# Music Video (De)Legitimacy and the Construction of a (Short Form) Auteur: David Fincher and Talent Management

# Abstract

This paper explores David Fincher’s collaboration with Propaganda Films, an integrated production and talent management company, during the late-1980s and early-1990s. Focusing specifically on Fincher’s music video work, the paper investigates how Propaganda’s talent management strategies helped to develop Fincher’s career and construct him as an auteur. To do so, the paper adopts a cultural production approach conceptualizing the auteur as a branded identity and discourse mobilized in promotional and critical materials. In doing so, the paper shows how Propaganda helped to single out Fincher’s videos as artistic works showcasing the exceptional talent of an aspiring feature-filmmaker. At the same time, however, the paper considers how Propaganda’s talent management strategies contributed to sustaining problematic cultural notions surrounding music video and short form work in general. As a result, the paper advocates adopting new and more diverse approaches when examining short form work and interrelated industry practice.

# Keywords:

David Fincher; Music video; Authorship; Auteur; Media talent management; Propaganda Films

# Introduction: Auteurs in context and music video delegitimization

Music video is a form of short form production that has long been culturally denigrated. Similar to short film, this denigration stems partly from notions that music videos’ brevity limits its potential complexity as well as from treatments of music video as merely a training ground for filmmakers seeking to progress to features (Westrup, 2016; Felando, 2015: 6; 21). Unlike short film, however, music video suffers additional prejudice largely because of various negative associations with commerce and consumer culture (see also Straw, 1988: 247; Westrup, 2016; Stubbs, 2019: 213-214). These negative associations stemmed especially from music video’s promotional functions, associations with MTV and television, and perceived relationships to youth culture. In 1991, for instance, *The Washington Post* described music videos as ‘blatant’ ads for record label artists and songs and part of MTV’s ‘round-the-clock commercials’ programming (Harrington, 1991). The article went on to assert that audiences under thirty behaving as ‘channel grazers’ with ‘limited attention span[s]’ were more likely to be seduced by music videos with ‘no structure’ and, therefore, buy into the products of the associated brands (Harrington, 1991). Accordingly, MTV specifically and television generally were treated as catering to lesser tastes and a potential risk to the developing minds of young audiences. Although MTV and television have been largely replaced by online platforms in the distribution of music videos in the 2010s, Will Straw argues that this has exacerbated music video’s marginalization (Straw, 2018). For example, Straw argues that the abundance of music videos on YouTube, the largest disseminator of music videos in the world, ‘seems a sign of little more than that platform’s uncontrolled voraciousness and role as dumping ground for all kinds of minor cultural forms’ (Straw, 2018).

While music video generally has been culturally denigrated, promotional, extratextual and critical discourse has positioned some music video directors as auteurs whose music videos merit closer attention. Re-examining David Fincher’s music videos in anticipation of the release of *Mank* (2020), for instance, *The Ringer* proclaimed that Fincher was clearly ‘a director with a future’ whose videos were ‘unmistakably the work of a wily and steely auteur’ (Harvilla, 2020). While such comments help to position Fincher as a talented artist who managed to transcend music video production, this article conceptualises the auteur as a branded identity and discourse mobilized by talent intermediaries such as producers, talent agents and talent managers. To do so, the article analyses press releases, trade press reports, and critics’ reviews surrounding Fincher’s collaboration with Propaganda Films, an integrated media production and talent management company, during the late-1980s and early-1990s. Co-founded in 1986 by producers Steve Golin and Joni Sighvatsson and directors Fincher, Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena and Greg Gold, Propaganda grew to manage an extensive client list that included Michael Bay, David Hogan, Spike Jonze, Mark Romanek and Antoine Fuque, and expanded from music video into commercial spot, feature film and television production, before collapsing in 2001 following a series of acquisitions and mergers (by which time many co-founders had exited). While analysing Fincher’s collaboration with Propaganda specifically, therefore, this article examines his construction as an auteur as part of the company’s broader talent management and production operations[[1]](#endnote-1).

In the simplest terms, talent intermediaries are so-called because they liaise between the ‘talent’ involved in the on-set production and the studios, financiers, and employers, to streamline the recruitment process (see, for example, McDonald, 2008: 167-181). Talent managers are technically different from agents because they tend to represent fewer clients and offer more long-term strategic career advice, are legally prohibited from procuring employment but are permitted to engage in production, and usually collect a 15% rather than 10% commission from their clients’ earnings (see, for example, McDonald, 2008: 167-181). Like other talent intermediaries, though, managers participate in ‘classification struggles’ that shape perceptions about what constitutes art and who is granted artistic legitimacy (see Roussel, 2017: 122-123). Talent intermediaries do so to enhance their clients’ marketability, and, in turn, shape their own professional standing, sphere of influence, and perceived worth (Roussel, 122-123; see also Kemper, 2010: xi-xii). As Violaine Roussel argues, talent intermediaries make worth with words as their contribution to ‘naming, gauging, classifying, and pricing talent make[s] economic and creative value in the same movement’ (2017: 177). Consequently, Roussel argues that talent intermediaries can sometimes be engaged imperceptibly in the ‘progressive and collective rearrangement’ of industrial and cultural divisions and hierarchies (2017: 131). Accordingly, this article explores how Propaganda’s talent management and production strategies contributed to Fincher’s professional and artistic legitimacy, and to what extent this contributed to rearranging or reinforcing music video’s cultural status.

# Propaganda Films: Talent management, music video auteurs and media convergence

When Propaganda was established in 1986, most of its co-founders had ambitions of becoming feature filmmakers (see Rohter, 1990; Taylor, 2013). Golin and Sighvatsson, for instance, were American Film Institute graduates who subsequently co-produced two obscure independent features named *Hard Rock Zombies* (Shah, 1985) and *American Drive-In* (Shah, 1985). Fincher, meanwhile, had gained experience working in visual effects for George Lucas’ Industrial Light and Magic and had directed a few music videos, including most notably for Rick Springfield for whom he also directed the concert film *Beat of the Live Drum* (1985). Owing to the co-founders’ relative obscurity coupled with the trade and popular press’ general disinterest in music video production, very few press reports exist around Propaganda’s very early years. Indeed, substantial press reports on Propaganda did not appear until 1989 and 1990, by which time the company had found significant success. This success saw Propaganda capturing over 30% of the music video production market to become the leading music video production company in the United States, securing investment from PolyGram (a major record label owned by the Dutch-conglomerate Philips), and expanding into commercial spot and feature film production (Dawes, 1988; Rohter, 1990). Because they followed Propaganda’s success therefore, press reports appearing in 1989 and 1990 are rose-tinted to give the impression of a grand master plan having been fulfilled.

The late-1980 and early-1990 press reports on Propaganda focused mainly on Golin and Sighvatsson’s decision-making and ‘nurturing’ of talent. An article in the *New York Times*, for instance, described Golin and Sighvatsson as two producers who had been ‘frustrated by the slow pace and high cost of making movies the Hollywood way’ and who were ‘capable of bigger and better things, if only they could be free to follow their instincts’ (Rohter, 1990). In the context of Propaganda’s expansion, meanwhile, Golin and Sighvatsson framed their music video and commercial spot production businesses as part of a long-term plan designed to give the company the cash flow necessary to ‘finance [their] own development on [their] own terms’ and as ‘a great training ground for new talent’ (Rohter, 1990; see also Dupler, 1989). Sighvatsson also stated later that Propaganda’s co-founders made music videos because MTV provided an outlet of a kind that did not exist for short films (Jonze, 1994). These comments align Golin and Sighvatsson neatly with other talent intermediaries who generate artistic value by positioning themselves as having the good taste necessary to identify talented artists capable of producing high quality work (on independent producers, see Ortner, 2013: 162-167; on agents, see Roussel: 2017: 177-178; on intermediaries as ‘cultural bankers’ see Bourdieu, 1993: 75). To do so, Golin and Sighvatsson cultivate a reputation for privileging art over commerce. Yet doing so obscures their commercial imperatives and business realities.

Sighvatsson’s justification for making music videos instead of short films, for instance, represents rhetorical manoeuvring designed to retain the privileged notions of artistic autonomy associated with restricted modes of production *and* cultivate a professional legitimacy necessary for working in the commercial media industries[[2]](#endnote-2). While Sighvatsson frames the ‘outlet’ positively as a source of exposure, it must also be understood as code for the market. Moreover, although Golin and Sighvatsson make music video production appear as a manifestation of the independent producer’s struggle for survival (Rohter, 1990), their significant market share came about because of MTV’s dominance in distribution (see Banks, 1996: 168). Specifically, MTV’s dominance enabled the channel to insist on the exclusive rights to screen videos for the top recording artists and this, in turn, gave many of Propaganda’s directors’ videos substantial guaranteed exposure (Banks, 1996: 168). Furthermore, Propaganda’s rhetoric positioning music video as training for auteur filmmakers was designed to increase its directors’ leverage and fees, signal the efficacy of its talent management operations, and indicate its potential growth and PolyGram’s return on investment (see also, Stubbs, 2019: 216-217). Rather than pure talent and free expression, therefore, all of this demonstrates how Propaganda and its directors’ success stemmed from certain business strategies and consolidation occurring across the screen media industries.

# Propaganda’s Music Video Division as Film School: Making art and artists

In a 2014 interview with *Playboy*, Fincher stated, ‘I made commercials to make money, but I did music videos as a kind of film school’ (Rebello, 2014). Although Fincher does not reference Propaganda specifically here, his comment recalls how the company’s executives conceived of its music video division as a ‘training ground’ for nurturing ‘raw talent’ (Dupler, 1989; Rohter, 1990). Conceiving of its music video divisions as a ‘training ground’ or film school in this way is highly significant because, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, educational institutions inculcate cultivated dispositions based on the implicit ‘recognition of the value of works of art and the ability to appropriate them by means of generic categories’ (1993: 230). Accordingly, Sighvatsson stated that music video enabled Fincher and Propaganda’s other directors to exhibit their ‘filmic background[s]’ and ‘command of the visual language’ (Jonze, 1994). Sighvatsson attributes their directors’ ability to do so to music video production being relatively new and enabling experimentation (Jonze 1994). However, Propaganda actively created situations where their directors could exhibit their ‘filmic backgrounds’ by pressing record labels to permit music videos with dramatic narratives and coaching its directors to experiment with form and style (see also, Stubbs, 2019: 220).

Fincher’s videos exhibit his ‘filmic background’ and ‘command of the visual language’ through a combination of stylistic flourishes, film references and metatextual devices. Stylistic flourishes in Fincher’s videos, for instance, include blue-tinted lighting (George Michael’s *Freedom! 90* [1990]; Madonna’s *Express Yourself* [1989]; Aerosmith’s *Janie’s Got a Gun* [1990]); symmetrical or fractured imagery (Madonna’s *Vogue* [1990]; Madonna’s *Bad Girl* [1993]), match cuts (snow to pearls in Madonna’s *Oh Father* [1989]), transitions between black-and-white, sepia and colour (Steve Winwood’s *Holding On* [1988]), and changing aspect ratios (Jermaine Stewart’s *We Don’t Have to Take Our Clothes Off* [1986]). Rather than appearing superficial and dispensable, these stylistic flourishes are imbued with an air of artistic significance through a range of film references and metatextual devices. While several of Fincher’s videos reference film noir (Roy Orbison’s *She’s a Mystery to Me* [1989], *Janie’s Got a Gun*; *Holding On*), for example, those for *Express Yourself* and *Oh Father* reference *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) and *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), respectively. Fincher’s videos for *We Don’t Have to Take Our Clothes Off*, *Holding On*,and *Vogue*, meanwhile, each invoke the act of filmmaking itself. *Vogue* depicts a film being made, *We Don’t Have to Take Our Clothes Off* opens with a title insert counting down the start of the picture and concludes with Stewart appearing to move from inside to outside the frame, and *Holding On* opens from the point-of-view of a detective collecting their camera and commencing to shoot a series of seemingly unrelated scenes with the colour changing as their camera flashes.

By invoking cinema’s past and incorporating stylistic flourishes and metatextual devices, Fincher positions himself as a (short form) auteur capable of innovation. By subsequently positioning himself as a film school graduate, Fincher makes himself appear to have had the natural talent to have gone beyond both the short form and the ‘school constraints’ to make his own impact on cinema history (on going beyond school constraints, see also Bourdieu, 1993: 231). In turn, Fincher aligns his music video work with artistic innovation as opposed to standardized modes of production associated with Hollywood studio film. Hence, whereas Fincher tellingly concludes his *Playboy* interview by criticising studios for creating standardized products like Big Macs (Rebello, 2014), he describes Propaganda elsewhere as a ‘conduit for … anything goes’ content (Mottram, 2011: 10). As a result, Fincher contributes to simplistic distinctions between artistic expression and commercial work undertaken for profit. That Fincher draws these distinctions between his music video and commercial spot production too, contradicts Graig Uhlin’s finding that Fincher is a transmedia practitioner who has remained ‘somewhat agnostic about what medium he labours in’ (2019: 141). Moreover, as Cynthia Felando argues, notions of short form production as a transitional site suggests it lacks its own inherent cultural value (2015: 6). Propaganda’s talent management strategies and Fincher’s rhetoric, therefore, contribute to denigrating music video directors generally by making them appear as failures working for-hire and lacking the necessary talent to transcend the form.

# Critical Discourse and Auteur Transcendence: From discovery to celebration

The critical discourse surrounding Fincher’s music video work can be split into three categories ordered roughly according to Fincher’s temporal proximity to the initial act of production. First are press reports, mainly reviews, on the music videos around the time of their release. As with Propaganda’s early years, these press materials are sparse. Where a video such as the one for Madonna’s *Vogue* did generate press attention, critical discourse focuses overwhelmingly on the recording artist. One exception was the video for Madonna’s *Express Yourself*,which garnered attention for its extravagant production design, referencing of *Metropolis*, and a multi-million-dollar budget that, reviewers noted, made it the most expensive music video ever at that time[[3]](#endnote-3) (Takiff, 1989; Gundersen, 1989; Willman, 1989). Attitudes were often negative, however, with reviewers describing the video as style-over-substance, ‘lame-brained,’ tawdry and pretentious (Takiff, 1989; Gunderson, 1989; Willman, 1989). These responses reinforced cultural hierarchies by treating art as being mostly out of music video’s reach. Describing Madonna and Fincher as having opted for ‘a studied cinematic look in this $1 million- plus, five-minute epic,’ for instance, Jonathan Takiff mocked the video for pretending to be high-art (1989). Despite raising questions about the video’s artistic merits, though, these press responses ultimately demonstrated the success of the video as a promotional strategy designed to generate attention. In turn, Propaganda and Fincher were able to leverage this success into new business on lucrative promotional campaigns for other artists such as Paula Abdul and brands including Nike, Levi’s and Pepsi (Hall, 1990). Significantly, in the 2010s Fincher has gone on to exploit television channels and platforms’ increasing appetite for highly marketable ‘cinematic’ event programming targeted at youth audiences by producing shows including *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) and *Mindhunter* (Netflix, 2017-2019) (on Fincher and *House of Cards*, see Stubbs, 2020; on ‘cinematic’ generally see, for example, Nelson, 2007: 7-23; Mills, 2013: 62). Accordingly, Fincher’s production of big-budget extravagant videos demonstrates how he has used promotional strategies designed to convey ‘cinematic’ aspirations since early in his career. Whereas notions of the ‘cinematic’ reinforce cultural hierarchies between media, this revelation shows how scholars seeking to understand how an auteur brand develops and functions must do so by tracing it across and between media.

The second category of critical discourse on Fincher’s music video work comes in the form of reviews of his first feature films, *Alien3* (1992) and *Se7en* (1995). While some reviews refer to Fincher’s music video background as a matter of fact, many frame his music video work as a reason for the failure or success of the films. For example, several reviews attribute *Alien3* and *Se7en*’s ‘over stylization’ to Fincher’s background making videos for acts such as Madonna and George Michael on MTV (James, 1992a; Wloszczyna, 1992; Persall, 1995). In turn, reviewers often framed the success or failure of the films as indicative of whether Fincher was ready and able to direct feature films. Reviewing *Alien3*, for instance, Rob Salem stated that ‘it is clear that the kid is in way over his head’ (1992). Meanwhile, Steve Persall lambasted New Line Cinema for letting the ‘MTV-video veteran’ ruin *Se7en* as he had done *Alien3* (1995). Conversely, Amy Taubin described Fincher as a filmmaker of ‘enormous talent’ who had enhanced a sub-par script and deserved to be offered better projects in the future (1995). Stating also that ‘Fincher honed his techno-Wagnerian aesthetic doing music videos - and fast cutting has nothing to do with it,’ Taubin reframed Fincher’s music video work as high-art opera or theatre (1995). Stemming from critics’ tendencies to position themselves as cultural gatekeepers anointed with the ability to discover artistic talent (Bourdieu, 1993: 37), this reveals how they contribute to denigrating music video and short form work by treating them as modes of production that deserving artists surpass. While *Alien3*’s disappointing critical reception subsequently led some critics to question the efficacy of Propaganda’s strategy for training feature directors through music video (Chagollan, 1994; James, 1992b), meanwhile, *Se7en*’s much better reception encouraged Propaganda to produce Fincher’s next feature, *The Game* (1997). As a result, this demonstrates that improvements and declines in the client’s artistic legitimacy can reflect directly back onto the talent intermediary, altering their reputation for being able to nurture talent and expanding and contracting their own career options (see also Roussel, 2017: 131).

The third category of critical discourse on Fincher’s music videos comes from the 2000s and 2010s after Fincher became a well-established feature filmmaker. Coming after some of Fincher’s features such as *Se7en* and *Fight Club* (1999) have been canonized, this critical discourse celebrates his music videos as artworks exhibiting many of the creative interests and impulses that he would return to and refine throughout the rest of his career (Lawrence, 2020; Harvilla, 2020; Kiang, 2014; Puchko, 2014). Comprised largely of articles published online and accompanied with the videos (which are usually hosted on YouTube) embedded on their respective sites, this critical discourse encourages a revaluation of Fincher’s music videos collectively as part of a broader auteur oeuvre. While Straw argues that the ‘artistically ambitious’ video appears lost amidst YouTube’s cultural ‘dumping ground’ (2018), recent critical discourse demonstrates how the internet can in fact sometimes facilitate the discovery of apparently artistic videos. Indeed, although undoubtedly driven partly by fans of the songs and recording artists, several of Fincher’s videos have had tens and even hundreds of millions of views on YouTube alone[[4]](#endnote-4) (for more on music video exposure on online platforms see Maura, 2012). On the film cataloguing app and website Letterboxd, meanwhile, many reviews of *The Beat of the Live Drum* come from users remarking that they only watched the film to complete Fincher’s filmography or, as some users put it, to ‘100% Fincher’ (Anon, 2021) Highlighting the role that stardom and authorship continue to play in cultivating fandom and encouraging a collector’s ethos, this reveals that Fincher’s videos are hardly lost at all (on authorship and fandom, see Corrigan, 2003: 97-98). Far from contributing to improving music video’s cultural status, this (re)valuation of Fincher’s music videos continues to hinge problematically on identifying the presence of an artistically ambitious auteur capable of surpassing music video work in general.

# Conclusion: Reconceptualising short form ‘graduates’

To conclude, this article has investigated Fincher’s collaboration with Propaganda Films and demonstrated how he has been constructed as a (short form) auteur. In doing so, the article has shown that Fincher’s construction as an auteur has reinforced rather than rearranged industrial as well as cultural hierarchies. The article is part of a broader project exploring the management of auteurs in an era of media convergence as well as of a relatively new line of scholarship into media industry management (on the latter, see Johnson, Kompere and Santo, 2014: 11). Consequently, many more avenues of enquiry remain. One area that this article has not had the space to explore is the relationship between media industries, management and diversity. While the heads of some of Propaganda’s divisions were female, for instance, all the company’s founders and most of its clients were white men. As such, it appears significant that Sighvatsson conceptualised Propaganda’s diversification in gendered terms as part of the company’s responsibility to ‘create an atmosphere where the guys can exercise their creative muscle without leaving the fold’ (Dupler, 1989). While Uhlin has argued that Fincher’s reputation for being combative has obscured how he has mobilized his auteur brand to sponsor collaborators and insulate them from media conglomerates chasing valuable intellectual properties (2019: 141-141), therefore, we might also consider to what extent sponsorship is a form of nepotism in a media industries that has continued to privilege and protect ‘maverick’ images, personalities, and behaviours[[5]](#endnote-5). Thus, if short form production is supposed to provide a training ground for filmmakers moving to features, we might do well to ask not only why short films get made but to also consider the reasons why certain filmmakers ‘graduate.’

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1. While Fincher was a co-founder of Propaganda Films, he has never formally acted as a talent manager. Instead, Propaganda’s talent management operations were overseen by Golin and Sighvatsson and run on a micro-level by talent managers and the heads of the company’s various divisions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. While Boudieu saw restricted production as a site where producers made “art for arts sake,” I agree here with Roussel that talent intermediaries’ rhetoric can signify creative and economic value ‘in the same movement’ (2017: 177) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Press reporting on the budget for the *Express Yourself* video was vague. Jonathan Takiff (1989) reported the budget to be ‘$1 million-plus’ while Edna Gundersen (1989) reported estimates of between $1million and $4million. In 2014, *Forbes* put the budget at $5million (McIntyre, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For example, at the time of writing Fincher’s video for Sting’s *Englishman in New York* has had over 220million views, *Express Yourself* almost 140million, *Freedom! 90* nearly 100million, Michael Jackson’s *Who is It* almost 70million, *Janie’s Got a Gun* nearly 60million, Paula Abdul’s *Straight Up* and *Vogue* over 30million, and *We Don’t Have to Take Out Clothes Off* and Billy Idol’s *Cradle of Love* over 20million.

   The number of views that these videos have received might also be understood in relation to a parallel trend in audio streaming that has seen the songs of many successful artists from the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s becoming increasingly popular on streaming services and has led to many such artists selling the rights to their catalogues for remarkable sums (see Sweney, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Claire Perkins, for instance, notes that ‘the trope of the maverick male auteur is a defining feature of indie culture (as it is for almost all other historical cycles or waves)’ (2016: 140). At the time of writing, *The Hollywood Reporter* has also reported on a pattern of aggressive and bullying behaviour by leading Hollywood producer, Scott Rudin (Siegel, 2021). The report includes witness testimonies about how Rudin smashed a computer monitor on an executive’s hand, threw a baked potato at another assistant’s head, and threw a stapler at another (Siegel, 2021). These allegations come, of course, come after the #MeToo movement prompted a series of disclosures about sexual abuse in the media industry after Harvey Weinstein was arrested for several acts of sexual assault and rape. Although the image of a maverick and acts of abuse are distinct, they might be understood as symptoms of gender inequalities across the media industry generally. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)