

Carol Vernallis. 2013. *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Reviewed by Paula Harper

“I love the media swirl,” begins Carol Vernallis’s (2013) *Unruly Media*. In this exploratory, whirlwind, and sometimes frustrating volume, Vernallis acts as an exuberant tour guide through the bleeding edges of twentieth- and twenty-first-century media content. Vernallis cares deeply about the material under scrutiny in her book—pop culture artifacts from the “Sneezing Baby Panda” video to Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 *Moulin Rouge!*—and the thesis of *Unruly Media* is, in part, that these objects are worthy of serious scholarly attention. Outing herself so blatantly as a fan of her material is a bold scholarly move, and, despite weaknesses in *Unruly Media*’s argumentation and execution, Vernallis’s call for further, rigorous, interdisciplinary attention to music video and other contemporary audiovisual phenomena is one that deserves to be heeded by scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplinary backgrounds.

In *Unruly Media*, Vernallis triangulates a contemporary audiovisual aesthetic paradigm, emerging from music video and feeding into other media forms and genres—specifically, YouTube and digital cinema. Vernallis dubs this paradigm “intensified audiovisual aesthetics,” and argues for specific investigation of the “musical” qualities and parameters of these genres. In many respects, *Unruly Media* fits squarely into Vernallis’s body of work, from her 2004 *Experiencing Music Video*, to her work as editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* and *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*. While Vernallis’s disciplinary roots in film theory clearly resonate through *Unruly Media*’s attunement to issues of narrative and the visual parameters of media, Vernallis’s work is anything but silent, championing the *audio* of the audiovisual. Her analyses of pop culture artifacts always take sonic features into account, often using sound, music, or “musicality” as an entry point into the reading of a particular scene or video.

When a reader is swept along in the unrelenting current of evocative metaphor and wide-ranging association, Vernallis’s prose is exhilarating. Her writing is vivid, distinctive, perhaps even “musical” in its striking juxtapositions and giddy tumultuousness. But as soon as one is jolted out of this stream by a moment of skepticism or critical inquiry, *Unruly Media*’s mode of address can quickly become frustrating, obstructive, baffling. Key

concepts are rarely explicitly theorized; the reader is left to glean the meanings of terms like “flow,” “musicality,” or even “music video” through context and Vernallis’s varied usage. Additionally, the analyses in *Unruly Media* assume a single vantage point, indicated by a near-ubiquitous use of the pronoun “we.” *We* hear a set of sounds, *we* experience a scene in a movie, *we* escape from our day jobs into the three-minute stasis of a YouTube clip. This collective second person is accompanied throughout the book by the also near-ubiquitous “might”/“may be”/“perhaps” auxiliary verb constructions. One assumes that the perpetual “perhaps”es are an attempt to mitigate the singular and privileged subject position enunciated by the “we,” but this once again is never explicitly laid out; the whole complex highlights the precariousness of Vernallis’s aesthetic arguments, but never grounds that precariousness in a—potentially quite productive—theorization of the author’s own vantage point. Might we experience some primal fear upon viewing the “Badger Song” on YouTube? Sure—but we might not. Any such distance between the reader’s own perspective and *Unruly Media*’s ubiquitous “we” opens up a productive and tantalizing space, in which the plurality of spectator experience in the digital age manifests as a site for much-needed scholarship.

*Unruly Media* is divided into three segments, one for each of the media forms in the title’s post-colonic. Three chapters on digital cinema come first, followed by three on YouTube, and three on music video. This configuration might initially seem somewhat confusing, as Vernallis’s central argument is that music video functions as the “supertext” from which these new “intensified audiovisual aesthetics” emerge. However, Vernallis offers the interpretation that music video “synthesizes the genres of post-classical film and online viral media,” making its placement sensible (21). Additionally, the book’s structure foregrounds aesthetic and media interpenetration in its inclusion of “crossover” chapters that begin and end each of the three sections, performatively mirroring a central tenet of Vernallis’s argument: contemporary media aesthetics bleed across genre boundaries. In that regard, no linear ordering of Vernallis’s three genres would afford a truly intuitive progression. The book’s introductory chapter functions as a highly comprehensive road map for the book that follows, laying out Vernallis’s arguments and objects of inquiry with some specificity.

*Unruly Media*’s first section, dealing with digital cinema, comprises six short chapters, across which Vernallis tracks an emergent set of aesthetics that break from those of classical Hollywood cinema. These “intensified audiovisual aesthetics” also, Vernallis argues, engage the human body in new ways, reflecting the situation of late-modern identity (40, 96). Throughout this argument, Vernallis sets up an implicit binary, situating linear narra-

tive (normative, homologous with classical Hollywood tradition) opposite “musicality” or “music video aesthetics.” “Music,” “music video,” or the “audio” of “audiovisual” thus frequently get mapped onto cinematic moments that Vernallis perceives as “non-narrative” or “anti-narrative.” *Run Lola Run*’s looping plot line “turn[s] the film into a music video. There is no past, no future”; *Moulin Rouge!* is notable for how it “holds us in its ‘now,’ rather than letting us stray to its future”; in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, “[a]s with music video, it is difficult to see where we are going; the viewer just has to go with the flow” (46, 79, 96). Such a stance is unsurprising given Vernallis’s own scholarly positioning—in this section, her theoretical reference-point is overwhelmingly the work of film theorist David Bordwell, who is cited dozens of times throughout the first section and numerous times throughout the rest of the book. His theorization of “intensified continuity” is a clear antecedent to Vernallis’s own “intensified audiovisual aesthetics,” and his concept of filmic “parameters” underpins Vernallis’s arguments of how audiovisual components shape narrative and meaning. In relying so heavily on Bordwell, however, *Unruly Media* sometimes feels insular, detached from broader scholarly and theoretical dialogues in music, film, and media theory.

The second section of *Unruly Media* focuses on YouTube, which Vernallis alternately understands as a platform and a genre, often problematically conflating the two. While characterizing the site as “vast and uncharted,” Vernallis mainly concerns herself with a particular strain of YouTube videos that are entertainment-oriented, employing music and visuals (9, 127). Vernallis acknowledges the existence of YouTube videos outside this paradigm—for example, archival footage, pirated media, or tutorials on everything from Photoshop features to cat nail clipping—but these other genres play no significant part in her analyses. It is clear that, for the purposes of *Unruly Media*, “YouTube” is largely synonymous with “viral videos,” those mega-popular phenomena disseminated to and consumed by an enormous, content-hungry audience. In this vein, Vernallis suggests the “Badger Song” as a contender for “one of the best exemplars of YouTube,” perhaps unaware that the song in fact predates YouTube, originating as a looping flash video on Weebls-stuff.com in 2003. In its original format, the “Badger Song” was essentially endless, playing until the viewer navigated away from the website—quite different from the finite form of YouTube videos, which in 2006 were capped at a length of ten minutes. The “Badger Song” misstep, while seemingly minor, is symptomatic of the problems that can arise from close readings that don’t attend to platform specificity and, more broadly, the variety of lived practices and media products that comprise twenty-first-century audiovisual consumption.

Vernallis seeks, in this middle section of *Unruly Media*, to establish a typology of YouTube aesthetics, and suggests a “map” of “aesthetic features” that typify the YouTube landscape: 1. pulse and reiteration; 2. graphic values; 3. a sense of scale that matches the medium 4. irreality and weightlessness (what [Vernallis calls] the “digital swerve”); 5. reanimation; 6. unusual causal relations; 7. intermediality and transmediality; and 8. sardonic humor and parody (130). Vernallis moves through a dizzying array of media objects in a survey of these aesthetic parameters, which blur and bleed into each other kaleidoscopically. Throughout, voices of critical media theorists like Lev Manovich, Alexander Galloway, and Jonathan Sterne are promisingly proffered, and terms like “just-in-time” production practices, “speedup,” and “precarious labor,” suggest engagements with issues of contemporary capitalism and circulation. However, Vernallis’s arguments often skim, skipping–stone–like, over the complicated economic and political issues in which her “intensified audiovisual aesthetics” are implicated; the above scholars and concepts feature suggestively. *Unruly Media* opens tantalizing doors, offering ways in which its aesthetic claims *might* be related to shifting modes of perception, embodiment, and social relations in the twenty-first century—but Vernallis rarely stays in one place long enough to work through the implications of any of these suggestions. At times, the reader might find herself distracted by an awareness of what’s bracketed out of such aesthetically–focused analyses: the downward and upward head gestures in will.i.am’s “Yes We Can” video might well have helped convey an emotional shift to viewers, but that hardly fully accounts for the video’s success in Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid. To treat the conditions of such a video’s material existence and circulation as vestigial to its aesthetics—rather than as collaborative, constitutive factors—seems remiss, especially given that Vernallis champions contemporary audiovisual media in part *because of* its ubiquity and mass dissemination (165).

Springing as it does from Vernallis’s previous scholarship, *Unruly Media*’s treatment of music video is the most nuanced and richly theorized set of chapters in the book. In the third and final section, Vernallis first considers music video aesthetics diachronically, juxtaposing the music video language of A Flock of Seagulls to that of Lady Gaga. These chapters are refreshingly grounded in historical and material reality, as Vernallis considers the technological affordances and constraints of various eras of music video production. A further chapter is dedicated to the consideration of the proprietary styles of auteur music video directors, while an epilogue considers possible aesthetic futures, in the shifting mediascape under Vernallis’s perceived and imagined purview. Here, Vernallis advances some of her most intriguing potential arguments, like how accelerated or

intensified aesthetics might be related to contemporary modes of attending, cognition, and perception. In these arguments at *Unruly Media's* close, a reader is offered tantalizing provocation towards further scholarship.

Throughout the book, a number of weaknesses occur on an editorial level. Whether as an artifact of the book's formal arrangement, or by design, *Unruly Media* is shot through with repetition. At times, lines or paragraphs are re-used verbatim (for examples, see 9 and 127; 85 and 93; 130 and 184). Numerous introductory chapters are often so similar in structure and content to those that follow that a reader might easily find herself in a state of bewildered *déjà vu*—didn't I *just* read this? One might understand this repetitiveness as performative on the part of the author; after all, Vernallis posits that "insistent reintegration" is the key feature of an emergent YouTube aesthetic (127). Other factors, however, like absent or uninformative citations, copy-editing errors (most egregiously, in the book's first sentence) or the lack of a bibliography, might vex a reader eager to build on Vernallis's work. Vernallis variously adopts the notions of "glance" and "multitasking" to describe her *Unruly Media* methodology, playfully appropriating otherwise pejoratively-inflected terms for the inattention characteristic of (and, for some opponents, engendered by) the digital age (42–43). Performative or not, however, this analytical mode does a disservice to the material it considers if it brackets film, music video, and viral phenomena as aesthetic objects, and engagement with them as merely "practice" for contemporary social experience, rather than giving real attention to their imbrication in the contemporary political, economic, material, and social realities of their audience.

The strength of *Unruly Media* lies precisely in its author's acknowledgement of its limitations. At a number of points, Vernallis presents her work as door-opening, a cartographical exploration. She poses a number of questions for future scholars to take up in their own research. How, for example, does a scholar deal with the *inaccessibility* of data from corporate bastions such as MTV and YouTube (152)? How can one best construct an "archive" of YouTube and other viral materials, for personal use or scholarly study (150)? What, apart from aesthetic parameters, makes a successful YouTube clip (135)? Finally, as Vernallis asks in her epilogue, how does the increasing interpenetration of cross-platform media aesthetics relate to the broader media and labor landscape of the early twenty-first century (227)? Ultimately, *Unruly Media* is an effusive (if at times vexing) ride through a number of contemporary cultural forms. Its value lies in the problems it raises, rather than those it solves.

