in online writing is a primary driver of the hauntingpocalypse. The word haunting appears uniquely well-suited for this purpose because of its ambiguity: calling something haunting can easily read as a coded term for that most potent of clickthrough catnip: meaningful.

As the internet churns through material at a fever pitch, art which engenders a sense of persistence can seem an elusive bird. An author referring to Haley Reinhart's cover of Elvis' "Falling In Love With You" featured in a chewing gum advertisement as hauntingly beautiful also says—in a way—"This art is meaningful, and will persist beyond the current cycle"... whether or not this actually the case.

Full disclosure: that gum commercial did get me a little misty-eyed.

Creative Criticism

Now that I've harped on this issue six ways from Sunday, what can be done to actually fix it? Here's some actionable suggestions:

Writers:
- Try using a different word instead of haunting.
- Maybe ease off the throttle for ethereal, melancholic and spare, too.

- Instead, find creative ways to describe the specific features which make the subject haunting.

If your publication requires you to stay within a particular reading level or writing tone, try having some conversations with your editors to see what sorts of experimentation might be permissible.

Personally, I've been experimenting with technical specificity... YMMV. Instead of "Haunting reverb" try "heavily compressed plate reverb, the high end subtly crackling with saturation."

I would love to see more general audience music/art writers attempt to develop approachable styles of discussing their subject matter not only in aesthetic or intertextual frameworks, but also with technical clarity.

Editors:

If several haunting articles have come across your desk recently, tell the writers to cheese it... or just edit the article and send the writer a nasty email. You're an editor, being a hardass is one of the perqs.

If you are required to meet particular engagement rates in order to ensure your employment, try having a conversation with someone from your bizdev department about possible alternative engagement strategies (or workflows / optimization tools, etc) which might be less dependent on repetition of particular SEO terms, headline syntaxes, or churning out samey articles with repetitive, standardized writing tones and diction.

Readers:

Email or tweet at publications every time you find a haunting.

Be funny rather than insulting—they'll get the point, so there's no reason to be rude. If enough people do this, maybe they'll respond by altering their writing style (even if it's only to save their inboxes).

The squeaky wheel gets the grease. #StopTheHaunting

Notes & Appendicies

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] the leftfield gaming site Kill Screen. I think they've had some management / staff turnover in the intervening time?

[2] To the technically-focused reader: I am aware that some of this project's execution is kinda hacky and inefficient. Keep in mind that this is not my primary area of expertise. I firmly believe that, as increasing percentages of our lives are spent in virtual spaces, programming (like cooking) should be freely embraced by everyone regardless of skill level. Sometimes a homemade cake can surpass an expertly crafted one from a pâtisserie specifically because it was baked with love.

[3] Google uses the Julian calendar for this.

[4] The manner in which Google caches websites turned out to reveal some interesting SEO quirks built into particular sites' designs. For example: Pitchfork appears to use hidden tags, so occasionally I'd get false-positives on content which was tagged "haunting", even though the word itself did not appeared in the article.

Google's habit of caching recommended and sidebarred articles necessitated a nontrival amount of data pruning. When "haunting" was used in one of these recommended articles' titles (which happens often over at Billboard, Rolling Stone, and HuffPo), these publications would turn up dozens of false-positives over the date range.

Lastly, Google indexes comments on some sites... so that one time at the tender age of 14 you so boldly declared:

...just might be forever preserved for posterity, like the stately and mysterious hieroglyphics adorning an untouched Pharaoh's tomb. Unfortunately, this also means than users who wrote haunting in their comments also contributed some false-positives.

[5] As it turns out, these two rules eliminated a significant amount of quotes.

For example, during the collection period, the photographs of 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi's death were regularly referred to as haunting.

Unfolding matters such as this are far beyond my ability as a writer to touch upon. Topics like war and mass dislocation absolutely warrant the use of the word haunting, and are completely outside the scope of this commentary.

Then, of course, the passing of David Bowie in January eliminated dozens of haunting quotes—more on this later.

Also, October presented a unique situation, wherein I was faced with an abundance of hits... but most were unsuitable due to the fact that haunting was being used quite appropriately in its spooky sense.

[6] Initially, I had no real estimate for how many hits I'd be getting during this process. After the first few rounds or pulling articles, the hit rate was holding steady at "a couple hundred per month". Eventually, as I began to feel like I had collected an adequate number of quotes, the number 1,000 was close enough that it made sense as a stopping point.

Additionally, if I've made any bonehead errors, each erroneous post would only account for 0.1% of the total set, which felt "safe enough to paint a good picture."

[7] In reality, the posting rate is skewed towards the beginning of the project. I started by posting 7 times daily, then eventually scaled it back to a more sustainable 3-ish over the next few months. Also: I didn't realize until writing this how closely these windows align—this is completely coincidental.

[8] Sputnik Music is a website I had not heard of until I was doing research for different article. It's been around since 2005, and has the interesting distinction of being the sort of utopian ideal "The World Wide Web" was prophesied to bring about; wherein anyone is free to write reviews, and amateur enthusiasts freely coexist with grizzled professionals.

The site is considered legit enough that it's included in Metacritic rankings and Wikipedia entries, so I opted to include it here as well. Unfortunately, it's haunting usage is quite high—which I found to come largely from reviews of metal and various heavy sub-genres.

[9] There were several sites originally on my list which I had to cut because they were not indexed in a way which made them searchable; or didn't return results correctly using this methodology.

[10] Some quick searching reveals that websites now often construct their layouts and select their content dynamically, using an increasingly large set of tools... all of which can obscure "how much" a publication publishes.

[11] I used Feedly for this. To be frank, I am unsure of the accuracy of these RSS numbers—and some of them were demonstrably inaccurate or missing, which I have noted in [Appx A].

Astute readers will doubtless ask, "Why not multiply the weekly average by the total number of weeks and use a straight-up percentage instead?"

Haunting Scores (if instead calculated as percentages) provide an identically-ordered list, but appear very low as raw numbers. This is because these publications are printing articles about all manner of topics—many of which are not what I'd characterize as the "art writing" on which this project is focused. For example: Rolling Stone provides different RSS feeds for Sports, Politics, and Culture News, among others. Additionally, not all publications divide their RSS feeds in this way, so for consistency, I am using the average weekly value for each main feed (which collects all articles).

If there was a reasonable way to whittle down the articles/week into purely "art writing", I would expect to see these raw percentages scale much higher. Because of this discrepancy, I have elected instead to display this "less direct" metric for optics.

[12] All the dates used for this project are Google's cache dates, not the article's publish date—though, in practice they are normally same-day or only a few days apart.

[13] Most major artists who keep regimented release schedules can be expected to release something, if not a full-on album in Q4 (presumably at the behest of their management apparatus, aiming to capitalize on the purchasing uptick towards the holidays... but hey, maybe they just like the consistency?).

Further reading:
http://www.popjustice.com/briefing/q4-has-arrived-heres-your-definitive-guide-to-the-next-three-months-in-pop/ (Note: this article freely mixes fact with fiction)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_2015_albums#Fourth_quarter

[#Drama] Side note: last year Rhianna caused a bit of an industry stir when she pushed back the release date for the highly-anticipated "Anti" from Q4 to Q1. After 4 years without a proper album, this delay signaled some "trouble in paradise". Her previous 4 albums had dropped almost exactly one year apart (from '09-'12) in the shimmering glory of Q4.

[14] This leads to an interesting follow-up question: if (presumably) publications continued to print a consistent amount of material... without haunting articles, what sorts of articles took up the slack during this time?

[15] It should be noted that around this time there is a corresponding dip in the total number of quotes I subsequently pulled, indicating there is perhaps a finite amount of haunting articles publications are willing to print.

[16] Totes email me if you find examples of this.

[17] "The flute line is supple and evocative." 😴 ..."The flute line is supple and evocative, calling to mind images of hushed pastoral landscapes at dusk, and the smell of wild mullberries sweetly ripening in the midsummer." 👌 💯

[18] This article—in which dearest Rembert seizes the re-introduction of infamous blue liquor Hypnotiq by running the experiment of drinking a whole bottle in a single day, in an attempt to live out the 2000s-era-rap-fueled fantasy of adulthood he imagined as a teenager—is my favorite example of this type of writing.

[APPENDIX A] Complete list of publications:

Publication	Quotes	Weekly	~HS~	RSS:?
1: The Huffington Post	131	971	0.135	
2: Pop Matters	73	93	0.785	
3: Paste Magazine	72	75	0.960	
4: Sputnik Music	67	-	-	[X]
5: Rolling Stone	65	252	0.258	
6: A.V. Club	52	376	0.138	
7: Consequence Of Sound	46	174	0.264	
8: Spin Magazine	34	81	0.420	
9: Stereogum	33	206	0.160	
10: Billboard	31	419	0.074	
11: NPR	30	245	0.122	
12: Vulture	29	336	0.086	
13: Pitchfork	27	168	0.161	
14: Buzzfeed	26	724	0.036	
15: Drowned In Sound	22	33	0.667	
16: DIY Magazine	22	165	0.133	
17: Slant Magazine	19	6	3.162	[X]
18: Brooklyn Vegan	19	142	0.134	
19: NME	19	242	0.079	
20: CBC	18	258	0.070	
21: Thrillist	17	48	0.354	
22: BBC	16	529	0.030	
23: The Atlantic	15	259	0.058	
24: IGN	15	285	0.053	
25: Uproxx	13	288	0.045	
26: Vogue	12	243	0.049	
27: PopOptiq	9	3	3.000	[X]
28: Alternative Press	7	77	0.091	
29: Wired	7	125	0.056	
31: Kill Screen	6	52	0.115	
30: The Verge	6	297	0.020	
32: The SF Examiner	5	132	0.038	
33: Kotaku	5	261	0.019	

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34: Refinery29              5      518     0.010
35: Rock Paper Shotgun      4      108     0.037
36: Gamespot                4      354     0.011
37: DrownedInSound          3       33     0.091
38: Polygon                 3      161     0.019
39: Jezebel                 3      245     0.012
40: Hollywood Prospectus    3        -       -     [X]
41: Miami New Times         2      111     0.018
42: Harper's Bazaar         2        -       -     [X]
43: Dazed Digital           1       70     0.014
44: Deadspin                1      271     0.004
45: Artrocker               1        1     1.000   [X]
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[APPENDIX B] Hauntings by month:

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July:        17
August:      123
September:   163
October:     178
November:    129
December:    239
January:     151
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[APPENDIX C] Has been removed for space considerations (it's very long)

It's up here: http://devinsmith.work/zine/newarchives/Haunting.html

Corpus Companion: Nirvana

A conceptual work and two short essays (The Golden Age of the Archive & On Replication)

Proposal

Corpus Companion is a system for creating a complete Companion body of work, based on the parameters of an Original body of work.

Background and Procedure

The American band Nirvana was active from 1987 until Kurt Cobain's death in 1994. I will use its body of work as the example for Corpus Companion's working procedure, as it is well-known, well-documented, and "complete" (ie no additional material will be created).

Nirvana's Audio / Visual discography includes:

- 3 Studio albums
- 3 Live albums
- 4 Compilation albums [mostly preexisting material]
- 3 Box sets [mostly preexisting material]
- 2 EPs
- 11 Retail singles
- 8 Promotional singles
- 3 Splits [with other artists]
- 8 Music videos

6 Video albums [Inclusive of live concerts]

... as well as a large collection of (for lack of a better term) apocryphal material such as demos, home-recorded cassette tapes, and concert bootlegs, some of which have been released in post-1994 albums or leaked online.

Naturally, we will run into some grey areas here; such as 3rd-party artwork which was specifically commissioned by Nirvana for use in official releases. Also in question are materials such as official correspondence (both personal and legal), interviews, and works which were created but remained unused (such as alternate cover photos for Nevermind featuring a female baby).[1]

Along with this, a massive amount of promotional material (such as posters, T-shirts, and other merchandise) was—and still is—created in support of the band, by non-members of Nirvana (but inclusive or derivative of their works). There also exists a parallel and ongoing stream of criticism, analysis, and documentation specifically instigated by Nirvana's work... which I am considering a distinctly separate entity.[2]

For the sake of expediency, in this example I will be limiting the concept of Nirvana's "body of work" to the list of A/V materials detailed above.
A Single Work

Once we have limited Nirvana's body of work in this way, additional questions arise as to the variation in medium and intratextual aspects of a single work. I will use Nevermind as the example here.

The Discogs master page for Nevermind lists 360 separate versions(!) of this album; covering international releases (which sometimes have different record labels or distributors), different formats (such as cassette, CD, vinyl, or digital), promos for radio stations, and even sketchy bootlegs.

This dizzying variety of releases creates variance in the musical and artistic content of the work itself:

Some releases end with Something In The Way, without including the 10-minute silence and "secret song" Endless, Nameless. Digital versions tend to include this

Polish bootleg cassette of Nevermind from Acomp records. Note the track titles.

song as a discrete track, but without the 10-minute gap. Cassette tape versions include different amounts of silence to even out the length of the sides—and some (presumably) might include the test tones common to cassette manufacture at that time. More recent Deluxe, Super Deluxe, and Anniversary editions include an enormous amount of additional material—sometimes eclipsing the total runtime of the original album. Remastering, format-specific mastering (such as for vinyl), and different digital encoding formats change the character and technical aspects [such as the avg. RMS and frequency content] of the audio.

As for artwork and packaging: some re-releases have completely different artwork from the first pressings. The covers for promo versions are sometimes template-based and text only. Some CD releases had additional longbox packaging. Japanese versions include Obi strips. The color and marbling of the vinyl releases are highly variable, and there are at least three different official picture disc releases. These intratextual differences can be as minute as weather the inner sleeves of otherwise-identical LP releases are 90° or rounded; or even completely identical packages save for a different UPC or catalog number to indicate a repressing.

In order to proceed, we will need to select a canonical version of each work, and limit the scope of which aspects will be considered for replication. At this point, I

decided it would be prudent to obtain a copy of Nevermind to use in the following examples.


A 2011 pressing of Nevermind
See: Side Quest: Nevermind 1991 vs 2011 (following).

Identifying the Parameters of A Work
After some consideration, I decided on the initial 1991 US commercial CD pressing as the ideal canonical version. The copy I managed to acquire is a 20th anniversary reissue, but it adheres closely in most respects to the original (see the Side Quest for specifics). From here, we can begin to break down the constituent elements of the work, which I will do starting from the outside and moving inward.

Packaging

This album is enclosed a clear Jewel Case, and includes a 4-page, 8-pannel [ie: double sided] insert, tray card, and CD with on-disc printing. There are several different options for folding this type of insert, and the printers I checked described this style as a "Rollfold" or "Folder Roll".
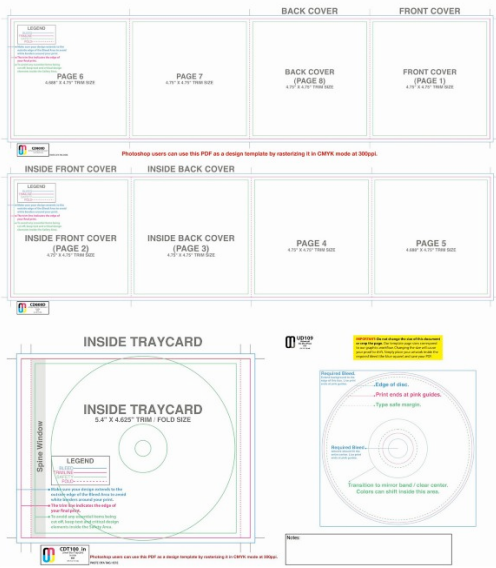
The outside pages of the insert are full-color, and the inside are black and white. Both the inside and outside are glossy. I am not savvy enough to identify the variety of paper and ink used by sight, texture, or smell.

The tray card is full color on the outside, and solid black on the inside. The original '91 pressing used an opaque grey plastic tray. The on-disc printing is one color with black text, which extends beyond the "mirror band" into the clear plastic area. The dimensions of these items are industry-standard and easily handled in programmatic contexts.

Artwork, Graphic Design, and Layout

The artwork for this album is a mix of photography, text, logos, and other graphic design elements (such as the black circle enclosing the production credits). These elements are universal to commercial visual art, and (again) are easily handled in programmatic contexts.

The majority of the text is informational. The band's name, and album title appear 4 times in total. Track numbers and titles are included both on the tray card and insert. The band members and other contributors are listed. The catalog number appears 5 times. The only non-informational text appears on the insert, which is comprised of lyrical excerpts and unused lyrical/poetic fragments.

There are 3 photographs of the band members on the insert. The cover and back photos are figurative (the photo on the back is of an assemblage by Cobain). A graphic design motif of stylized water ripples is used throughout the artwork and printed on the disc.

Audio Content

Compact Disc Digital Audio (colloquially: Red Book) is encoded in 16 bits at a 44.1kHz sampling rate, in 2 discrete channels [ie stereo]. In practice, when pressing a CD, one usually provides the manufacturer with audio files in a more common LPCM format such as WAV or AIFF. However, the CDDA spec includes aspects beyond only audio storage, such as an index of track numbers and start times, and other metadata.[3]

Nevermind includes almost an hour of audio, divided into 12 tracks. Aside from being available on the disc itself, track timing and title information are accessible through commercial online databases such as Gracenote, or in a less precise way through free sites like Discogs or Wikipedia.

Musical Content

Nevermind's music is based around a core instrumentation of electric guitar, electric bass, drum kit, and vocals; though additional instrumentation is sometimes used. Guitar and bass are often distorted, and some vocal and guitar performances utilize extended techniques. Recording and production features (overdubs, audio effects, etc.) are present throughout.

Structurally, Nevermind's songs are written in variations of the verse-chorus form common to contemporaneous American pop music. Most songs are arranged with sparser verses and denser choruses, wherein the guitars are usually doubled and the vocals are often harmonized. Polly and Something in the Way feature acoustic guitar and more relaxed performances.

Every song is in common time, though some include moments of free time. Notably, these songs feature a fair amount of harmonic variety and mode changes; perhaps stemming from being composed primarily on guitar, and being influenced by bands and artists with similar guitar-based writing.

Cobain described Nevermind's lyric writing process as haphazard, last-minute, and somewhat perfunctory; many of the lines were lifted from his previously-written poems. Owing to this, many of the lyrics are more suggestive or figurative than concrete. Often a song's sections will be contrasted; where one will use rhyming couplets, and another will be in free verse. Slant or off rhymes are occasionally used. Sometimes a single word or phrase will be repeated several times in succession.

In the body of writing about the music of Nevermind, its aesthetics are likely its most discussed feature. The members of Nirvana considered their music as existing in a continuity stemming from blues in the American South; but saw rock, punk, postpunk, hardcore, and new wave bands as their primary points of extension. In non-sarcastic interviews, they usually referred to themselves as a "rock band."[4]
Creating Companion Works

Once we've identified the scope of a body of work, and the parameters of each constituent work, we can begin the process of creating companion works.

Given the nearly unlimited range of options for this process, I've included the following list to organize my thoughts on the feasibility of different approaches. In reality, these options are fluid rather than discrete. This list is ordered from the most feasible to the least feasible.

1. Reject all parameters, and create a Companion Work of any type for each Original Work. This would require only identifying the scope of the original corpus, and which Original Works should be included therein. Companion Works of any type could be created quite easily.
2. Create a Companion which conforms to the Original's general form, while rejecting parameters related to specific content and medium. Eg. producing an album of music, of any length, style, etc. This would allow for the creation of digital-only Companion Works, which could include (for example) album covers, but would not require creating a matching amount of artwork to cover the insert, tray card, etc.
3. Create a Companion which conforms (or responds) to certain form-related parameters of the Original, while rejecting the specific medium. Eg. producing an album of music with a matching number of tracks, or track lengths, or in

the same keys, or using the same instrumentation, etc. This could include an identical amount of artwork using the same dimensions, an equal number of each layout element [text, photos, etc], or purpose of the element [track listings, catalog number, etc]. Optionally, if not conforming to parameters, the artist could respond to them [Eg. writing lyrics about similar or contrasting topics, using exclusively instrumentation absent from the original, etc.]

4. Create a Companion which conforms or responds to certain parameters and content of the Original, and conforms to medium. Eg. the same as #3, but actually manufacturing/creating the Companion Work so it will coexist in an exactly identical medium to the Original (or as close as possible).

For a reasonable balance of effort and artistic "effectiveness," I think something comparable to #3 is the strongest option. I like the idea of Companion Works occupying identical temporal and (theoretically) spatial parameters to the Original. While executing Companion Works, I imagine an artist would naturally respond to the original's artistic content and parameters in both conscious and subconscious ways.

Programmatic assistance could be used in the collection and collation of data related to an Original Work's parameters, and stochastic or generative techniques could be used to quickly create large amounts of material falling within selected parameters (which could be presented as-is, or used as a starting point).

The final step of physical medium replication presents by far the most challenges, including elements such as working with manufacturers to ensure matching packaging parameters, as well an increase in budget.

It doesn't take long to imagine how applying this system to increasingly complex or large bodies of work quickly spirals into the realm of logistical impossibility. Creating corpus companions for (just to name a few) Zhang Yimou, C.Y. Lee, or The Internet Archive—beyond only the most cursory forms—would prove daunting.

Likewise, using a broad notion of a "body of work" (which might include the output of governmental organizations, military generals, the commercial output of entire economies, etc. etc.) quickly introduces ethical concerns well beyond the intended scope and commentary of this project.

The Golden Age of the Archive

In August of 1991, a month before Nirvana would begin the Nevermind sessions in LA, Tim Berners-Lee rekindled his World Wide Web project; posting an explanation of the WWW on the alt.hypertext usegroup, along with a code library designed for the creation of web browsers.[5]

Kurt Cobain committed suicide in April of 1994. Eight months later, Netscape Navigator 1.0 was released to the general public. Nirvana are one of the last musical acts to have significantly altered the dominant trend of popular music before the mass adoption of the Internet in America.

At present, we find ourselves in the golden age of the archive. Our problem is no longer how or where to acquire material... but which material should be traversed, how best to traverse it, and which associated works and historical contexts should be addressed in the traversal.

Such concerns—once relegated only to the foofy realms of academia and criticism—are now relatively commonplace. Will your Twitch audience troll you if you skip the snowboarding minigame at The Gold Saucer during your FFVII playthrough? Should you torrent the FLAC rip of the original pressing, or buy the 180 gram vinyl reissue to get the most authentic listening experience—or reject outright the notion of an authenticity hierarchy? Prior to traversing the filmography of John Waters, should you first read Susan Sontag's Notes on Camp?

In recent years, the accessibility of entire bodies of work has instigated new projects in unexpected ways. Podcasts such as Denzel Washington Is The Greatest Actor Of All Time Period, Gillmore Guys, and The West Wing Weekly use bodies of work as a starting point rather than the exclusive focus—expertly honing the topical judo required to stay relevant to modern discourse. Bodies of work (particularly closed bodies of work) are easy fodder for internet light reading like listicles, #TBT posts, and comedic writing about an otherwise-beloved artist's questionable forays into then-current trends.

Soon pop culture writing will find itself tiptoeing into the ouroborosian nightmare world of hermeneutics; where academic essays on film or literature often devolve

(explode?) into catalogs and criticism of existing bodies of criticism of bodies of work. This is already happening (in a sense) in the form of articles about twitter's response to an artists' works or actions.

On Replication

Most of what I know about music production was learned on-the-job, and a good deal of it comes from the practice of replication—through the task of making "rips". For the layperson, this is when you receive a request to make a piece of music which is similar to a particular song, but not close enough to get sued. This usually happens when a director becomes too attached a temp track, but lacks the budget to license it.

This may sound like a dumb job, but it's actually hugely instructive. If you're assigned to make a rip of Prince's When Doves Cry, you will learn that it doesn't just use "some 80s drum machine"... it is called a Linn LM-1 and it has a very specific sound. After doing this enough, you will be able to hear into music production with a new level of clarity.

I have recently entered a period of nonchalant experimentation across several unfamiliar mediums. I have been considering how best to organize (and conceptualize) my body of work during this time, as I experience it wobbling into the gonzo zone where an instagram of a stochastically generated video sometimes feels like the realest version of the work. Do I want my dumb twitter jokes to count as part of my corpus?

As I continue to roll these questions around, my natural impulse is to take the thing apart and see how it works.

Notes

The header artwork includes material from the twitter bot YouTube Artifact, by dontsave.

[1] LA weekly interview with photographer Kirk Weddle.

[2] Of which, this project is (kind of weirdly) now a part. holla!

[3] The Red Book spec includes other nuts-and-bolts stuff like error correction matrices and subcode particulars... I haven't had to deal with any of this stuff since I was in college, when CDs were still relevant to the American music market.

[4] Notes for Musical Content:

• Kurt Cobain's top 50 albums: http://nirvana.wikia.com/wiki/Kurt_Cobain
%27s_Top_50_Albums

• A complete interview from 1993 with Erica Ehm: https://youtu.be/fe7q8yDPJFo?t=1m57s

• LiveNirvana.com: Interview archive, 1991 (Note: The graphic design is a little dated, but LiveNirvana.com has an astounding amount of detailed and thoroughly researched information.): http://www.livenirvana.com/interviews/index4.html

• Rolling Stone: Interview with Krist Novoselic, 2013: http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/krist-novoselic-on-kurts-writing-process-and-the-in-utero-aesthetic-20131003

[5] ARS Technica article on pre-Netscape browsers and Berners-Lee's alt.hypertext post.: http://arstechnica.com/business/2011/10/before-netscape-forgotten-web-browsers-of-the-early-1990s/

Side Quest: Nevermind 1991 vs 2011

Comparison notes and a personal letter from a friend-of-a-friend.

Selecting the canonical version

Excepting studio and manufacture-related items like master tapes and vinyl test pressings, the pre-release promos are the first extant versions of Nevermind. However, many lack the commercial artwork, and they weren't widely available for purchase. The initial 1991 releases feel most appropriate to use for this, but there is still the question of format.

Vinyl hadn't yet come back into vogue in 1991, and Nevermind lies right at the cusp of the mass consumer adoption of CDs. Cassette production peaked in '88, and '91 was the last year Cassettes outsold CDs—although the transition to CD dominance happened slowly through the rest of the decade. I couldn't find stats on Nevermind's sales across formats, but it was released in September of '91, and hit #1 in January of '92; so presumably either could have been the most-purchased format.[1]

Of these three 1991 configurations, the Cassette's artwork is the most divergent in regard to layout. The photographs are cropped and quite small (the monkey photo especially). The album cover appears to be designed for a square format, in the cassette it is extended downward with solid blue.

So, this leaves us at a toss-up. Though this is admittedly arbitrary, the first copy of Nevermind I recall seeing was a CD... so that's what I'm going with.

Tracking down a copy

Echo Bay appears to be the best spot for tracking down original pressings of Nevermind, but I didn't want to wait for shipping—so I decided to make like '91 and go visit a music store.[2]

The Excelsior shopping center is a great spot if you're looking for musical instruments, sports or camera equipment, and rock 'n' roll apparel (band tees, studded belts, bandanas, etc). A few record stores are tucked away in this complex, but (sign of the times!) they mostly stock vinyl. Only one of the four record stores which were open had a CD copy of Nevermind: Memphis Music in B1. Rock on

A JOHN WOO FILM

HARD-BOILED

CHOW YUN-FAT

AS A COP,
HE HAS BRAINS, BRAWN,
AND AN INSTINCT TO KILL!

GOLDEN PRINCESS PRESENTS A MILESTONE PICTURES PRODUCTION A JOHN WOO FILM
CHOW YUN-FAT · TONY LEUNG "HARD-BOILED" TERESA MO · PHILIP CHAN
CHEUNG JUE-LUH · ANTHONY WONG · BOWIE LAM & Y. YONEMURA
ORIGINAL STORY JOHN WOO SCREENPLAY BY BARRY WONG PRODUCTION DESIGNER JAMES LEUNG
ACTION CO-ORDINATOR CHEUNG JUE-LUH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY WANG WING-HENG HKSC
EDITED BY DAVID WU · KAI KIT-WAI & JOHN WOO MUSIC BY MICHAEL GIBBS
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER AMY CHIN PRODUCED BY LINDA KUK & TERENCE CHANG DIRECTED BY JOHN WOO

Memphis Music!

The version Memphis had in stock was a remastered 20th anniversary edition, but it is clearly aiming at replicating the original CD pressing. In order to make a detailed comparison, I reached out to my friends to see if anyone still had a complete copy of the original '91 CD.

A quick note about the streaming versions

In 2016, digital versions of Nevermind can be easily streamed or purchased from iTunes, Spotify, or Amazon—but all of these versions omit key aspects of the work. They all include the song Endless, Nameless… but not the gap of silence which precedes it in most CD and cassette versions. None include a "digital booklet." iTunes includes both the standard and deluxe editions, but does not specify weather the standard version was digitized from the original or 2011 remaster (the previews sounded like the remaster). Spotify's multiple versions have similar issues. Side-By-Side Comparison

My friend Eliot (whom I have never actually met IRL, even though we email all the time and have made some tracks together) put me in touch with his friend Christopher, who was kind enough to take some photos of his 1991 pressing of Nevermind:

Keen viewers might notice this is the Canadian pressing, as indicated by the "PRICE CODE V" below the UPC and the Ontario mailing address listed for DGC. Compared with my 2011 version, there are a few immediately noticeable differences, such as the logos on the back.

...but upon close inspection, much of the graphic design is quite different. You may have noticed the the underwater graphics above don't match up. Actually, the underwater graphics on the disc face, the back, and the color portions of the inside have been completely replaced.

Along with being completely different photos, the 2011 version uses the photo effects in a different way: the inside now includes much more white space than the original, and the back is more heavily posterized, with the newsprint effects using larger "ink dots."

Differences also exist in the typography, most noticeably the white backgrounds added behind the track numbers (also present on the insert), but these differences extend to the content itself, as well as justification and arrangement of the text and logos on the insert.

Ironically, this indicates that the graphic designers were already working in a way which parameterized key aspects of the work. Consciously or not, a decision was made that "the artwork of Nevermind" was not "this particular photo of water with these particular effects," but rather "any photo of water, with a similar set of effects."

The 2011 pressing's revisions seem intended to visually clarify... but from a conceptual, or archival / taxonomic standpoint they do the exact opposite. By deciding to replace entire portions of the original work, they have instead contributed to a branching notion of what the work actually is.

The album's remastering also falls into this category of false-clarification. The 2011 remaster utilizes a style of aggressive multiband compression which reveals many more details [eg. the now-present high end and clearer spatial definition of the "hello / how low" vocals], but also fundamentally changes the character of the audio in such a way that one now needs to specify which version of the album they've listened to.

Even after all of the 2011 version's comparatively subtle changes, there is one aspect of the 1991 pressing which there is no way to replicate in any meaningful way: that is, simply, a quarter-century's worth of existence.

The work as memento

Like many in my cohort, once in the era of ubiquitous streaming, I decided to divest myself of most of my physical music collection. But in the process of boxing up these items to sell at Dimple Records, I found there were some albums my heart would not allow me to give up. Perhaps you've had a similar experience.

Nevermind is not one of these albums for me. As a classic moody teenager, I connected with bands like NIN, Tool, and The Deftones for their technical writing

and gloomy, theatrical aesthetics. I didn't come around to Nirvana until I was in my late 20s, after watching some of their live concert videos.

But for many people my age, Nevermind and In Utero were the albums that laid anchor and remained. The shock of these fierce, inflammatory performances, poetic lyrics, and thundering productions translated something particular—and true—about the experience of youth in the 90s. Cobain's untimely death and the closing of Nirvana's body of work encased forever these few years in both the public consciousness and the hearts of those who deeply connected with this material.

I asked Christopher to tell me about his experience with this particular item, which has been with him now for two decades. He replied as follows:

> The first time I saw a copy of Nevermind was probably in 1992 (I was twelve). I was visiting my cousin and his older sister had a copy of the cassette tape. I remember being intimidated by the picture of the baby in the water. Although I didn't understand why, or even have the words to explain it, the subversive cover made me uncomfortable. Although to be fair, my cousin's two older sisters were terrifying teenagers, so that may have had more to do with it then the naked baby.

> I didn't hear what was on that tape until about a year later when a friend of mine got the cassette tape as part of the Columbia House free tapes in the mail deal. I was a sensitive kid, and although I felt uncomfortable with the violent sounds on the record, that didn't stop me from falling in love with the songs and the melodies. The upbeat melodic writing wrapped in the angry electric guitars and loud drums was just the right ratio of bitter and sweet. We would sit in his room and listen to his tapes and look at the tape jackets. I always like the picture of the band where they are smiling and Kurt has a bit of pink in his hair. My friend liked the blurry picture where Kurt of flipping off the camera. Those two pictures capture the tension of that record so well. That was also the year I learned to play the guitar, and once I figured out what a power chord was, Smells Like Teen Spirit was the first song I learned.

I didn't get the CD that I have now until 1995. My parents were pretty conservative, and understandably they didn't think that Nirvana was very age appropriate for a 13 year old. When I was 15 I started dating a girl who had grown bored of her grunge CDs, and gave me all her Nirvana records. I knew all the music from listening at friends houses (and having a few mix tapes that my parents didn't know about), but they we're the first CDs that I really ever owned.

Last year I move into a smaller condo and didn't have room to keep my entire CD collection. I fought the death of the CD for a long time, but before the move transferred my entire CD collection onto a hard drive. I had to go down into the basement and dig through a couple of boxes to find the Nevermind CD. Looking at the jacket and the pictures reminded me of how much I miss the ritual of handling the CDs and looking at the jackets while listening to the music. I still really like Nevermind. I don't think the record production has aged as well as some of their other records, but still think the song writing is amazing.

The picture I sent is me with an 18th year old whiskey in one hand, and my 2 week old son in the other. I married the girl that gave me that Nevermind CD. I guess I really like the record and the girl.

I've now had my copy of Nevermind sitting on my desk for about a week. It is, perhaps, a compromised, perameterized, ersatz version of the original work—but this is a judgey (and perhaps meaningless) perspective.

I wonder, when pulling this object from a box in the attic in the year 2031, what I will remember about these first few months in Singapore, and what these meandering days will eventually mean to me?

Notes

[1] Yahoo's Chartwatch: Cassette Turns 50 (citing Nielson Soundscan and Billboard): https://www.yahoo.com/music/bp/chart-watch-extra-cassette-turns-50-204002292.html
[2] Additionally, SG's excellent library system stocks several Nevermind-related items, including DVDs and musical scores (both reductions and full band transcriptions) via the performing arts-specific Library@Esplanade branch. The album itself resides in the Lee Kong Chain reference collection on level 11 of the main branch. However, items in this collection cannot be checked out without first going through a formal request procedure. Although the NLB's CD is indeed the 1991 pressing, it is housed in a standard SG library soft case; so the experience of handling the item is somewhat off.
[Misc. Note] There are also differences in production-related features, such as the alphanumeric strings on the back of the disc's "mirror band" (which I think are disc batch-related), as well as (most obviously) the grey vs transparent disc tray in the Jewel Case.

Hard Boiled Babies

An unrealized work for collaborative film

John Woo's "Hard Boiled" ('92) is a certain type of gritty, relentless, over-the-top late 80s / early 90s action spectacular that has since been supplanted almost entirely by dreary, never-ending comic book franchises and ponderous CGI debacles. Chow Yun-fat stars as "Tequila" Yuen, a wise-cracking, hard-drinking, jazz-clarinet-shredding[!?] cop who plays by his own rules; alongside Tony Leung as Alan, an undercover cop who's gotten in too deep for his own good.

Over the course of its first hour, we are treated to a masterclass in Hong Kong action choreography, with tremendous shootouts in tea parlors, warehouses, and docks; punctuated by necessary genre staples like: heated arguments with The Chief, slow-motion funerals at dusk, late night barroom philosophy, and trouble with the ladyfriend.

However, the entire second half of the film takes place completely within the confines of a hospital—the basement of which is being used as a secret weapons cache by a violent, unhinged Triad group. This spectacular half hour is spent rotating between three interwoven action sequences, where (1) the SWAT team squares off against the heavily armed Triad forces; (2) Alan and Tequila battle the Triad's main enforcer (Mad Dog); and (3) all the while innocent patients of the hospital are being alternately evacuated, gunned down, and blown to smithereens in the overwhelming pyrotechnics.

Threaded through all of this is one of the strangest (yet absolutely captivating) plots I have seen in quite a while: Tequila's on-again-off-again lover Teresa [played by Teresa Mo] is tasked with coordinating the evacuation of DOZENS of Babies from the hospital's 2nd floor maternity ward.

The Baby evac (like all the intertwined plots in the last act) becomes increasingly harrowing, eventually involving straight-up firefights and explosions in the nursery —with Tequila gunning down Triad members, outrunning explosions, and leaping from a second-story window... all while holding (and wise-cracking to) a Baby.

This, dear reader, is the starting point of our project.

The Babies: A Complete Synopsis

First introduced around 1:18 in a short, dreamy montage, The Babies seem to enter the film from out of nowhere. While not exactly diagetically out-of-place (as we are in a hospital), this scene is a marked tonal contrast from the violent material which precedes it, and is hard to see as anything but a really weird Checkov's Gun.

Even more bizarrely, The Babies' true genesis lies in an earlier incarnation of the script—which revolved around a psychopath who poisons baby food. This plot was (probably rightly) considered "unacceptable" for international audiences, and so this version script was abandoned.[1]

However, the idea of including babies in the movie stuck around... and so here we are: with Teresa seemingly hypnotized as The Babies are lovingly fed, bathed, and swaddled by their attendant nurses.
Teresa, mesmerized by The Babies

Shaken from her reverie by Tequila and Alan, Teresa is scuttled off into an elevator, where she provides them with some critical intel on the hospital's suspicious basement; after which she does some other non-Baby stuff.

We don't hook up with The Babies again until 1:33, by which point the shit is mere moments from hitting the fan; and the police begin attempting to evacuate the hospital under the guise of a fire drill.

During the chaos, Teresa suddenly remembers… The Babies!

This is where The Babies' subplot gets started in earnest. In the initial evacuation scramble, we see at least two babies safely leave the nursery before the Triad Goons lock the place down and take the remaining patients hostage.

Some Goons storm the nursery, and force the nurses to leave at gunpoint, but not before Teresa slaps one of them across the face, and (like a boss) tell him to shut up because he's scaring The Babies. We are left with a slow panning shot of the now-abandoned Babies to emphasize just how goddamn many of them there are, and an ominous bowed cymbal cue to emphasize the danger they now face.

The action rolls along at a steady clip, with the Triad vs SWAT clash escalating into bazooka-and-C4 territory; and Tequila and Alan wisecracking in the basement before blowing their way out through the morgue (and a few dozen Triad Goons).

Around 1:44 the SWAT team enters the hospital, blowing away Goon after Goon. Simultaneously, Tequila and Teresa (now reunited) make their way back to the Nursery.

They plug The Babies' ears with cotton to protect their hearing. As a musician who has lost a few dB above 12kHz over the years to drums and Marshals, I greatly appreciated this detail.

The SWAT team reaches the nursery, and Tequila orders them to "Assist madam. Get these babies out." In short order, they realize the exit from the maternity ward is blocked by a raging fire, and Teresa & co. are forced to improvise.

They tie scraps of the curtains around the bassinets to form makeshift handles, and a SWAT member rappels down the front of the Hospital with The First Baby; braving machine gun fire from the Triad Goons, and the growing flames blasting from a nearby window.

This scene is particularly fraught, as it appears that at any moment this First Baby might be shot, dropped, or incinerated. When The First Baby finally makes it safely to his parents, we collectively breathe a sigh of relief…

... But there are still hundreds of Babies left in this flaming battleground of a hospital!

The Baby evac is relegated to shorter cuts between the main action, as Tequila and Alan blast their way through dozens more Triad Goons (and presumably causing hundreds of thousands of dollars of property damage) until finally confronting Mad Dog.

There's a quick (but powerful) scene at 1:57, where a couple of Goons blast their way into the nursery, killing two Baby-evacuating SWAT members in the process. The Lead Goon makes the critical mistake of jumping over an improvised barricade, where he finds Teresa laying in wait for him, weapon drawn.

After a tense moment, he realizes he's out of luck, and spends his final breath insulting her like a total chump before (in classic John Woo fashion) she straight-up empties the entire clip into his chest.

Alan picks up the fight with Mad Dog, as Tequila shoots his way back over to the nursery. Just as Teresa is about to make her way outside, they hear the telltale cry of... a last, forgotten Baby!

Tequila doublebacks to pick up The Last Baby[2] as Teresa dodges gunfire on her way down the rappel line. Tequila reaches The Last Baby, plugs his ears with cotton, and tells him to "shut up" as a final squad of Goons closes in on their position.

It's clear from the get-go that this Last Baby is special.

Tequila improvises a lullaby while dispatching the approaching Goons with his free hand— 6 to be precise—the last of which dies gruesomely with a shard of glass plunged right through his neck.

Although Tequila manages to get off a pretty sweet wisecrack to The Baby in middle of this firefight, he is unfortunately left with a bullet wound in the chest— though to be fair, in this movie even significant injuries to the protagonists are treated as mildly irritating at worst.

There is a tender moment where he apologizes and wipes some spattered blood from The Last Baby's face.

The Triad Goons place C4 explosives sporting red LED clocks all over the hospital as Alan and Mad Dog duke it out. This fight resolves interestingly and I won't spoil it for you. Some time later, Tequila and Alan meet back up, running into The Triad Boss, who (with his finger on the bomb trigger) taunts them before escaping.

Now out of sight, The Triad Boss triggers the bombs, sending ridiculous fireballs blasting through the entire hospital. Cut off by the fire, Alan gives Tequila one last smoldering look before running off to take down The Boss.

This leaves Tequila and The Last Baby running for dear life through gigantic explosions on the 2nd floor.

Everything is going to hell. Tequila narrowly avoids fiery death at turn after turn.

In a moment of respite, he manages to squeeze in one final wisecrack, before tucking The Last Baby tightly into his jacket, and preparing to escape from the 2nd floor window by tearing a large coil of exposed wire from the wall to use as a rope...

...but not before an explosion sets his (very 90s cut) slacks alight as he sprints towards the open window! After a frantic few moments, The Last Baby totally comes through, and extinguishes Tequila's pants by heroically pissing down his leg.

Tequila leaps from the hospital mere moments ahead of the biggest fireball mankind has ever seen. He hits the ground and rolls, before making a mad dash across the front parking lot—all while massive explosions tear the hospital apart, sending flaming shrapnel and sparks raining down around him.

Finally reaching the safety of the Police line, The Chief desperately asks:

... And the answer is: No. No Chief, there are *No! Babies! Left!*

Every last one of the hundreds of Babies trapped in that hospital were safely rescued—Babies who surely would have met violent, fiery deaths had not Teresa and Tequila stepped up and taken care of business.

The Last Baby is hastily passed to his parents, without so much as a goodbye from Tequila. And thus ends our time with The Babies.

After this outrageous sequence, the movie quickly wraps up with a brief, perfunctory denouement, centering mainly on Tequila and Alan. This ending was extremely dissatisfying, because at this point I had become extremely invested in

the process of saving every last one of these Babies, and to see this plot line so abruptly and unceremoniously closed felt incredibly jarring.

Proposal

The "Hard Boiled Babies" [HBB] project will allow us to reconnect with these Babies we have become so attached to… by creating a feature-length film about every single one of them.

- Each film will be written, directed, crewed, and acted by a different group of people.
- The films will be set "in the present," picking up with each of The Babies as 24-year-olds (they're Millennials!).
- Although these films will be taking place in the same cinematic universe in which the events of "Hard Boiled" (and "Stranglehold") are cannon, the plots of these HBB films need not be restricted to the action genre, nor even reference any material from these source texts.
- Each film should have its own unique identity and tonal character.

Details and Process

How many Babies were there? Unfortunately, The Babies are uncredited. Even if they were, the number of Baby "actors" might differ from the number of Baby "characters" represented on screen.

While we do get a couple long shots of the nursery, the camera is always placed among the bassinets; so we don't have a clear indication of how many are behind the camera, or the size of the room itself. The largest number of bassinets we see in a single take is 16.[3]

There are a few of shots of the Nursery from different angles, though the geometry and props don't always appear to match from one shot to the next. In a Special Features interview, producer Terence Chang reveals[4] the film was only partially scripted, and shot over a comparatively long period of 120 days; so these sets might have been reconfigured during the shoot.

Due to the age of the film and its production style, locating reliable first-hand accounts of the Nursery configuration (or authorial intention) could prove difficult; but if we were to execute this project, attempts to do so should be made.

In the mean time... making some assumptions from the visible layout,[5] my best guesses for total Babies are: 19, 22 or 25. Seeing as though next year will mark Hard Boiled's 25th anniversary: let's go with 25.

Setting

As the setting of "Hard Boiled" is Hong Kong, presumably the bulk of these films would likewise be set in Hong Kong or China (though, some of The Babies having relocated internationally is certainly a possibility).

Filmmakers outside of China should be sensitive to (or at the very least cognizant of) recent commentary on "whitewashing" characters—and cast their films appropriately. Though we can't be sure that all of the 25 Babies are of Chinese descent, the panning shot at 1:36 indicates that most of them likely are.

On The Narrative Flavor of the HBB Films

Other than the central conceit—ie, each involves a Baby rescued during the events of "Hard Boiled"—these films should be approached with total creative freedom and individuality.

Events which befall us when we are too young to react to (or even comprehend) them have varying affects on us throughout our lives; and these characters will be no different.

Perhaps the fact of a character's survival of the "Hard Boiled" ordeal has shaped her entire life; and acts as the primary lens through which she understands her reality. Conversely, perhaps this event is now a long-forgotten footnote, just some odd trivia which has no salient effects on her life whatsoever.

A much darker observation: of the many, many innocent civilians killed during the Triad's attack, presumably some of them would have been parents or relatives of The Babies. Even if a Baby's entire family escaped the ordeal physically unscathed, experiencing this event as an adult could certainly have lasting psychological and emotional effects.

In any event, other than positing a world in which Triad gangs exert overwhelming martial capabilities, and certain heroic individuals posses constitutions allowing them to easily survive a shocking list of severe injuries (such as close-range shotgun blasts, deep cuts, burns, blunt trauma, and heart-stopping electrical shocks)... the universe of "Hard Boiled" is really quite open to interpenetration. Perhaps these elements suggest a sort of magical realism, which could translate well to any number of different genres or narrative styles.

The Hong Kong of "Hard Boiled" exists at the twilight of British sovereignty, which ended in 1997 (when The Babies were 5 years old). Much has changed during The Babies' lifetimes; China's seismic economic boom and gradual political shifts over the last quarter century have had far-reaching effects both domestically and globally. Perhaps these Babies' narratives will help to add individual shading to (or play out against the backdrop of) these social, political and economic shifts. Presentation

Once the 25 films are completed, they could be presented in variety of different ways. A traveling film festival could be organized to present the 25 HBB films over the course of several days or weeks; ideally beginning and/or ending with a screening of Hard Boiled. Unless there is enough general interest in the project to the point where profits could be expected from ticket sales, I would imagine art spaces (or colleges) would likely be the best home for a project of this nature.

Perhaps more realistically: the films could be made available as a collection. Digital distribution would seem the most reasonable route; and we could "split the difference" between online and theatrical settings by having each HBB film receive a debut screening in its city of origin, which could also be simulcast online and followed by a question-and-answer session with the cast and crew (or something similar). The HBB films could be debuted in this way over the course of a month or so, culminating in the release of the whole collection.

In any event, I would hope that John Woo would find this project interesting enough to engage with it in some capacity. I would be curious to get a sense of how he has personally experienced the changes in China, or at least perceived them from the perspective of an expat living and working in America.

And, of course, I'd like to know if he himself has ever wondered... what ever happened to all those babies from the hospital?

Notes

[1] This comes from an interview with Woo in the special features of the 2007 "Ultimate Edition" DVD. Also in this interview, he mentions this idea came from a real-life incident in Japan—though he doesn't identify it specifically, the 1955 Morinaga Milk arsenic poisoning incident seems a likely candidate.

[2] The gender of The Last Baby is not explicitly identified. I am using male pronouns for expediency and tonal flow only; any further comment on broader gender topics is not intended. For more information, see here.

[3] Arranged in 4 rows of 3 (12), while on the far side of the room are 2 bassinets (14), as well as the 2 we see wheeled out of the Nursery (16).

[4] This interview was an illuminating look into the hit-and-run nature of the creation of this film. For example: They discovered one of the locations Woo wanted to use (the tea shop in the opening) was slated to be torn down... so they went ahead and filmed this action sequence before the rest of the script was in place; juggling noise complaints from the neighbors (which were subsequently ignored by police because they were fans of Chow Yun-fat), and real life Triad groups demanding "Protection Money".

[5] Owing to the configuration from footnote 3, I'm going to guess than any additional rows behind the camera will likewise have 3 bassinets in them, meaning likely totals would be: +1 row(s): 19, +2: 22, or +3: 25.

Ten Million Words* About Pop Vocal Delivery (And Nick Jonas' "Jealous")

A while back, I mentioned that I liked Nick Jonas' "nuanced" vocal delivery on Jealous, and I someone asked me what exactly I meant by this.

This is a good question! Music and art writers often use a lot of language which can be literarily satisfying, but also kinda meaningless from a technical perspective... and the word "nuanced" definitely leans in this direction. One of the things I'm working on is bringing more technical detail into my writing—and as a musician (particularly, having spent the last several years employed as a pop music transcriber) vocal performance is hands-down one of my favorite topics.

In order to properly answer this question about "nuance," we should start by breaking down the individual features of a vocal performance, so that we can discuss the subject with a certain degree of specificity. If you've ever taken music classes or sung in a choir, you might be familiar with some or most of this already— though these topics aren't usually approached with an eye towards the particulars of pop music, specifically.

Like Drake, we're starting from the bottom:

• Time & Pitch
• Ending A Note
• Dynamics
• Tone & Timbre
• Pronunciation
• Phrasing
• Affect
• Delivery
• Semiotics
• Post-Internet Stylistic Heterogeneity

The most basic features of singing are time and pitch. In time, a vocalist can sing right on, or either lean into or lay back on the beat (ie. anticipating or lagging behind the exact rhythmic center). The consonant and vowel sounds which form a word provide additional options; for example the length of the transition from the closed N to the open O in the word "Now" can be used to shift a note's timing. When the backing track has a strong or unusual groove, the vocalist needs to make a decision about how closely with the groove to sing.[1]

For pitch, a vocalist can sing a note exactly on, or either rise or fall into the pitch. Once on pitch, a vocalist can use vibrato or other pitch inflections.[2] Transitioning between notes is another decision point: a vocalist can slide between notes (portamento), and the length of the slide is variable. Embellishments like runs (melismas) and turns can be added. Singing off-pitch is a valid decision... though you don't hear it much on the Top 10 after around 2000.

And all of this also applies to the ends of notes as well. If you pay attention (particularly with vocalists who do a lot of multitracked harmony), the way in which a singer ends her notes is usually a notable feature of her delivery. From obvious weirdo stuff like the rising yodels on the chorus of Zombie,[3] to more subtle variations in the "tightness" or "looseness" of harmonized lines, or creating subtle pauses to separate notes—there's a lot of options here. Experience in formal settings tends to make singers more cognizant and particular about note endings.

For singers, dynamics dovetail somewhat with tone and timbre. In the realm of dynamics, a vocalist can sing at a constant volume, crescendo or decrescendo, or use less common dynamic techniques like tremolo or glottal stops.[4] A vocalist can sing in full voice, a scream, a breathy tone, a whisper,[5] etc. etc. and freely transition between these. Less common techniques like the vocal fry[6] occasionally pop up. In certain styles of singing, often the use of tone becomes the predominant feature of the performance (eg. extreme metal,[7] sexy R&B, etc).

Because your voice is a part of your body, each individual will have a different "instrument." Using (or not using) the diaphragm to support the voice makes a huge difference, and in the context of recording this can be used intentionally to achieve a desired tone. Subtle physical adjustments can direct the voice to resonate with different parts of the skull, which affects tone in various ways.

There's also decisions about pronunciation. In pop, this mostly boils down to the shape of vowels. During the 2010s, I noticed many younger vocalists started bending their vowels in unusual ways (eg. O into OU or OE), particularly in acoustic/folky pop. This is just a guess, but I think it might come from increased exposure to the voices and vowels of international artists via the internet.[8] Some pop artists (eg. Nicki, Gaga, etc) explicitly use extreme or theatrical pronunciation shifts.

There's also some technical considerations when working with microphones, particularly with plosives (B, K, T) and sibilants (S, Sh). Experienced recording vocalists will often intentionally soften these by using slightly different mouth and tongue positions or unvoiced plosives.[9] Engineers ˜love˜ this because it saves us time during editing and mixing.

Phrasing is the broad term for how you deal with these technical elements over "a line" of music. In pop, lines are generally sentence-like in verses, and choruses are a linguistic free-for-all. Pop vocal phrasing tends to be a little more varied in verses. Pre-choruses are normally phrased to build into a big chorus, though sometimes a sudden dynamic contrast works great, too.[10]

But perhaps the single most important aspect of pop singing is affect, which is a bit harder to define. You might think of this as the attitude or general expression which is overlaid on top of all these musical features.

Having a particular affect can make a pop vocalist truly iconic... even if they ignore all the technical stuff we just talked about. This is the main thing that sets a pop vocalist apart from (for example) a theater, classical, or jazz vocalist. In those worlds, affect is important too, but you need to come correct with your technique. In the 90s, many vocalists were making bizarre or sloppy technical decisions, but delivered iconic performances because they nailed the affect.[11]

Back when I was doing more studio work, "flat affect" vocalists were quite popular. These days (thankfully), affect in pop music is much more variable, and singers with very extreme or unusual affects (eg. Future) can top the charts. One of the things I love about 80s pop was the trend of dramatic, theatrical, or filmic affects (particularly with New Romantic artists).

A quick non-technical term for this whole bag of stuff is Delivery. A "great delivery" also relates to how the vocalist's decisions interact with the song itself. For example, a Desiigner-esq delivery on a trap song is probably great, but a Desiigner-esq delivery on something like Vanessa Carlton's "A Thousand Miles" is probably weird. Of course, whether a delivery is considered bad or good or normal or weird changes over time and with varying trends.

As with all forms of communication, there is a semiotic layer associated with many decisions a vocalist can make.[12] For example, a Bro Country singer who uses the pronunciation and affect of an old-money New Yorker will have a hard time connecting with the Bro Country audience, because of what these vocal expressions signify. The links between a musical or performative style and its culture of origin can likewise lead to overt intersectional conflict[13] when that music begins to influence other cultures.

And finally, the post-internet age of accessible archives has resulted in a trend towards stylistic heterogeneity in pop music, as vocalists and musicians are now drawing elements from a broader range of temporally and aesthetically disparate styles.

In the late 2010s, it's now commonplace to have (for example) The 1975's late-80s-INXS-replicating[14] debut album sharing the charts with Meghan Trainor's updated 50s Phil Spector sound and Kanye West's avant-garde hip hop. Popular music

trends used to be more monolithic—think Grunge supplanting Hair Metal in the 90s—but now, all bets are basically off.

What a time to be alive! And what a time to be a pop vocalist.

On "Nuance"

When I wrote that Nick Jonas' vocals on Jealous were "nuanced," what I meant specifically was that he's making a lot of complicated performance choices, but limiting their extremity. Let's begin by examining a small part of a more extreme vocal performance: Lana Del Rey on "Born To Die."

BEFORE you hit play: take a moment to get yourself into a headspace of objective listening. Try to separate yourself from subjective reactions like "I love Lana Del Rey" or "I hate this song," and instead focus purely on what the vocalist is doing, and the specific techniques she's using to do it.

Feet don't fail me now, take me to the fin- ish line. Oh my heart it breaks, e- very step that I take, but I'm ho- ping at the gates, they'll tell me that you're mi- ne. Wal- king through the ci- ty streets, is it by mi- stake or de- sign? I feel so a- lone on the Fri- day ni- ghts, can you make it feel like home if I tell you you're mi- ne?

On the opening verse of Lana Del Rey's "Born To Die," she consistently begins her phrases laying way back—but tightens up the timing slightly as the stanza

progresses. She uses this shifting time feel to emphasize certain words, such as "Gates" and "Home" by (unexpectedly) nailing them right on the beat.

She uses exaggerated, slow slides to fall or rise into the pitches (which sometimes last for over half the length of the note). She occasionally adds vibrato to notes at the ends of phrases, and adds a small pitch inflection to "mistake." Many of her longer notes end with a slight falling pitch if she's leaving a rest before the next lyric.

She uses a light Midatlantic accent,[15] slow/de-emphesized formation of words (i.e. long transitions between consonants and vowels), unvoiced plosives, and softens her sibilants on the 2nd stanza. These timing and pronunciation features coalesce into a drunk / druggy / wasted affect, and the Midatlantic accent adds sociopolitical connotations of white 20th-century wealth and glamour. These potent semiotic signals set the stage for high drama and forbidden lust.

Her phrasal dynamics are relatively subtle. She makes an interesting decision by singing the first line "Feet don't fail me now" slightly stronger, then dropping into the mp which holds for the rest of the verse. This decision lends a subtle shade of "giving up" to the affect. She brings the lyric "on the Friday nights" out dynamically, before once again pulling back into mp.

So, even in a performance with a lot of extremity in the timing and pitch decisions (along with some unique affectation choices), there's still a fair amount of subtle things going on, too.

Nick Jonas' Vocal Delivery on Jealous

To circle back around: Non-vocal-nerds might really like Jonas' delivery on Jealous, but have a hard time explaining exactly why. That's because (with the exception of the "I still get jealous!" hook) his lack of extremity makes its most characteristic features harder to pinpoint, as compared to (for example) Lana Del Rey's mile-wide slides and "movie star voice."

I'm going to be referencing two performances of this song: the studio version, and a live concert recording from 2016. In the concert setting, many of the delivery's features have been refined by two years of repetition, and he pushes some of them to a greater degree of extremity, which is illuminating.

Note: I couldn't find an audio-only version of this live video, so remember not to "listen with your eyeballs." 😫

The First Verse:

The most noticeable feature of Jonas' delivery is that he's sliding up or down into almost every note—which is partly a personal style (see the first verse of Bacon[16]). Coupled with the narrow melodic ranges in the first two phrases, and some indistinct pronunciation of the conversationally-worded lyrics, "I don't like the way he's lookin' at you / I'm startin' to think you want him, too" (with unvoiced Ks and softened H sounds)— right off the bat, he begins to form shades of a postwar working-class affect. Think: Brando in Streetcar or Deen in Rebel—virile, mumbly men at the mercy of their uncontrollable passions.

Along with the sliding pitches, he's also keeping the timing loose and leaning into the beats, most obviously at the beginning of phrases, and on words which begin with softer consonants like "way" and "look." The slight decrescendo and hesitation on "lookin' at you…" adds a sort of musical ellipsis, engaging the listener in anticipation of the narrative continuation.

The ascending melodies in the second half of the verse cover more intervalic ground, and the short slides become more pronounced. He uses variation in these slides and shortens notes to assist in the phrasing of each line. For example, he begins "Am I crazy" and "Even though" right on pitch and beat before sliding up the melodic line (also note how he emphasizes the starting consonants of "crazy" and "though" which land on beat 1).

This second half of the verse builds both vocally and in the production, so the listener is prepared for the lead-in to the chorus when he nails the "Can't" in "Can't help it" both right on pitch and beat. This change reverses the flow of the previous two melodic lines, signaling to the listener that we're about to hit a new

section (coupled with the brief production breakdown immediately following). In the live recording, he emphasizes the shape and rhythm of these lines further by shortening the ends of notes.

The Chorus

Jonas' delivery in the first half of this chorus is animated primarily by timing. He consistently leans into the beat, primarily by anticipating with the consonants and opening the vowels right on or just beforehand. He pushes this timing a bit more extremely in the live performance, and you can hear it very clearly in the opening "Chin Music Up." The effect of this timing is a bouncy or rounded feel, like keeping time by swinging your arms while walking rather than tapping your foot while sitting.

Also critical to maintaining this feel is the way he fades and shortens individual notes. For example, notice how he decrescendos "fault," and then adds an explicit cutoff to "Hover," which he pronounces colloquially as "Huh-vuh." These features again play up the affect of masculine bravado, and are further heightened by the anachronistic idioms used in the lyrics.

He loosens timing even further in the delivery of "Right to be hellish," delaying the "to" into a heavy swing feel. This also emphasizes the song's very first transition into the falsetto range, preparing us for the solid gold hook in the next measure. His handling of the break out of falsetto on "hellish" is likewise a great touch, adding an extra umph to an interesting and unusual word.

We reach the full-on singalong moment in the second half of the chorus. He tightens up the timing on "You're too sexy beautiful," which helps to clarify what might otherwise be an awkward line to sing (back-to-back syllables beginning with the S and X). Along with this, he leaves little gaps after the notes in "too / se / xy", and adds a nice decrescendo to the back half of "beautiful." On the line leading up to the hook, Jonas pushes the slide in "taste" out to almost a full 16th note, and uses strong, specific note cutoffs after "taste" and "that's."

These two short notes on 3 and 4 are followed by an extremely satisfying bit of melodic work over the changes: After a D to F#m turnaround, the accompaniment hits the downbeat on an A chord, and we get a surprising falling 5th in the melody from F# to B on "why..." This melody resolves down to the tonic a beat later: harmonically, forming an A+9 to A. You can tell Jonas digs this fancy resolution, too: in the live version he adds an ornament here.

The two beats of rest after "why" are a great heads up! for listeners that we're about to hit the hook, but it also allows the vocalist to take a nice deep breath before launching upwards. Besides being fun to sing, approaching this falsetto hook by an intervalic leap rather than stepwise motion allows the singer to nail the falsetto notes mid-register rather than navigating the break range. Aside from being the second-highest note in the song, Jonas also adds an exaggerated vibrato to "Jealous" and shifts the note into a slightly breathier tone as it progresses.

These melodic lines in the chorus overlap in the studio recording, so in the concert setting he shortens "Jealous" to give himself some time to drop back into his normal register and eliminates the subtle decrescendo to keep the vocal energy up. It's probably worth mentioning that in this live recording, this song was likely at the end of the set, after an hours' worth of singing—so in this context some vocal tiredness is to be expected and completely excusable... and in any event, he sounds solid.

Second Verse

There's a lot of variety in the delivery on the second verse, and each line gets a slight melodic or arrangement twist as well. The first line plays with the rhythm by leaning into words which start on softer sounds like "h" and "a," and nailing the harder sounds like "d," "t," and "p" right on the beat. After sliding way up into the "it," we get the song's only specified melisma (there's a few rando ones in the ad-libbing at the end).

The first two lines build dynamically up to the harmonized "just for me," which he emphasizes by shortening the preceding "bit" to a 16th note. He nails the "for" aggressively (bending the O into an UH), and the "Me" includes both a whole step slide in and out, and finishes with a short exhale leading into 2. He delivers this line with the slurred, blustery affect of bravado established in the chorus.

The contrast between the studio and live versions of "protective or possessive, yeah" is helpful. Once again, he's using the harder consonants "tec" and "tive" to nail the beats, and brings out the slides slightly on the sibilants "se" and "sive." In the live version he sings the "or" louder, and dips lower into his chest voice for the final "Yeah" (which he pronounces kind of like "ö-eh" ... yeah, no clue on that one).

The rhythm of the final line diverges from the first verse. He specifically places a pause after "call it," and (like the first verse) nails the "pass-" right on the beat rather than sliding into it. In the live version he places each syllable more cleanly on the beat, and adds a bonus melisma to the "I turn my."

Bridge

We're the on- ly ones in- vi- ted, I said there's no- one else for you.

Be- cause you know I get ex- ci- ted, yeah, when you get jea- lous, too.

The Bridge

At the bridge, Jonas makes the unusual and interesting decision to use repeated upward slides into each note during the first half of each phrase (rather than sliding between each note). This also allows the length of the upward slide to control the perception of a note's timing. In the live version, he pushes both the start of the slides and their lengths out, which keeps the bouncy/round timefeel from the chorus going strong.

The bridge contains a few specific ornaments (technically: an inverted turn on "else" and a mordent on "know"[17]), and for the live version he throws in a bonus mordent on "only." Tbh I'm not crazy about these, because I feel like the specificity with which he performs these ornaments runs semiotically counter to the established salt-of-the-earth affect... but this is a relatively minor complaint.

The bridge also features a few prominent vocal harmonies. The chorus is also harmonized, but these parts are mixed way back. The bridge harmonies feature some unusual parallel 4ths, and when the vocal melody jumps up to "no one else," this satisfyingly shifts to more consonant diatonic 3rds.

The final measure has some notable harmonic things going on. The bass walks up to a G; and the harmonized vocals sustain an A on top, and resolve an F# to E natural below, creating a kind of Em/G or G+6+9 feel (or a B quartal/G if that's how you roll). In the live version, the band spices this up with some unexpected NFL Theme vibes,[18] which helps to create momentum leading into the breakdown before the final choruses.

The Breakdown & Ad-Libs

Breakdowns usually provide a pop vocalist with some space to step out and nudge their deliveries into more adventurous territory, and Jonas takes the opportunity to do so. With the production stripped down, you can more clearly hear the slight upward slides into notes—though the audio edit between "music up / and I'm" is a bit exposed here. You can also hear more clearly which words he's adding vibrato to ("face," "no," and "be"), as well as the slight vocal fries on the end of "obsessed" and the beginning of "I mean."

Jonas shifts "It's not your fault that they hover" up an octave into falsetto, and stretches the rhythm of the line way out; displacing "I mean" by an eighth note and condensing it to a pair of sixteenth notes, followed by "no" arriving on the sixteenth after the downbeat. The transition back to full voice is tricky, placing the "it's" in falsetto and the "my" in full voice. Take a moment to sing this yourself, and you'll see why he adds a small rest in the live version to handle this in a more comfortable way. On the final "I still get jealous" hook, he triumphantly kicks the high D up to an E.

The ad-libs during the final chorus are all in Bm pentatonic, providing a comfortable and familiar harmonic space for melodic interjections. For a singer with Jonas' level of chops, they're comparatively reserved, with the exception of a blink-and-you'll-miss-it 16th triplet run crossing the bar line for "That's why."

This decision to hold back is (in a sense) another "nuanced" one: a younger vocalist looking to prove his mettle might instead opt for several measures of pyroclastic melismas—and that sort of decision has its own charm as well! But, perhaps having already weathered the rolling seas of teenage stardom, Jonas felt comfortable sitting back and letting the unrelenting hookiness of the song's chorus do the heavy lifting; his ad-libs function more as subtle punctuation (IMO the most interesting of which is the "You / Hey" which places the "Hey" on the offbeat of 4, where the chord changes without accent in the drums).

This deferential approach is carried over into the live version, where he sings the hook almost unadorned, and allows the band to elevate the energy level of the final choruses with a thundering flurry of activity (those bass fills 😫 👌 💯).

A Matter Of Taste

On the few occasions I've been wine tasting, the day often begins with the best of intentions, only to devolve into a freewheeling bacchanalia as the afternoon rolls along. This is, in part, because I lack a certain amount of self-control (and generally, class); but more pertinently, because I haven't really acquired the skill of tasting wine.

After a generous sip of a red which I can identify only in the roughest sense as "dry" or "tannin-y," it feels like a crazy magic trick to hear a professional Sommelier break down the specific components of the wine's flavor. And while that activity can be as much performative as informative, even when the Sommelier is clearly leaning towards the former, I find myself (at least momentarily) inspired to approach the activity of tasting with greater care and clarity.

For music writers with a certain amount of technical experience, pop occupies an unusual position: roughly comparable to the unavoidable discussion of Budweiser in New Yorker articles about the world of artisinal craft brewing.[19] As the post-internet critical consensus tipped inexorably towards Poptimism in heated (and necessary) debates over inclusivity, aesthetics, and authenticity policing, one smaller issue which got lost in the shuffle is that from a technical perspective, almost anything that hits the Top 10—regardless of style—is roughly comparable in

terms of form and complexity. The act of declaring in favor of pop music positions a technical music writer—like the Orval Brewmeister Jean-Marie Rock boldly declaring Budweiser the "best" American beer—within a particular frame of contrarian-chic... though I think this perception might be slightly skewed.

It's easy to sing the praises of pop artists who indulge in exciting leftfield tweaks to the standard formulas (like the adventurous harmony in Britney's "Toxic," oddball prog-pop acts like Ice Choirs, or artists who transition beyond categorical pop entirely like Prince, Beyoncé, or The Beatles) because they tend to make decisions which are overtly unusual and in-and-of-themselves musically interesting. What takes a little longer to appreciate is that even the most infuriatingly generic, banal, market-driven, or disposable pop music contains a staggering tree of musical decisions which can be observed.

As to whether these decisions require extensive comment... well, on the one hand: my gut tells me there's only so many 5,000-word taste profiles of Budweiser one can write in a lifetime. But on the other: certainly the omnipresence of America's favorite wallpaper of a lager at the weddings, wakes, and the millions of ephemeral moments which pepper our lives is, in itself, one of its most notable features.

I am writing all of this not because I think Jealous is an overlooked masterpiece due for a serious critical re-evaluation—don't get me wrong, I think it's a solid pop tune with a great delivery—but rather because someone happened to ask me about the word "nuance." And right now, I happen to be in a place where I have the time and motivation to consider this question fully... and perhaps, like in the woozy afternoon following a heady day of wine tasting, in far too great detail and length, and with just a touch of embarrassing sincerity.

Sign up for my mailing list here if you would like to get updates whenever I write articles or release new material.

Notes

* Article may contain less than ten million words.

[1] Here's two really extreme examples: Prince's "The Ladder" and Brandy's "What About Us?"

[2] See the repeated appoggiatura motif in Jermih's "Birthday Sex."

[3] The Cranberries' "Zombie."

[4] See the "Heart / Hea-ah-art" hook in Regina Spektor's "Fidelity"

[5] You already knew this footnote was going to be the Ying Yang Twins.

[6] Here's a decent explainer video. Personally, I think vocal fries are fine and the hermeneutics surrounding the argument itself are more interesting.

[7] Metal vocal technique is fascinating and will lead you down some highly rewarding internet rabbit holes.

[8] For example, take a moment to listen closely to Australian artist Troye Sivan's seductive vowels.

[9] Unvoiced Plosives.

[10] Compare the equally effective transitions into the chorus on Alanis Morrisette's "You Oughta Know" and Miley Cyrus' "Wrecking Ball."

[11] Back in the mid 90s, my local pop/alternative station played The Violent Femmes' "Blister In The Sun" on heavy rotation.

[12] Semiotics: the final frontier.

[13] Katy Perry covering "Paris" live on BBC1.

[14] I was honestly a little surprised that more reviews of The 1975 didn't go into greater depth on its primary stylistic template: INXS' "Kick."

[15] Midatlantic Accent. Here's an Atlantic article on the topic.

[16] Nick Jonas' "Bacon," live 2016.

[17] Inverted Turn, Mordent.

[18] "King of the sports jingle" Scott Schreer's indomitable NFL Theme.

[19] The New Yorker, "A Better Brew", Nov. 24, 2008.