THE DIGITAL META-DISSEMINATION OF FEAR IN MUSIC VIDEOS

A transdisciplinary textual analysis of two case studies:
Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» and M.I.A.'s «Born Free»

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Abstract

Due to change in its production, distribution and reception contexts, music videos have become the most popular genre in the actual digital media landscape, reaching both niche and global audiences. This paper aims at analysing, from a transdisciplinary perspective, two music videos, Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» (Peter King & David Procter, 2010) and M.I.A.'s «Born Free» (Romain Gavras, 2010), focusing on the way both of them incorporate textual references to *vlogging* and other media, in order to emulate and disseminate a participative sensation of *fear* that is directly related to the dissolution of the border between public and private spheres of Social Web users.

Keywords

Music Video, Social Web, Users, Dissemination, Fear, Textual Analysis.

Perhaps most of you haven't noticed it yet, but music videos are everywhere.

On computer or smartphone screens, big and small, the medium allegedly responsible for the death of a radio star whose body remains to be found has survived the shift of MTV from music television to reality shows and became, rather surprisingly, the most consumed and disseminated genre in the digital media landscape. Once the exclusive domain of television programmers, music videos are nowadays the chosen audio-visual genre of digital users and websites, which are constantly seeking for new content in order to satiate their audiences' hunger for media. You can reach them from almost everywhere via laptops, PDAs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, PSPs, iPods, iPads and other tablets. More than a habitat, the Internet has become a genuine and generous ecosystem for music videos, turning it into an increasingly accessible, widespread and omnipresent digital medium.

In 2010, 37 of the 65 most watched online videos were music videos, which represented 62% of the overall visualizations (VISIBLE MEASURES & TRUE REACH 03/2010). In the same year, 7 of the 10 most watched videos on YouTube were music videos (READ WRITE WEB 01/2011) and 77% of the users who consumed music on the Web did it via music videos (NIELSEN 04/2011). In fact, the music video possesses structural characteristics, such as its average short duration, which fit the media consumption habits of Web users, who typically have a short attention span. In 2008, only 16% of Web users watched videos with more than 3 minutes of duration and only 9% of them consumed videos with more than 5 minutes (TUBEMOGUL INDUSTRY ANALYSIS 12/2008). In the last quarter of 2010, the average fruition time of online videos was of 3'53" in the North-American market and 3'34" in Europe (BRIGHTCOVE & TUBEMOGUL INDUSTRY ANALYSIS 02/2011). Make no mistake: if audio-visual is the dominant form of online communication, music videos have become the most popular genre of the digital media landscape reaching both niche (ANDERSON 2009) and global audiences.

The massive importance of music videos is detectable both quantitatively and qualitatively. No other medium is making and shaping our everyday culture like music videos are: film, art, literature, politics and advertising – they are all clearly under the impact of the music video, namely in their aesthetics, technical procedures, visual worlds and narrative strategies (KEAZOR *et al.* (eds.) 2010: 7). Think of the major works of novelists like William Gibson, Jasper Fforde or Daniel Z. Danielowski; think of the cinematic achievements of music video directors like Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Jonathan Glazer, David Fincher or Mark Romanek; think of the massive importance of the will.i.am's «Yes, We Can» music video in Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign; think of the most successful advertisements of huge brands such as Apple, Coca-Cola, PlayStation or Nissan; think of video art installation of artists like Chris Cunningham, Tyler Shield or Richard Phillips; think of major TV series as *Glee* or *Californication*: they are all intimately inspired by music videos and the medium keeps on being openly inspired by all of them. This all goes to show that music video continues to do what it has done for decades: to look for all kinds of possible inspirations, to try to do something new with it and to thus inspire itself as well as other media forms (KEAZOR *et al.* (eds.) 2010: 19).

In spite of uniting the two most influential media of post-World War II – popular music and filmmaking –, music video remains an underappreciated, critically unnoticed and elusive media subgenre (AUSTERLITZ 2007: 1).

In the last thirty years, music videos have been conceptualized by academics as advertising, a new form of television, visual art, electronic wallpaper, dreams, a cinematic genre, nihilistic and chauvinistic media, neo-Fascist propaganda, metaphysical poetry, shopping mall culture, visual LSD, semiotic pornography and viral content. All this confirms that there still might be some truth in Simon Frith words that the study of music videos has produced more scholarly nonsense than anything since punk (FRITH 1988: 205). Throughout the years, music video has also been the subject of a large number of approaches that sometimes biased its critical study by orthodoxies such as Neo-Marxism, Post-Modernism, Psychoanalysis or

Feminism. Nevertheless, in all those approaches, an extraordinary amount of textual analysis has been produced by academics (GOODWIN 1992: 3). The theoretical configuration of audio-visual media contents as *texts* and of its audience as *readers* has been used with interesting results by authors since the ground-breaking work of John Fiske (FISKE 1987-1992), Stuart Hall (HALL 1992), David Morley (MORLEY 1992) and Andrew Goodwin (GOODWIN 1992). Therefore, I do believe (and that's what I've been working on my Ph.D. research project) that a transdisciplinary epistemic approach between Web Studies and Literary Studies can be truly effective and fruitful in the study of music videos on the Social Web. In fact, sometimes even without acknowledging it, that's what most authors that studied music videos have been doing in the last three decades: this can be easily verified by their use of technical terms such as *narrative*, *performativity*, *reception*, *reader*, *pastiche*, *intertextuality*, *canon* or *diegetic*, just to name a few.

To put it rather concisely, a textual analysis of digital music video has to consider the following facts:

- music videos have potentially three texts (lyrics, music and image) with hypothetical *synesthetic* correlations (GOODWIN 1992; WILLIAMS 2001);
- music videos are created by a potentially large array of *authors* (musicians, directors, producers and/or users);
- music videos texts are mainly read and diffused through digital platforms by an *active* audience that may perform a large series of *synesthetic*, *transtextual* (GENETTE 1982) and *transmediatic* (ROSE 2011) readings during their fruition process; and
- the distinction between music videos authors and readers is blurred due to the *participative* possibilities of the Social Web (JENKINS 2006) and the *producerly* nature of music video texts (FISKE 1987: 251).

In order to elicit the growing importance of music videos in today's digital media landscape, this paper aims a textual analysis of two music videos, Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» (KING *et al.* 2010) and M.I.A.'s «Born Free» (GAVRAS

2010), focusing, from a transdisciplinary perspective, on the way both of them incorporate textual references to *vlogging* and other media, in order to emulate and disseminate a sensation of *fear* that is directly related to the dissolution of the border between public and private spheres of Web users.

Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» music video was uploaded to YouTube on August 16th 2010 and has so far reached the quite impressive amount of 300.000 views for a new and alternative UK act.

FIGURE 1: Screenshots of Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» music video.

The concept of the music video is quite simple (FIGURE 1). It opens on rotating fixed close-ups of the three naked band's members, each cut synesthetically timed to a chord change. As the song escalates through a descending bass line and a knee-trembling wall of guitars, their faces and upper parts of their bodies grow progressively bloodier and more battered. The martial motif of both the music's strong and regular rhythm and the images' gore style synesthetically echo the lyrics narrative (a battlefield scene) and lexicon (*blackness*, *veins*, *moans*, *arms*, *legs*, *teeth*, *nail*, etc.), which are sung in the lead singer Rachel Davies' full-throated wail.

The tight and meticulously built synesthetic correlations between lyrics, music, voice and images turn the music video into an increasingly difficult and fascinating thing to watch. One of the video's top comments on YouTube expresses quite blatantly this paradox: «I don't want to admit that I find this beautiful, but I really do. It's absolutely mesmerizing» (@ VizualConqueror). One of the main reasons why this music video fruition is so intense is because we only get to see the cumulative effects of the physical violence and never its source or origin. It's just as if the aggressions of each band members are purposely hidden from us due to the video's circular editing and as if they occur during the gaps that separate each of the three recurrent cuts, thus reflecting their passivity, impotence and fear on our own fruition experience. Once again, a YouTube user comment expresses this feeling quite eloquently: «Why [do] you all stand here and watch them? Someone, call an ambulance!» (@ vanrok).

John Fiske defined and applied the concept of *producerly texts* to media products that allow its audience to participate in the production of its meaning through an exercise of what he calls *excessive reading*. Producerly texts have loose ends that escape its control, meanings that exceed its own power to discipline them, gaps wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them by their readers (FISKE 1989: 104). In other words, a media product doesn't have to give up having a clearly defined message, but in so far as it limits its potential meanings, it limits its potential circulation. A producerly text is, therefore, one that can be enjoyed and accessed on multiple levels: it can be taken at face value, but it also leaves room for deeper and more active interpretations (JENKINS *et al.* 2009: 81-82). If a literal reading of Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» music video text can be anchored to the song lyrics (the band members' battering portrays the injuries of soldiers in a battlefield), its producerly nature is directly related to an unanswered question: *Where does all this violence come from?* An excessive reading of the music video text, based on its hyper and metatextual references (GENETTE 1982), might give us some clues on how to tie up this loose end.
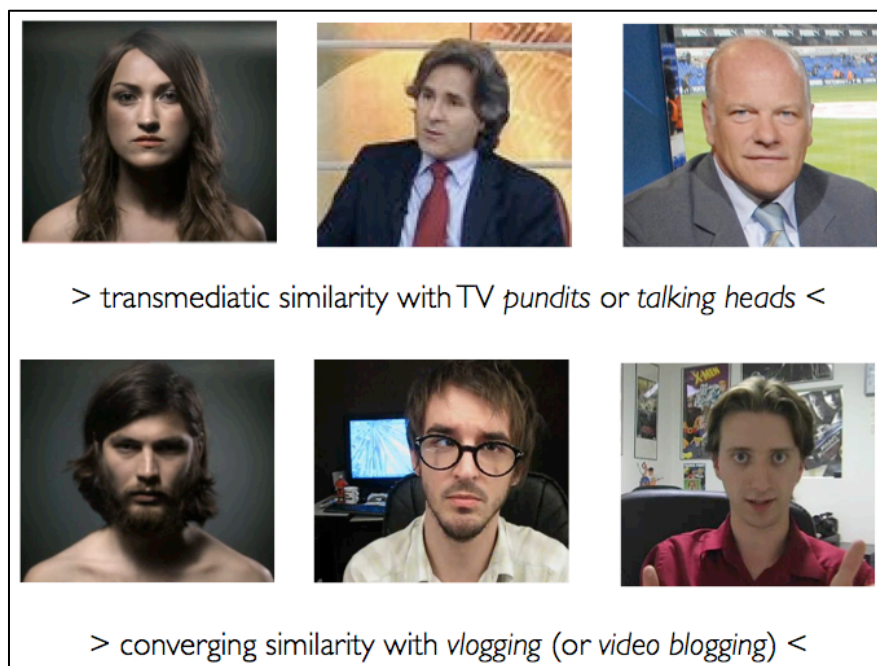
FIGURE 2: Transmediatic and converging similarities between
Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» music video and other media genres.

The framing of the fixed cuts of the music video and the lip-sync of the song lyrics by the band members are analogous to television *pundits* or *talking heads*, in which someone with a certain expertise broadcasts his or her commentary on a particular subject. Due to the *convergence* (JENKINS 2006) of music videos to the Social Web, both framing and lip-sync options tend to rather refer to *vlogging*, one of the most emblematic forms of online communication (FIGURE 2). Vlogging is not only the dominant genre of online user-generated contents, but also an audio-visual genre that is critical for the construction of the sense of community among video sharing websites users. Therefore, Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» music video contains quite *readable* hipertextual references to vlogging through its vernacular aesthetic configuration: fixed framing of talking heads, lip-synching, brevity (RETTBERG 2008: 21) and the simulacrum of authenticity (metaphorically represented in the music video text by the nudity of its three characters).

But there's more to it. Vlogging is also a grass-root medium genre that tends to generate engagement and criticism through Web user's harsh verbal comments and

video responses (BURGESS *et al.* 2009: 58-74). YouTube is filled with numerous examples of vloggers that suffered the effects of the dissolution of the border between their private and public spheres and their inability to deal with trolls and haters. In fact, it is highly probable that many of us in this room have participated in forums, blogs or other social networks and felt, one way or the other, the effects of the virtual arena that digital platforms sometimes turn into. It is crucial to note that the often mentioned *participation gap* (JENKINS *et al.* 2006) is not only related to user's difficulties of accessing digital platforms, but also to their incapacity of dealing with the fear of online exposure and participation. Therefore, based on the identified hipertextual references to vlogging, one feels rather tempted to read the portrayed violence in the music video text as a metatextual allusion, or a quite pungent metaphor, of the ferocity that frequently typifies communication exchanges between YouTube community members (FIGURE 3).
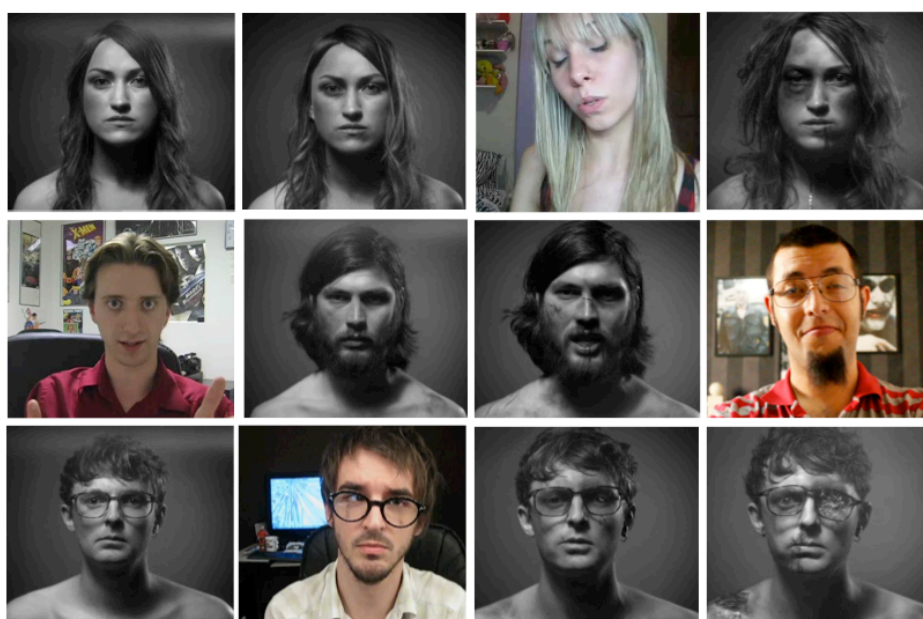

FIGURE 3: Mixed framing of Esben and the Witch's
«Marching Song» music video with vlogging screenshots.

Just like its three characters, each one of us has already potentially felt as helpless victims of this invisible and anonymous crowd called "the others" during our participative journey through the digital media landscape. In the end, what makes this

music video fruition so intensively difficult and fascinating is how easy it is for most Web users to identify with its characters. Don't be surprised if this emotional cleansing reminds you of Aristotle's definition of catharsis in his *Poetics* (ARISTOTLE 2003): after all, this is a performative music video, perhaps the closest modern medium genre to ancient Greek drama one might ever find on YouTube vast and growing cultural archive. In this digital drama, Web users *hamartias* (or injuries) are a consequence of their digital illiteracy or, to be more precise, their fear and inability of fully communicating with their peers.

M.I.A.'s «Born Free» music video was uploaded to Vimeo on April 25th 2010 and so far has reached 3.5 million views, turning it into one of the website's most popular videos. The music video was also uploaded to YouTube on April 26th 2010, but was removed one week later due to its graphical violent content. After a strong reaction of YouTube community against the website's censorship, the music video was made available again a few days later with an over-18 viewing disclaimer.

FIGURE 4: Screenshots of M.I.A.'s «Born Free» music video.

Unlike Esben and the Witch's performative music video, M.I.A's «Born Free» is a rather conventional narrative. It depicts a US military SWAT team, staging a raid in a building, during which they force a young redheaded man violently into a

detainee transport vehicle along with other redheads that have been rounded up. The detainees are then driven out to the desert, where they are brutally treated and forced to run across a live minefield. During this course of events, a young redheaded boy is shot in the head and another is blown to pieces after stepping on a live mine, while the soldiers continue to chase, beat and shoot the other redheads (FIGURE 4). All this is shot with a handy camera, which confers the music video a documentary or TV report-like plausibility. The music's relentless drums, prodding keyboards and M.I.A.'s baleful vocals intensify the violence of the images, while the «I was born free» chorus creates a fierce contrast, or *disjuncture* (GOODWIN 1992: 88), with both images and music.

As the song's wiki page reports[1], the music video has been widely described by the media as a political allegory, drawing parallels to many indigenous resistance movements around the world. This reading is supported by images seen on the video: a mural with the slogan *Our Day Will Come* (the historic motto of the Irish Republican Army); and redheaded young people wearing Palestinian *kufiya* who throw rocks and glass bottles at the armoured vehicles.

Once again, the main producerly feature in the music video text is directly related to an unanswered question: *Why cast redheads to portrait this alleged political allegory?* An obvious answer is the absurdity, randomness and vast symbolic scope of this choice: chasing redheads demonstrates the absurdity of any ethnic, religious, or political persecution. It also turns the dissemination of fear through its readers quite efficient: if something as arbitrary as one's hair colour can be used as an argument for genocide, then there are no guarantees that in the future a person may not be in the future persecuted for being tall, short, fat, skinny or even for being a fan of music videos (like me). Nevertheless, the question remains unanswered: Why cast *specifically* redheads to depict the symbolic absurdity of any mass persecution? An excessive reading of the music video text based on its transmediatic references (ROSE 2011) might give us some enlightening answers to this question.

The first media I would like to invoke is the cover artwork of M.I.A.'s *Maya*, the album that the «Born Free» single is supposed to promote (FIGURE 5). It is a

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_Free_(M.I.A._song) (last accessed 01/06/2011).

typically busy, trippy, disorienting piece of art that features the singer's face almost completely hidden by a composition of YouTube player bars. We don't need to have read one of several M.I.A.'s interviews in which she assumed that the cover was «a statement about 21ˢᵗ century privacy»[2], to identify in it a strong and readable metatextual reference to the dissolution of the border between the private and the public spheres of Social Web users. In fact, *Maya*'s advertising campaign constitutes a genuine case-study of online participative promotion, and it is quite obvious that, due to its graphical violent images, the «Born Free» music video was created to be Web streamed and not broadcasted by music television.

FIGURE 5: M.I.A.'s *Maya* album cover.

The fact that the «Born Free» music video was conceptualized and produced as a digital medium is potentially an important factor to the producerly structure of its text and a strong guideline for its digital readers. What do Web users, and specifically YouTube community members, know about *gingers*? Actually quite a lot. First of all, one of the most popular South Park cartoon episodes on the Web is Season 9 *Ginger Kids* originally aired on November 9ᵗʰ 2005. In this episode, Cartman, a character

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[2] http://tinyurl.com/3paj7yd (tiny url created 01/06/2011).

known for his anti-Semitic tendencies, channels his hatred to people with red hair, freckles and pale skin, proclaiming that they have no souls. The popularity of this episode was boosted among YouTube community members four years later thanks to a rather surreal video of user @CopperCab uploaded on January 14th 2010[3]. In this classic piece of vlogging, an 18 year-old ginger kid expresses, with a disarming naivety, his anger at the South Park episode, declaring that, against all odds, he *did* have a soul (FIGURE 6). The Web users response was massively brutal and transformed this video in one of YouTube most famous phenomena of popularity: on June 1st 2011, the video ranked #57 in the website list of most viewed videos with 17 million views and #2 in the list of most commented videos.

FIGURE 6: Screenshots of South Park's *Ginger Kid* episode
and @CoperCab's *Gingers Do Have Souls* video blogging.

I think that the «Born Free» music video text loose end is now easy to tie up. M.I.A. and director Romain Gavras chose a *gingercide* to portray their allegory, because they were aware that redheads were already a strong cultural reference in the Social Web. When the music video was released, conventional media failed to identify these transmediatic references, but Web users didn't. A definitive proof of this awareness resides in the fact that, nowadays, both @CopperCab's *Gingers Do Have Souls* video and South Park's *Ginger Kids* clips appear as some of the first suggested videos on the several YouTube pages that contain copies of the original music video, which means both can be topologically conceptualized as *paratexts* (GENETTE 1982: 10) in YouTube's graphical user interface (FIGURE 7). This is a

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[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY39fkmqKBM (last accessed 01/06/2011).

valuable indication because YouTube's video recommendation system consists of a collaborative filtering algorithm based on its users browsing history[4]. Another proof is, obviously, the undeniable success of the music video in the Social Web: there is absolutely nothing *viral* to it, because Web users deliberately and consciously disseminate what is culturally relevant to them.
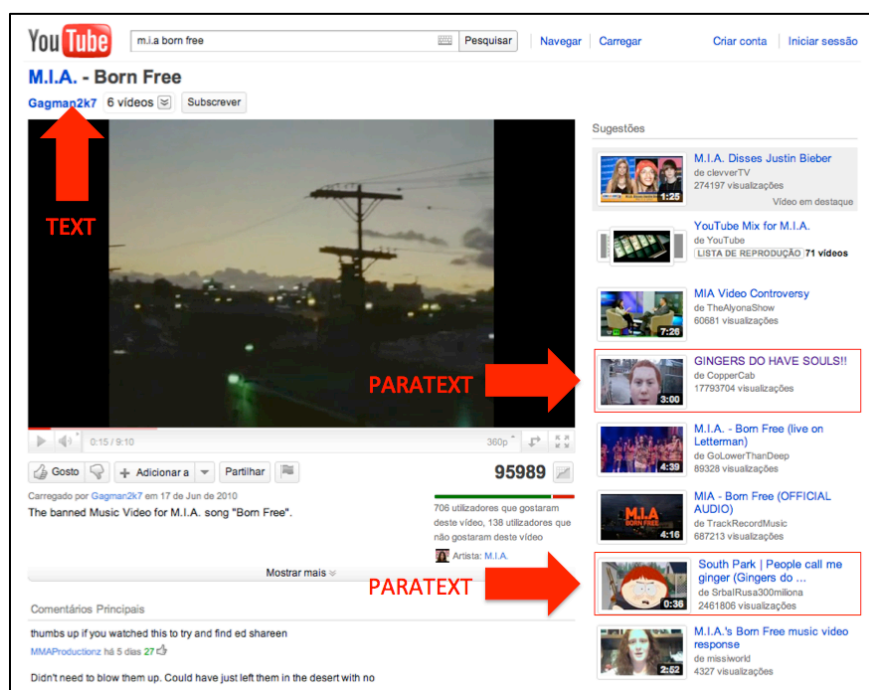

FIGURE 7: Identification of two paratexts on a screenshot
of a YouTube page playing M.I.A.'s «Marching Song» music video.

To finish this textual analysis of Esben and The Witch's «Marching Song» and M.I.A.'s «Born Free» music videos, let me just do a quick recap of its on-going conclusions:

- music videos are the most preeminent audio-visual medium genre on the Social Web;
- a textual analysis from a transdisciplinary approach between Web Studies and Literary Studies can truly be effective and fruitful in the study of music videos on the Social Web;

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[4] http://tinyurl.com/49dvj5r (tiny url created 03/06/2011).

- the digital dissemination mechanisms of music videos are related to the *participative* possibilities of the Social Web (JENKINS 2006) and the *producerly* nature of music video texts;

- the producerly features of music video texts introduce a general guiding principle for the success of its dissemination: open, loose ends and gaps that foster *excessive readings* by its viewers (FISKE 1987);

- those excessive readings are always anchored to the music video text, through a potentially vast array of *synesthetic* (GOODWIN 1992), *transtextual* (GENETTE 1982) and *transmediatic* (ROSE 2011) correlations;

- the sharing of music video and other media texts and meanings has nothing *viral* to it and, on the contrary, is the basis for social affiliations of Web users and often re-articulates or reconfirms their shared values (JENKINS *et al.* 2009: 81);

- the violence portrayed in both Esben and the Witch's «Marching Song» and M.I.A.'s «Born Free» music videos can be read as more than mere *visual hooks* (GOODWIN 1992: 90-96) and rather as elaborated references to the dissolution of the border between the private and the public spheres of Social Web users.

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