**Spike Jonze, Propaganda/Satellite Films and Music Video Work: Talent management and the construction of an Indie-Auteur**

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**Introduction**

Throughout his career, promotional and critical discourse has frequently depicted Spike Jonze as an indie-auteur; that is, an autonomous artist. While the indie-auteur label has commonly been applied to directors of indie films that have found success on the festival circuit, like the Coen Brothers, Steven Soderbergh and Paul Thomas Anderson, Jonze began his directing career making music videos. Because music videos play a role in selling recording artists and their songs, though, cultural commentators have often perceived them as an inferior media form tied to commerce, particularly when contrasted against film’s supposed artistry. Following the release of *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Jonze’s feature film directorial debut, Mark Olsen wrote in *Film Comment* that Jonze had ‘rise[n] from the relative anonymity of commercial and music video directing with a voice and vision so astonishing as to overwhelm the cultural products [he was] meant to pimp.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Olsen, like many cultural commentators, saw Jonze as a naturally talented artist who transcended the apparent commercial constraints and promotional functions of music video and spot production. Jonze seemed to have *progressed* from music video to film, and this progression appeared organic, inevitable and deserved.

This narrative of Jonze’s organic progression chimes with a broader culture surrounding indie film that privileges indie’s supposedly organic qualities, and its apparent distance from Hollywood’s manufacturing of commercial products.[[2]](#endnote-2) Jonze’s ‘progression’ to feature film directing, and his emergence as an indie-auteur, however, are far from organic or inevitable. Jonze received significant support from Propaganda Films, and its subsidiary Satellite Films, a talent management and media production company. Satellite managed Jonze and produced all of his music videos and commercial spots from 1992, when he became a client, to 2001, when the company collapsed. Propaganda, meanwhile, produced *Being John Malkovich* using finance provided by PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, its parent company at the time. Accordingly, in this chapter, I explore the roles that Propaganda’s/Satellite’s media production and talent management activities played in shaping Jonze’s music video work, and building his reputation. I focus especially on Propaganda/Satellite’s efforts to promote Jonze and enhance his marketability by positioning him as an autonomous artist (or indie-auteur in-waiting) seemingly superior to most other music video directors. I show that Jonze’s and Propaganda’s/Satellite’s work is part of, rather than antithetical to, a highly industrialized and commercialized music video sector and reconfigure Jonze’s authorial profile by questioning whether he is really ‘indie’ at all. I also consider implications for cultural and social distinctions between film and music video which, like distinctions between film and TV, have traditionally positioned the former as authored, artistic and intended for supposedly sophisticated audiences, while the latter is presumed to be relatively unauthored, commercial and appealing to undiscerning mass audiences.[[3]](#endnote-3) As a result, I assert that it is imperative that scholarship resists narratives portraying Jonze as an artist whose progression to indie-auteur was organic, and instead recognize the range of collaboratively produced strategies and cultural assumptions shaping his career and underpinning the marketing of his persona.

**Propaganda Pre-1991**

To understand why Jonze became Satellite’s client, and how he became a successful music video director and emerging indie-auteur working within the company, it is necessary to explore how Propaganda Films’ broader business and strategy evolved beforehand. Propaganda was founded in 1986 by producers Steve Golin and Joni Sighvatsson, and music video directors David Fincher, Nigel Dick, Greg Gold and Dominic Sena. Propaganda began as an integrated production and talent management company focused on producing music video and representing directors. Integrating music video production with a director-focused talent management business made sense for two keys reasons. First, because talent management companies are usually much smaller than talent agencies they are forced to differentiate themselves.[[4]](#endnote-4) Talent management companies often make their smaller size an advantage by claiming to offer tailored strategic career support to unestablished clients with little previous success finding employment in the media industries.[[5]](#endnote-5) Second, new video technology was cheap at the time, and the music video sector was still emerging, meaning that there were relatively few barriers to entry facing small production companies in terms of cost and competition.[[6]](#endnote-6) This allowed Propaganda to develop unestablished directors’ careers by producing their music videos, helping them gain exposure and become more marketable, and then use their clients’ marketability as leverage to secure more contracts and greater fees.

By 1990, the year that Propaganda founded Satellite, its strategy had proven successful and the company had evolved significantly. Propaganda had become the leading music video production company in the United States capturing roughly one third of music video work commissioned by the major record labels,[[7]](#endnote-7) was 49% owned by PolyGram,[[8]](#endnote-8) and had expanded into commercial spot, film and television production. Propaganda benefitted immensely from changes across the music video sector in two key ways, both of which can be traced to MTV’s emergence. First, MTV offered Propaganda and its directors greater exposure. Second, MTV helped create an industrial context that made the music video auteur increasingly valuable. Jack Banks’ 1996 work on MTV sheds light on exactly how these two developments occurred and how Propaganda and its directors benefitted.

According to Banks, MTV, which launched on cable in 1981, quickly became the dominant channel for music video because it shared ownership with large cable multiple systems operators that gave the channel an ‘important base of guaranteed subscribers.’[[9]](#endnote-9) MTV subsequently exercised control over music video distribution by insisting that record companies grant exclusive access to thirty percent of their videos.[[10]](#endnote-10) For Banks, therefore, MTV created consolidation and a form of contractual vertical integration across the sector.[[11]](#endnote-11) One consequence of this form of vertical integration was that record companies began increasingly commissioning work from a handful of established production companies.[[12]](#endnote-12) Propaganda benefitted especially from MTV’s exclusivity contracts with record labels, because the company and its directors made videos for the labels’ most popular and promising artists including Madonna, Janet Jackson and Sting; the thirty percent that effectively guaranteed them substantial exposure on MTV. The *New York Times* thus reported that Propaganda’s ‘market share gave the company dominance of MTV and late-night music video shows,’[[13]](#endnote-13) while *Premiere* commented that Golin and Sighvatsson ‘seemed to have a special talent for ferreting out hot young directors’ who ‘quickly became the kings of MTV.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

While Banks outlines changes occurring across the music video sector, I am interested instead in the relationship between consolidation and indie-auteurs in promotional and critical discourse. Banks argues that ‘record companies and MTV consider a music clip solely as a commercial to sell certain commodities,’ while ‘those involved in the production of music videos, including the musician, producer, and director, want to create an artistic work.’[[15]](#endnote-15) Moreover, for Banks, this distinction is underpinned by assumptions that making art requires creative autonomy. ‘Cultural producers have limited creative autonomy’ in the music video market, Banks says, because they usually ‘lose struggles’ with the record companies that underwrite and own the clips.[[16]](#endnote-16) This essentially depicts music video directors as indie-auteurs: naturally creative figures whose autonomy appears threatened by consolidation across the sector. Banks was not alone in expressing these views, of course, which were shared by critics and other scholars.[[17]](#endnote-17) Perceptions that the music video director is antithetical to MTV, however, is a key notion underpinning their marketability. In these terms, MTV’s dominance and consolidation in the music video sector can be reframed as phenomena that allowed Propaganda to capitalize on their clients’ growing reputation as indie-auteurs in-waiting, in order to enhance and sustain their fees.

As Propaganda became the dominant music video company in the late1980s and early1990s, its share of the market, and its fees and the fees of its directors, appeared to have peaked.[[18]](#endnote-18) Propaganda responded by expanding into other, more lucrative media, to reduce its reliance on music video revenues and increase its overall revenues. To do so, Propaganda sought to leverage its directors’ reputations. When Propaganda sold 49% shares to PolyGram in 1988, for instance, *Variety* paraphrased the company’s owners describing the deal, which included feature film production finance, as part of ‘the company’s policy … to create opportunities for its music video and commercial directors to cross over into features.’[[19]](#endnote-19) The films that Propaganda subsequently produced included *Kill Me Again* (1989) and *Wild at Heart* (1990), two projects packaged with indie-auteurs – John Dahl and David Lynch, respectively – and marketed as artistic independent films. This marked Propaganda’s alignment with the ‘quality iteration of independent film’ that, as Yannis Tzioumakis outlines, became increasingly popular and lucrative in the late1980s and early1990s.[[20]](#endnote-20) As a result, Propaganda’s owners reframed its music video and commercial spot production businesses as basically a means for creating feature film and nurturing or training feature film directors. Golin claimed that music video and commercial spot revenues allowed Propaganda to ‘survive’ and gave the company ‘credibility with directors who [didn’t] want to take a project to a studio.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Sighvatsson added that Propaganda’s music video and commercial spot businesses functioned as ‘research and development’ that provided ‘a great training ground for new talent.’[[22]](#endnote-22)

Golin and Sighvatsson’s reframing of Propaganda’s music video and commercial spot production businesses is indicative of broader rhetoric surrounding indie film that makes art, and not commerce, seem to be the primary objective of production.[[23]](#endnote-23) Part of this rhetoric is a tendency for indie film to be defined against Hollywood, with the latter denigrated on the basis that it represents a highly commercialized industrial system.[[24]](#endnote-24) Golin’s claim about wanting to support feature film directors who are eager to work outside of the Hollywood studios is one example: any suggestion that Golin was seeking to support alternative expression in protest of Hollywood consolidation however, is undermined by the fact that he also described the process of consolidation in the music video sector as ‘a necessary evil’ that created ‘a much more professional way of doing business.’[[25]](#endnote-25) Rather than providing any progressive cultural or social function, therefore, Propaganda’s strategies worked as a form of professional legitimacy and revenue generation. Specifically, depicting their directors as naturally talented artists exhibiting huge creative potential provided room for Propaganda to continuously renegotiate and improve their clients’ contracts.

While Golin and Sighvatsson’s comments are economically driven, however, they also carry problematic cultural undertones. Their talent management strategies are based on elevating their clients by denigrating non-client directors. This is explicitly evident when Golin contrasts Propaganda’s ‘professional’ directors, creating results-driven work, to amateurs making ‘shoddy’ videos.[[26]](#endnote-26) Similarly, by reframing Propaganda’s music video and commercial spot businesses as a means for creating film and nurturing filmmakers, Golin and Sighvatsson suggested that Propaganda’s directors were naturally artists disinterested in generating revenues for Propaganda or profiting themselves. This implied that Propaganda’s directors deserved to progress to other apparently better media like indie film. This in turn suggested that remaining a music video director essentially meant settling for inferiority. In these terms, Propaganda’s talent management strategies relied on sustaining cultural hierarchies between art and commerce, film and music video, and the filmmaker or indie-auteur and the music video director. As Propaganda applied its talent management strategies to new clients like Jonze, the reputations that its strategies helped build became underpinned by, and helped disseminate, these cultural distinctions.

**Satellite and Jonze**

Established in 1990, Satellite represented one manifestation of Propaganda’s expansion. Propaganda’s scale had increased: it managed several established and marketable directors including Fincher, Sena, David Hogan and Michael Bay, and it expanded into film and television production. Satellite, then, was set up to be a division dedicated to managing less marketable directors with limited experience of finding work, and concentrated entirely on music video and commercial spot production and talent representation. In this sense, Satellite was indicative of Propaganda’s attempts to ‘nurture’ talent through music video and commercial spot work.

Jonze signed with Satellite in 1992. Signing new clients, particularly ones capable of fitting into the company, obviously represented a significant aspect of Propaganda’s strategy for growing its business and revenues. Golin and Sighvatsson’s comments, then, must also be understood as revealing and even contributing to Propaganda’s strategy for talent recruitment. By claiming to nurture talent and provide significant opportunities, Golin and Sighvatsson sought to entice new clients through promises of career progression and higher fees. Sighvatsson, for instance, bragged that Fincher’s and Sena’s careers had gone ‘through the roof’ and they had begun receiving $140,000 per video, up from $4,000 or $5,000.[[27]](#endnote-27) Elsewhere, Sighvatsson emphasized that Fincher and Sena had become ‘top television commercial directors’ where they made ‘a 30-second piece of film for $600,000.’[[28]](#endnote-28) Sighvatsson clearly used Fincher and Sena’s success to claim that their talent management strategies were efficacious. Jonze has since recalled being impressed by Fincher and other Propaganda directors’ work shooting ‘huge commercials and videos’ for The Rolling Stones and Volvo.[[29]](#endnote-29) This affirms that Jonze was motivated to join Satellite at least in part for career opportunities, and saw his career progressing according to the blueprint that Propaganda’s talent management strategies helped design. Moreover, Jonze says that after joining Satellite, he frequently visited Fincher in his office down the hall to ‘pick [his] brain about stuff.’[[30]](#endnote-30) This shows that the offices of talent management firms can also function as hubs in the exchange of knowledge. Jonze admits too that he mainly went to Fincher to ‘learn how effects were done,’[[31]](#endnote-31) demonstrating that this exchange centered upon developing skills as a visual storyteller rather than exchanging or formulating critical political ideas or social activism of a kind associated with the more marginal or radical end of independent film.

Because Jonze was relatively unknown when he joined Satellite in 1992, almost no news coverage exists of his first two years at the company. The most thorough account of Jonze’s early period with Satellite comes from the 2003 DVD release of his music videos, short films and documentaries as part of the ‘Directors Label’ DVD series, which Jonze helped create.[[32]](#endnote-32) The DVD includes a booklet featuring an interview with Jonze interspersed with stills from his music videos. Released after Jonze’s emergence as a feature film director, however, the DVD must not be understood as a historical artifact. The DVD represents a paratext designed to reappraise and canonize Jonze’s music video work, by positioning it as part of an indie-auteur oeuvre. As a result, the DVD package and Jonze’s comments sustain, and enhance, his reputation.

In the DVD booklet, Jonze recalls that his reel, which he presented to Satellite, only included ‘a couple of super low-budget videos,’ some ‘skateboarding footage’[[33]](#endnote-33) and a collection of photos.[[34]](#endnote-34) Jonze states that Satellite’s head, Danielle Cagaanan, reviewed his reel and cautiously agreed to take him on as a director, providing he could get ‘the energy, personality and point of view’ from his photos into his music videos.[[35]](#endnote-35) Jonze says that Cagaanan’s instructions initially left him confused, but that he figured out what she meant one year later, when he began drafting treatments for *If I Only Had a Brain* by MC 900 ft. Jesus, one of several early songs he received.[[36]](#endnote-36) Jonze explains that he drafted two treatments, one following a young boy discovering MC 900 ft. Jesus (Mark Griffin) operating a spooky TV shop from his basement, the other following the recording artist being transported in a cardboard box to a factory producing his new brain.[[37]](#endnote-37) Jonze says that although he preferred the former, Cagaanan encouraged him to submit the latter to the recording company because it better reflected his personality.[[38]](#endnote-38) ‘She just thought it was more original,’ Jonze explained. ‘She could see other people writing the treatment with the image on the TVs, but she couldn’t see anyone else writing that other one.’[[39]](#endnote-39)

In these accounts, Jonze sheds light on how Satellite and Cagaanan sought to construct him as an indie-auteur by positioning him as a figure with an individual creative style capable of producing original work. To do so, Cagaanan imagined a homogenous music video sector where directors produced standardized works. On the surface it appears that, by recognizing Cagaanan and Satellite’s role in nurturing his creative identity, Jonze undermines depictions of himself as an autonomous artist. Yet this represents a rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Claiming to have been unaware that he had an individual creative style is a way for Jonze to make his style seem natural or organic.[[40]](#endnote-40) Jonze suggests that his creative style only needed to be nurtured and that it was always inherently different to popular music video conventions. Propaganda/Satellite taught Jonze how to present himself as an indie-auteur, thus like Cagaanan he also invokes a homogeneous music video sector to reinforce his reputation. Jonze asserts that his photos looked nothing like ‘all the videos that [were] on TV’ and that ‘everyone knows what a video is supposed to look like.’ [[41]](#endnote-41) He also retrospectively dismisses his first treatment for *If I Only Had a Brain* as ‘pretty much just like a “music video” idea’ and states that, although the video he made was not ‘the most amazing,’ he nevertheless likes it by virtue of being the first video where he was not ‘trying to be something or do something [he wasn’t].’[[42]](#endnote-42) This works to increase the cultural value of the video specifically and epitomizes how the DVD functions to reappraise his music video work in general. Jonze’s comments are contrived, however, since he contradictorily claims to be unaware of having a personal style that he simultaneously recognized as being different. As a result, Jonze’s account demonstrates how authorial discourse can stem from the publicity imperatives of talent management companies and the personalization of their general strategies around individual clients.

Propaganda/Satellite’s influence in shaping Jonze’s music video practice becomes evident when recognizing how clearly his directing work matched with the company’s preferences regarding how music videos should be designed, and how they should look. According to two Propaganda executives, Anne Marie Mackay and Juliana Roberts, the company and its divisions favored videos designed around original concepts and dramatic narratives.[[43]](#endnote-43) They ‘pushed’ these videos, Mackay and Roberts stated, despite record labels often preferring ‘formulaic’ and ‘unimaginative’ performance-centered videos.[[44]](#endnote-44) Mackay and Roberts’ comments appear as nothing more than statements about creative preferences. This is designed, however, to depict Propaganda as an artistic and innovative company, especially as one struggling against conservative record labels that value music video only for its promotional benefits and potential to generate profits. Yet their comments hide the commercial imperatives underpinning Propaganda’s talent management and media production strategies. In fact, Propaganda preferred concept videos because they helped promote the company and its directors. Understood in these terms, the notion of creative conflict between record labels and music video producers can be reconfigured as tension between two parties with different investments in music video’s promotional possibilities, the former prioritizing the promotion of recording artists, the latter prioritizing directors.

Concept music videos appeared well-suited to promoting Propaganda and its directors for two main reasons. First, they gave Propaganda’s directors greater leeway to experiment with form and style.[[45]](#endnote-45) The company’s preference for stylistic flourishes was underlined by John Dahl, director of *Kill Me Again* and *Red Rock West*, who commented that Propaganda, which produced the films, ‘were probably disappointed that [his] movies weren’t cooler looking’ because ‘they really like the visual.’[[46]](#endnote-46) This arguably undermines perceptions of creative autonomy within Propaganda, since the company clearly favored stylized work more than some directors. Second, concept videos enabled Propaganda’s directors to incorporate dramatic narratives and offered opportunities to play with music video and other media genres and conventions. This is symptomatic of Propaganda’s strategy for elevating its directors and legitimating their work by positioning them as filmmakers. Sena’s and Fincher’s music video work, for instance, referenced canonical films like *Casablanca* (1942), *8 ½* (1963), *Citizen Kane* (1941)and *Metropolis* (1927),[[47]](#endnote-47) which aligned them directly with auteurs including Federico Fellini, Orson Welles and Fritz Lang. As if confirming this strategy, in an interview conducted by Jonze in 1994 Sighvatsson claimed that stylistic and formal experimentation exhibited Propaganda’s directors’ ‘filmic background[s]’ and ‘command of the visual language.’[[48]](#endnote-48)

Jonze’s comments on his music video preferences recall Propaganda’s owners’ and executives’ comments above. During an interview for Channel 4’s *Mirrorball*, for instance, Jonze expressed a preference for concept music videos.[[49]](#endnote-49) That he expressed this preference during *Mirrorball*, a documentary series celebrating his and other directors’ music video work as art, reveals an attempt to make concept videos appear more personal and artistic. This is underlined in the ‘Directors Label’ booklet, as Jonze describes his video for Daft Punk’s *Da Funk*, probably his most concept-heavy video,[[50]](#endnote-50) as ‘a predecessor to [*Being John*] *Malkovich*.’[[51]](#endnote-51) In these terms, Jonze clearly frames *Da Funk* and his other music videos as exhibiting his ‘filmic background.’[[52]](#endnote-52) While Jonze’s experimentation with form and style was intended to promote the director as an indie-auteur, therefore, it should be understood instead as a mark of his work within the commercial music video industry, informed as it was by Propaganda/Satellite’s experience and knowledge of music video production and convention.

**The Music Videos**

Stylistic flourishes are abundant across Jonze’s music videos. Jonze’s videos for MC 900 ft. Jesus’ *If I Only Had a Brain* and Dinosaur Jr.’s *Feel the Pain*, for example, both feature unusual point-of-view shots (the former from inside the cardboard box as MC 900 enters; the latter from inside a golf hole with the ball teetering above), very low-angle shots (MC 900 inside his cardboard box; J. Mascis of Dinosaur Jr. teeing up) and fast-paced tracking shots (MC 900’s cardboard box rolling down a hill on a child’s trailer and J.Mascis’ golf buggy swerving around Manhattan). Jonze’s video for Beastie Boys’ *Sure Shot*, meanwhile, features many stylistic flourishes including low-angle shots (such as its opening shot of an approaching dog that does not appear again, revealing it to be otherwise inconsequential to the video), close-up crane shots (with the rappers hanging from the crane), transitions between color and black-and-white, sped-up tracking shots and montages created from archive footage.

Even Jonze’s performance-centered video for Weezer’s *Undone* *(The Sweater Song)* opens with a prolonged stylistic flourish. Made from one single tracking shot, the video begins in black-and-white with the camera moving through a studio hallway. As the camera reaches the stage door entrance, however, the stage area beyond appears upside down. As the camera continues through the door and floats down towards the stage, it rotates in mid-air, turning the image the right way up. Once the camera reaches the band, the image then becomes color. This opening sequence’s stylistic flourish helps put Jonze’s stamp on an otherwise unremarkable performance video. As well as stylistic flourishes, special and visual effects are abundant across Jonze’s music video work. Examples include: MC 900 appearing inside a moving cardboard box; the tracking shot of a golf ball soaring over Manhattan in *Feel the Pain*; Elastica chasing a digitally created ghost and firing laser guns at an animatronic Godzilla in the video for *Car Song*; Mike Watt riding two model trains in *Big Train*; a (stunt)man running down the street alight in Wax’s *California*; Steven Malkmus, the lead singer of Pavement, performing with an invisible head in *Shady Lane*; and Christopher Walken flying around a hotel lobby in *Weapon of Choice*. Like the stylistic flourishes, the special and visual effects in Jonze’s music videos highlight the presence of a visual artist.

While Jonze’s stylistic flourishes and use of special effects draw attention to visual artistry, formal play is used to create the impression that they belong to a broader artistic vision. This effect is achieved sporadically in some of the examples cited above, particularly where videos combine stylistic flourishes with highly unusual subjects, like the fast-paced tracking shots of objects or vehicles not traditionally associated with speed (MC 900’s box; J. Mascis’s golf buggy) or shots of the Beastie Boys hanging onto a crane or performing underwater in *Sure Shot*. Much clearer examples, however, come from Jonze’s videos for The Pharcyde’s *Drop* and Fatboy Slim’s *Praise You*.

Jonze’s video for *Drop* clearly exhibits his stylistic flourishes and visual effects use. The video is played in reverse to give the impression of The Pharcyde’s members flying up from the ground, balls bouncing up stairs, and puddles of water rising into the air. The video ends with Fatlip (Derrick Stewart) receiving a hammer, Thor-like, in his hand. A glass pane featuring a painting of four figures in black with red outlines symbolizing The Pharcyde subsequently becomes reassembled (Fatlip had, of course, shattered the glass pane with the hammer he had thrown away). Once reassembled, the pane essentially becomes a fourth wall separating The Pharcyde from the camera and audience. In the space between the glass pane and the camera, however, a figure emerges completing his painting. This insertion of the glass pane at *Drop*’s conclusion represents a framing device designed to encourage audiences to perceive an authorial figure’s recrafting of music video convention. The glass pane/fourth wall is intended to symbolize music video convention (the framework). Having the painter occupy the space beyond the fourth wall functions to highlight Jonze’s presence by paralleling his position beyond the camera. Jonze, as the video’s director, thus effectively emerges as the artist operating outside convention to interpret and depict his subjects. The glass pane’s shattering, therefore, is a metaphor for Jonze’s breaking of music video convention, though one that overstates this breakage, since the video merely *reworks* music video conventions. As a result, *Drop*’s stylistic flourishes are made to appear indicative of Jonze’s authorial vision.

Like *Drop*,Jonze’s video for Fatboy’s Slim’s *Praise You* is designed to encourage audiences to perceive Jonze’s breaking of music video convention. The video begins with grainy handheld footage of Torrance Community’s amateur dance troupe travelling to perform, with one member heard thanking Richard Koufey (played by Jonze) for his preparation. This is followed by a wipe transition to a title insert featuring garish green and pink font calling the video a ‘Torrance Public Film Production.’ Subsequently, Richard and his troupe perform to Fatboy Slim’s *Praise You*, surrounded by extras looking like unparticipating spectators, accompanied by ambient sound and background dialogue. Afterwards, the troupe again discuss their performance, with one member thanking Richard for his ‘original’ choreography and Richard comparing it to ‘b-boy posse’ moves. This is laughable, since the choreography appears amateurish, improvised and rigid, and is performed by white middle-aged men and women wearing button-up t-shirts and yoga pants.

The video’s epilogue and prologue sequences, text insert, grainy handheld footage and amateur dance routine effectively function to again signal an authorial vision. They signal, on one clear level, Richard’s authorship, his amateur video recording and production. On another concealed level, however, they appear ironic and signal Jonze’s authorship, the figure responsible for constructing the self-reflexive music video. Consequently, the video is designed to draw comparisons between Richard and Jonze as two figures breaking convention.[[53]](#endnote-53) Drawing comparisons between Richard and Jonze in this way, however, is intended to emphasize their difference. Specifically, Richard’s breaking of dance conventions emerges from his amateurism and apparent ignorance regarding those conventions. In contrast, Jonze’s breaking of music video convention becomes the work of a highly skilled professional, an apparently knowledgeable and self-aware artist. This neatly captures the legitimation process underpinning Jonze’s music video work. As stylistic flourishes and formal play help make *Drop*, *Praise You* and other videos directed by Jonze seem to be innovative artworks breaking music video convention, therefore, most other videos become positioned as standardized works supposedly made by less creative music video directors.

Because Propaganda’s talent management strategy was designed to position its directors as artists, filmmakers and indie-auteurs, Propaganda’s directors also frequently referenced other media content and genres. Unlike Fincher’s and Sena’s videos which referenced high-culture films, however, Jonze’s videos recreated a range of popular media programs or genres, including a *Happy Days* episode (Weezer’s *Buddy Holly*), the 1970s TV cop show (Beastie Boys’ *Sabotage*), science fiction (*Car Song*), and classical Hollywood musicals (Björk’s *It’s Oh So Quiet*). Into each, Jonze inserted visual flourishes and framing devices designed to encourage audiences to perceive the referencing process as an individual author’s recreation. For example, *Buddy Holly* begins with an opening title sequence crediting Jonze as the *Happy Days* episode’s director, while *Sabotage* signals its mock-design by deliberately emphasizing its low-budget production with text reading ‘for screening purposes only’ appearing over archival footage used in place of a real explosion. This represents a broader feature of indie film, one discussed in detail by Michael Newman in relation to the Coen Brothers and other indie-auteurs.[[54]](#endnote-54) Formal and generic play can both help to promote directors because, as Newman says, they encourage authorial readings resulting from perceptions that breaking convention represents some manifestation of individual vision.[[55]](#endnote-55) They also cater to educated audiences who delight in recognizing and pointing out the references, and how genre or formal conventions might be played with.[[56]](#endnote-56) References in Jonze’s music videos thus signaled his broader skill in recreating and perhaps improving pop culture, making Jonze stand out as artist-innovator. While the specific references appeared different between Sena, Fincher and Jonze’s work, the effect was the same: they were positioned as directors capable of creating art beyond music video.

**Critical Discourse**

The success of Propaganda/Satellite’s strategies in helping to boost Jonze’s reputation and marketability is evident across critical discourse around his work. Critics clearly interpreted the textual properties that Jonze’s concept videos exhibited as signs of his individual authorship. Critics variously called Jonze a ‘video savant,’[[57]](#endnote-57) ‘artist,’[[58]](#endnote-58) ‘genius,’[[59]](#endnote-59) and ‘auteur.’[[60]](#endnote-60) They saw Jonze’s stylistic flourishes and popular culture references as proof; as expressions, they claimed, of his unusual or quirky vision and artistry. An early report on Jonze featured in *Newsweek* in late1994, for instance, called him a ‘25-year-old alternative auteur’ and described his ‘vision [as] loopy, canny and pure pop,’ citing as evidence the *Sabotage* video in which he ‘duded up the hip-hoppers as cheeseball TV cops in a parody of “The Streets of San Francisco.”’[[61]](#endnote-61)

Crucially, this *Newsweek* article quoted Cagaanan commenting, ‘He’s younger than most of us and his references are everything from “Star Wars” to “Happy Days.”’ This revealed Propaganda/Satellite’s attempts to position Jonze as the fresh voice within Propaganda/Satellite to make him seem hip and embed him as an astute innovator within popular culture. Over the next several years, numerous similar comments followed. *The Atlanta Constitution* claimed that Jonze’s *Buddy Holly* video displayed a ‘goofily self-conscious appreciation of pop- and pop culture,’[[62]](#endnote-62) the *Boston Globe* described Jonze’s video for Wax’s *California* as ‘quirky wicked fun,’[[63]](#endnote-63) the *Los Angeles Times* called the video for Daft Punk’s *Da Funk* ‘Another bizarre gem from director Spike Jonze,’[[64]](#endnote-64) and *The Ottawa Citizen* called Jonze’s *Praise You* video ‘a devastatingly funny spoof of music video conventions.’[[65]](#endnote-65)

According to many critics, then, Jonze’s videos were never just music videos: they were films and authored artworks. *The Gazette* called Jonze’s *Da Funk* ‘much closer to a short movie than a music video,’[[66]](#endnote-66) and the *New York Times* called the *Praise You* video ‘more like a guerrilla art attack than a commercial for a pop song.’[[67]](#endnote-67) These comments underlined how stylistic flourishes and formal play encouraged critics to perceive Jonze’s music videos as innovative and legitimated artworks, revealing perceived differences between Jonze’s work and mainstream music video conventions. By identifying Jonze’s quirkiness, references or formal play, critics broadcast their apparently refined tastes and discerning palettes.[[68]](#endnote-68) In this regard, ‘quirkiness’ and formal play function in music video as they do in film: they distinguish artworks and their niche audiences from a commercial mainstream and its mass audience.[[69]](#endnote-69) *The Ottawa Citizen* thus asserted that unlike ‘most MTV fare,’ Jonze’s ‘high-concept videos are smart in idea and execution.’[[70]](#endnote-70) As well as reaffirming distinctions between film and music video, art and commerce, these comments sustained social hierarchies by positioning Jonze’s admirers as smart, sophisticated and selective, and the mass mainstream music video audience as unsophisticated and undiscerning.

These distinctions, of course, were far more blurred than critical discourse suggested. Despite claims that Jonze’s authorial sensibility and videos were incompatible with the mainstream, he profited from having his videos gain significant exposure on MTV. According to some journalists, Jonze’s videos helped make Weezer a ‘household name’[[71]](#endnote-71) and gave established artists like Mike Watt long-overdue airplay.[[72]](#endnote-72) Notably, these journalists were both music-based, meaning that, because they were less invested in the visual medium, they were more willing to acknowledge his videos’ promotional functions and risk undermining depictions of his videos as artworks. Impressions that Jonze helped make the record labels’ musicians famous enhanced Satellite’s bargaining position and, as a result, Jonze’s fees soon increased to levels that lesser known acts like The Psychlone Rangers could no longer afford.[[73]](#endnote-73) By 1998 and 1999, critics were calling Jonze ‘a household name’ whose videos would never be found on MTV’s ‘Out of the Bin,’ a segment dedicated to giving lesser known acts exposure.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Jonze’s exposure on MTV also helped him cultivate a reputation for successfully appealing to young audiences. Again, this was underpinned by Propaganda/Satellite’s talent management strategies. ‘Because we became the biggest in videos,’ Sighvatsson stated in 1990, ‘everybody thinks we have unlocked some secrets about the 18 to 24 market. We’re perceived as image makers, and I think that has spilled over into commercials.’[[75]](#endnote-75) While ‘spilled over’ depicted a fortuitous or organic process however, Propaganda/Satellite’s strategy was most certainly carefully planned and orchestrated. By emphasizing Jonze’s youth and recent pop culture references in the early *Newsweek* article, for instance, Cagaanan made Jonze seem in-sync with the youth demographic.[[76]](#endnote-76) Almost immediately after Jonze’s videos became popular on MTV, then, Satellite leveraged his success with the channel’s youth demographic, to secure commercial spot contracts with brands like Nintendo, Levi and Nike.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Finally, by emphasizing Jonze’s youth, Cagaanan also depicted him as a director with significant potential destined for greatness. With the announcement and release of *Being John Malkovich* in 1999, then, Jonze’s emergence as indie-auteur appeared complete. Critics were quick to call *Being John Malkovich* ‘predictably quirky’[[78]](#endnote-78) and ‘offbeat.’ [[79]](#endnote-79) Some critics stated explicitly that this aligned Jonze well with indie-auteurs such as Wes Anderson and Paul Thomas Anderson.[[80]](#endnote-80) While this suggested an artistic work unlike commercial Hollywood products, however, Propaganda, backed by PolyGram, had packaged *Being John Malkovich* with Jonze to target the growing number of audiences drawn to ‘quirky’ indie film. Simultaneously, critics began retrospectively analyzing and searching Jonze’s music videos for similarities to *Being John Malkovich*. *Film Quarterly*, for instance, noted that like the feature film Jonze’s videos often ‘blend[ed] several layers of intertextuality’ and ‘played with identity issues.’[[81]](#endnote-81) Stating that Jonze’s works cohered under a single authorial vision helped legitimate his music videos as artworks or short films seemingly deserving more serious attention than most. Recalling Olsen’s comments in *Film Comment*, however, this reveals an anxiety at the more elite end of film criticism over Jonze’s background as a music video director and the commercial associations it carried. This shows that the eagerness of certain critics to sustain their positions as judges of quality can make them particularly receptive to the PR strategies of talent management companies like Propaganda. As a result, critics participating in Jonze’s construction as a marketable indie-auteur helped obscure the fact that his reputation was the product of highly commercial strategies and that he was the beneficiary of a consolidated industry.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored Jonze’s collaboration with Propaganda/Satellite from 1992 until the early2000s. I have shown that while promotional, extratextual and critical discourse frequently depicted Jonze as a natural talent and artist, and his emergence as elite music video director and indie-auteur as organic and inevitable, his creative reputation and career success was shaped significantly by Propaganda/Satellite’s talent management and media production strategies. Yet this was hardly contradictory. Propaganda/Satellite helped construct Jonze’s reputation as an artist by shaping his music videos (encouraging concept videos, stylistic flourishes and formal play) and influencing critical discourse through PR activities. This was designed to make Jonze more marketable, expand his career opportunities and enhance Satellite’s leverage when negotiating fees. The strategy appeared successful as Jonze’s music video fees increased, he secured more lucrative contracts to direct commercial spots and eventually delivered a commercially and critically successful debut feature, the Propaganda-produced *Being John Malkovich*. Examining the roles that Propaganda/Satellite played in shaping Jonze’s work and building his reputation, therefore, has helped to problematize his reputation as artist working autonomously to fulfil his singular vision and shows that he was not so very independent after all. This demonstrates that if we are to have anything but a limited understanding of the work and careers of authorial figures, research needs to better recognize the roles and contributions of talent intermediaries like agents and managers, figures who have been too often overlooked in media scholarship.

Finally, although commercial imperatives underpinned Propaganda’s strategies, they also involved and relied on sustaining highly undesirable cultural distinctions and hierarchies. Propaganda/Satellite’s strategies depicted Jonze as an artist creating innovative music video artworks and portrayed him as a natural talent destined, like Propaganda/Satellite’s other directors, to progress to film. In contrast, most other music video directors were positioned as artistically stuck, making culturally inferior videos designed to promote recording artists and destined to disappear amongst the other commercials airing on MTV. This narrative sustained cultural distinctions between art and commerce, film and music video, the filmmaker or indie-auteur and the music video director. This in turn sustained cultural and social hierarchies positioning film’s elite and apparently refined audience over MTV’s and music video’s mass and supposedly undiscerning audience. As Propaganda/Satellite used Jonze’s reputation as an artist to, first, secure more music video and commercial spot contracts, and later to package and market *Being John Malkovich*, they helped disperse these cultural distinctions and hierarchies even more widely. While this chapter has analyzed Jonze’s work specifically, therefore, far more scope exists to examine the role that talent intermediaries play in managing the indie-auteur discourse more widely and, especially, for examining the consequences of its construction and dispersal in media other than film.

1. Mark Olsen, “Discovery: Mike Mills,” *Film Comment* 36, no. 3 (May 2000): 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Geoff King, “Indie as Organic: Tracing Discursive Roots,” in *A Companion to American Indie Film*, ed. Geoff King (Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2017), 58-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed discussion of these distinctions between film and television, see Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Paul McDonald, “The Star System: The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed.Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 167-181. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dan Leopard, “Selling Out, Buying In: Brakhage, Warhol, and BAVC,” in Convergence Media History, ed. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (New York: Routledge, 2009), 151-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jack Banks, *Monopoly Television: MTV’s Quest to Control the Music* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Propaganda was itself a fairly diversified media company owned by Dutch-conglomerate Philips Electronics. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 63-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Larry Rohter, “For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1990, 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. John Richardson, “Producers: Propaganda Films,” *Premiere*, June 1, 1990, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Banks, *Monopoly Television*, 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For examples of critics asserting similar views see Olsen, “Discovery” and Alona Wartofsky, “Shooting for the hip: Video may have killed the radio star, but Spike Jonze is a cultural force to be reckoned with in the music video business,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, November 11, 1999; and for scholars see Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. As Banks (165) discusses, in 1990 record companies began applying downward pressure on top end production fees. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Amy Dawes, “Propaganda, Polygram Ink Pic Pact,” *Variety*, September 9, 1998, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Yannis Tzioumakis, “‘Independent,’ ‘Indie’ and ‘Indiewood’: Towards a periodization of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema,” in American Independent Cinema: indie, indiewood and beyond, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Rohter, “For 2 Producers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 221-246; Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Texas: University of Texas, 2012), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Newman, *Indie*, 221-246. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Steven Dupler, “L.A. Company Branches Out From Clip Base: Propaganda Nurtures New Talent,” *Billboard*, February 25, 1989, 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Richardson, “Producers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Dupler, “L.A Company Branches Out.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *The Work of Director Spike Jonze: A Collection of Music Videos, Short Films, Documentaries, and Rarities*, produced by Vincent Landay and Richard Brown (2003, Palm Pictures), DVD. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Jonze had previously founded *Dirt*, a quarterly skateboard and dirt bike magazine targeting teenage boys. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. This neatly captures the typical manager and talent dynamic, where managers build their own reputations around their ability to raise their clients’ profiles without being seen as too heavily involved. See Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents: The Postwar Talent Takeover* (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. The Work of Director Spike Jonze. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Dupler, “L.A. Company Branches Out.” [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. As Geoff King explains, experimentation with style can represent showiness resulting from a director’s eagerness to make their mark. Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Lizzie Francke, “Never a Dahl moment: Director John Dahl remains addicted to darker side of life,” *The Guardian*, August 4, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Sena referenced *Casablanca* and *8 ½* in his videos for Janet Jackson’s *Let’s Wait Awhile* andTaylor Dayne’s *I’ll Be Your Shelter*, respectively. Fincher referenced *Citizen Kane* and *Metropolis* in his videos for Madonna’s *Oh Father* and *Express Yourself*. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Spike Jonze, “Sighvatsson of Propaganda Films, Which Seized on the Music-Video Revolution and Encouraged a Generation of Gifted Young Filmmakers,” *Interview Magazine*,October 1, 1994, 102, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Mirrorball, ‘Episode 1,’ Channel 4, April 25, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. For a brief discussion of *Da Funk*, see Laurel Westrup’s chapter in this collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *The Work of Director Spike Jonze*. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Here I am using Sighvatsson’s phrase cited earlier in: Jonze, “Sighvatsson of Propaganda Films.” [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Some critics helped to extend the in-joke by playing along and crediting Richard as director. For example, see Deirdre Dolan, “Music video scores without any glitz: Spike Jonze’s alter ego almost fooled MuchMusic,” *National Post*, March 12, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Newman, *Indie*, 141-181. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Rick Marin, “MTV’s ruling video savant,” *Newsweek*, November 27, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Neil Strauss, “Critic’s Notebook: Hit Bands You See But Don't Listen To,” *New York Times*, April 01, 1995, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Alona Wartofsky, “Shooting for the hip: Video may have killed the radio star, but Spike Jonze is a cultural force to be reckoned with in the music video business,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, November 11, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Eric Weisbard, “Join the club,” *The Village Voice,* March, 4, 1997, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Marin, “MTV’s ruling video savant.” [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Steve Dollar, “Pop Music Preview,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1995, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Renee Graham, “Don’t try this at home,” *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1995, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Lorraine Ali, “POP MUSIC; The Kids Are All Right With a New Generation,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1997, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Wartofsky, “Shooting for the hip.” [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ilana Kronick, “Daft Punk’s tale of humble hound might redefine music video,” *The Gazette*, March 20, 1997, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ann Powers, “Rock Music Videos as an Art Form With a Festival of Its Very Own,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1999, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. By asserting that the critic’s taste is used to signify their social class, I am of course drawing here on the theory of Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. See Newman, *Indie*, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Wartofsky, “Shooting for the hip.” [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Dollar, “Pop Music Review.” [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Fred Shuster, “Proving Why He’s the Ace of Bass Watt Savors Punk Roots with ‘Ball-Hog’,” *Daily News*, March 17, 1995, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Joe Warminsky, “At Home with the Rangers: Record release party brings Psychlones back to Bethlehem,” *Morning Call*, March 24, 1995, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Ben Wener, “You like noncorporate videos? Check these out,” *The Orange County Register*, April 17, 1998, F52. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Rohter, “For 2 Producers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Marin, “MTV’s ruling video savant.” [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Al Levine, “‘Can you imagine it?’ Sports commercials can sell it,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 24, 1995, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Renee Graham, “Delroy Lindo getting his due,” *Boston Globe*, July 5, 1998, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Michele Willens, “From Miller Lite To the Making Of Movies Lite?” *New York Times*, September, 6, 1998, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Scott Repass, “Reviews: ‘Being John Malkovich’,” *Film Quarterly* 56, no.1 (September, 2002) 29-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)