

Title	'Kick, Bollocks and Scramble': An Examination of Power and Creative Decision-Making in the Production Process During the Golden Era of British Music Videos 1995–2001.
Type	Article
URL	<a href="http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/7169/">http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/7169/</a>
Date	2012
Citation	Caston, Emily (2012) 'Kick, Bollocks and Scramble': An Examination of Power and Creative Decision-Making in the Production Process During the Golden Era of British Music Videos 1995–2001. <i>Journal of British Cinema and Television</i> .
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# ‘Kick, Bollocks and Scramble’: An Examination of Power and Creative Decision-Making in the Production Process During the Golden Era of British Music Videos 1995–2001

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Emily Caston

In a nominal sense, the producers of music video are those agents who produce. But in the music video sector it is not, in fact, producers who execute many of the responsibilities associated with producing in the theatrical sector such as raising finance, hiring writers and directors, and securing a distribution deal.

This article aims to examine the creative processes of British music video production between 1995 and 2001 and identify the agents who held the responsibilities associated with producers in the theatrical sector. During these years, the style of production used in the UK music video sector was often referred to as the ‘kick, bollocks and scramble’ method of production. It was perceived to be unregulated and chaotic as a result of short pre-production periods, low budgets and poor professional training.

The music video sector has received scant attention in publicly funded reports on the screen industry.<sup>1</sup> This neglect is despite the evidence of its substantial contribution to the British economy. Research in 1998 indicated that the UK record industry spent £36.5 million on approximately 850 million music video commissions.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, music videos constitute a highly significant entry point and training vehicle for UK freelancers in film, television and advertising.

There has been little attention paid to distinctly British music video production since Goodwin (1992) and Frith et al. (1993). Most recent publications either centre on the US (for example, Austerlitz 2008 and Banks 1996). Others centre on textual analyses of the

*Journal of British Cinema and Television* 9.1 (2012): 96–110

DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2012.0062

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US sector (for example, Beebe and Middleton 2007; Hanson 2006; Kleiler 1997; Reiss and Feineman 2000; Strand 2008; Vernallis 2004). Schwartz (2007) presents a relevant and sustained attempt to describe the production process which cites evidence of the British sector, but is nevertheless primarily focused on the very different American industry.

Part of the reason why music videos are so poorly respected in the UK is the fault of the industry itself. It has failed to create effective collective representation and professional codes of conduct that could be used to regulate production methods and combat the poor reputation that the British sector holds. In 1984, Music Video Producers Associations were founded in the UK and in the USA. The US association (MVPA) went on to become an influential industry organisation providing legal advice, an awards show, a lobbying vehicle and a training platform. The UK association closed down after less than four years in operation. The precise reasons for its demise are not officially documented but are commonly attributed to a lack of commitment from its founding members. The British MVPA was reformed in 2000 but currently provides only a skeletal legal advice service through its parent company, the Advertising Producers' Association (APA).

Alejandro Pardo has suggested that there are a number of 'fundamental creative stages' or 'moments' in which producers can exercise decisive influence over films (2010). Paramount among these stages are the selection of the original concept, the choice of a writer and supervision of the script, the selection of a director, the approval of the creative crew, control over the editing process, and the promotion and sale of the film (240). This framework is useful for evaluating the contributions of producers across the different sectors of the British screen industry as a whole.

The data I draw on in applying this framework are derived from my own professional career as a film producer. Between 1995 and 2003, I produced and executive produced over a hundred music videos for artists ranging from Madonna and Oasis to S Club 7 at a variety of production companies in the UK and USA.

In his essay on the blurred distinctions of scholarship and production, John Caldwell (2009) evaluates the relative merits and risks of scholarship arising from 'insider' knowledge. Since an insider scholar has already crossed the methodological line of having 'gone native', it is probably best to describe her as a native who has become an emigrant and is viewing the closed community from the distanced position of another community over the river (215).

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I therefore present this evidence as an emigrant rather than a qualified anthropologist.

While producing in the 1995 to 2001 period took place within recognisable social, economic and corporate structures of power, those structures of power were not fixed and were continually created and refashioned by individual agents. Power was continually negotiated and contested. Negus's conception of cultures of production helps to explain the emergence and maintenance of the expectations and stereotypes that drove many of these power negotiations. As Negus argues, 'culture produces an industry':

Production does not take place simply 'within' a corporate environment structured according to the requirements of capitalist production or organizational formulae, but in relation to broader culture formations and practices that are within neither the control nor the understanding of the company. (1999: 19)

#### *The golden era of British music video production*

I define the period 1995–2001 as the golden era of British music video production for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was an era in which labels could largely control the exhibition of their work on TV. MTV was still screening videos on rotation; *The Chart Show* (Channel 4/ITV 1986–98) guaranteed airplay on a Saturday morning to a key affluent target market. Video was more important than radio in breaking new British artists in the UK and in driving sales domestically.

Secondly, the UK market was deemed internationally as the centre of creative excellence and innovation in short-form commercial moving-image work. In 1995, the *New York Times* published an article entitled 'Out of crass commerce arises the new auteur' (Foegen 1995). The article cited a British music video director, Nick Egan, who had previously designed album covers for the Clash and Bob Dylan. Egan argued that although music video was regarded as the 'poor cousin' of the film industry it was in fact a far richer cousin because of the considerably greater creative freedom given to the directors. This freedom, he believed, accounted for the high quality of work coming from the British sector. It caused directors worldwide to flock to what became known internationally as the *creative playground* of short-form work.

Until the mid-1990s, some musicians had successfully resisted the new music video art form. They held that they were 'authentic' musicians who performed live rock and did not produce 'fake' mimed performance for pre-recorded image-driven videos.<sup>3</sup> But, by 1995,

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even acts such as Oasis and U2 were experimenting with new non-performance-based concepts for their videos, and were attempting to collaborate with the new generation of video directors such as Jonathan Glazer, Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze.

During the golden era, record companies started to exploit intellectual property in music videos as a distinctive product rather than a mere promotional tool. In 1998, One Little Indian released the first DVD collection of artist videos for Björk. Then, in 2003, Palm Pictures launched the Director's Label which produced and distributed DVDs of the work of leading music video directors. But the launch of the Director's Label seemed to mark the demise of the golden era of this sector of motion picture arts, partly because record labels lost control of distribution and exhibition through online consumption, and partly because the events of 9/11 saw many US-owned entertainment corporations freeze their marketing budgets. This caused average video budgets to plummet, and video departments cut their production levels by up to 50% in 2001 and 2002.

#### *The six creative moments of film production in music video*

Pardo offers the concepts of 'moments' and 'stages' to pinpoint the execution of power or influence by an agent or agents. I have opted to use 'moments' because it is more easily applied to non-linear production. As practising producers will attest, a film project can jump backwards and forwards in time in the production process, and these creative moments are perhaps better understood as layers of social action rather than events on a linear dynamic of production.

##### *1. The search for and choice of the original concept*

In the music video sector 1995–2001, the search for the original concept was usually undertaken by the video commissioner, although in some cases it would also be undertaken by the artist or the artist's manager. The commissioner would begin this search after the parameters of the video brief were set by the marketing team and label manager. The parameters would include budget, delivery date and preferred genre of video.

The video commissioner would then draw up a short list of ten to twenty of the most suitable directors for the project. The artist manager and label manager might have suggestions. The commissioner would contact the director's representative (rep) to establish his or her

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preliminary interest and availability. If the response was positive, the track and brief would be sent and the rep would ask the director to write a treatment. Treatments generally varied in length between half a page and two pages.

The commissioner would draw up her short list of the best treatments and would then consult with the marketing team, label manager, artist and artist manager to select the favoured project. Her decision would be informed by a conversation with the director's producer or executive producer to secure a guarantee that the project could be delivered within the quoted budget and timescale. If the commissioner trusted the executive producer, the executive producer's guarantee was often an essential precondition for closing the deal, and could ensure that a risky venture was booked earlier than expected or that a safe venture was delayed due to concerns expressed by the executive producer.

Executive producers, directors' representatives and producers would influence the final choice of script, although not all directors welcomed these interventions. Meetings would be held inside the company between these agents to discuss which ideas should go forward. Producers and executives would often suggest changes to the script based on budgetary concerns or technical issues. Directors' representatives would suggest changes based on their knowledge of the artists' performance abilities, personality and video genre preferences, as well as the issues facing the marketing department.

*2. The selection of a writer and the supervision of the script*

While the video commissioner selected the director and initial concept, she or he would very rarely intervene in the development of the idea. Writers were not employed. Almost all directors wrote their own treatments. Even if the video was a narrative short film with dialogue and actors, directors would not generate a dialogue shooting script. Instead, they would generate a detailed storyboard.

The producer was unlikely to attend storyboard sessions. At Harry Nash, I had final approval on storyboards in my role as executive producer. I would hold a storyboard meeting to discuss the proposed camera angles, *mise en scène*, scene durations, beats of the temporal structure, drama and performance issues. We would also discuss the shooting ratio in these meetings. All our videos were shot on 35 mm. This was standard practice until the early 2000s when budgets dropped and 16 mm was more commonly used. It was unusual for boards to be sent to the video commissioner prior to the shoot, and the video

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commissioner would not be consulted during the process discussed above. She would be presented with the boards as a fait accompli on the shoot.

#### *3. The choice of a specific director*

While the choice of director was heavily determined by the video commissioner, there was ample scope for conflict and disagreement. Artists were often keen to work with amateur film-makers who were their friends, but labels preferred to retain complete creative control. A label manager of a semi-independent might disagree with the CEO of the parent company. If the video was being made for a collaboration between two artists, there might be two record labels in disagreement.

#### *4. The approval of the artistic crew*

Generally, the director would choose the key creative crew. However, on a big budget project with an international artist, the record company was likely to ask for right of approval on the choice of editor and director of photography. On a performance video for a solo female artist or a manufactured pop band, the label (on behalf of the artist) was likely to choose the make-up artist, hairdresser and stylist. If the director was in the early stages of his career, his executive producer was likely to choose the key crew, in consultation with the record label and producer.

#### *5. The control of editing*

The commissioner would be involved in the editing, grading and effects, and she would act as a conduit for feedback from the artist, label and management. In theory, the director's consent was needed for all changes, because the director alone had the vision of the structural, rhythmic and narrative integrity of the work. In practice, the director was often pressurised by the label or artist into making changes he or she believed were detrimental to the integrity of the work.

Offline editing was a key site of conflict between different parties. The producer's role during editing was primarily to mediate these conflicts and secure an outcome most favourable to the director. The executive producer's role was to mediate between the demands of the label and the demands of the director. Some companies were viewed as more director-friendly than others. Ridley Scott's Black Dog

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was such a company because it was led by a director. I spent many years inventing imaginative excuses to prevent record companies from entering the edit suites at too early a stage in the creative process. On several occasions the directors and editors used covert strategies such as deliberate continuity errors to distract the commissioner and artists' attention away from artistically innovative sequences.

*6. The promotion and sale of the cinematographic work*

The promotion and sale of the finished film was the responsibility of the marketing department of a record company which might work in partnership with an external plugging company. In a small number of cases, however, production companies would involve themselves in PR, whether this meant supplying sound bites and press releases for a controversial video that had been banned from pre-watershed TV, such as Radiohead's *Rabbit in Your Headlights* (1998) or the Prodigy's *Smack My Bitch Up* (1997), or providing interviews for a behind the scenes piece on MTV.

*Roles and powers*

*The video commissioner*

Video commissioners worked for the record labels either on staff or freelance contracts. In general, it was the commissioner who exerted the most power over the first three creative moments identified by Pardo (2010). Her power was to determine the agenda for these decisions, determine the information flow to all other involved parties and influence the final outcome.

This is consistent with the view of many inside the sector. The leadership they assumed in an unregulated guerrilla domain of production and the creative risks they were willing to take are widely seen as the most important factor underlying the originality of the work of the golden era. These commissioners included Dilly Gent at Parlophone, Carrie Sutton at EMI, Mike O'Keefe at Sony, Paul McKee at One Little Indian, Robin Dean at Independiente, Carol Burton-Fairbrother at Virgin Records, John Hassay at Skint and John Moule at Mute. In a very real sense, these commissioners were the effective agents who caused such pioneering work to reach audiences. They took huge risks by investing in new genre styles and talented young film-makers.



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However, commissioners did not hold the original power to create or determine the agenda for the editing process. Generally, the power and influence that they exercised during editing was the power of veto: to withhold approval and request changes. Because commissioners lacked detailed knowledge of the content or quality of rushes, they could not dictate the agenda for decisions to be made during the edit: only the director or the editor could do this.

#### *The director*

It was the director who came up with the original concept, wrote the treatment and supervised the creation of the storyboard. The director also exerted power over Pardo's fourth and fifth creative moments – the choice of artistic crew and the control of editing. However, the extent of the director's power depended on her power and status within the company. It was also limited by the legal framework that major record labels would readily invoke in the event of a conflict between their corporate interests and the moral rights of the director.

The video for Madonna's single, *Frozen* (1998), illustrates this. I was the director Chris Cunningham's executive producer at the time. The video was shot in a desert outside Los Angeles and lit by cinematographer Darius Khondji who was chosen by Madonna (rather than Chris) because of his work on *Evita* (1996). Two months after we delivered the video, a re-edited version synched to a Stereo MC's remix of *Frozen* was broadcast on MTV. It featured continuity errors and shots of Madonna's stand-in body double. The vice-president of Warner Bros music video in New York argued that Chris had no artistic rights over the footage. A conversation with the label legal affairs team confirmed this. In the USA, directors' rushes were regularly taken by music video commissioners for a remix that would be recut by a new team of editors. No need was felt to consult with the directors in advance, because US law did not recognise moral rights, nor did British law enforce these as inalienable.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The executive producer*

The practices of production companies determined the terms and conditions in which productions took place. An executive producer exercised her creative signature on UK music video production as a whole by helping to determine which directors were brought to the market and when. Aside from closing the deal, the main responsibilities of an executive producer were to 'poach' and 'coach'

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directors. A production company would have a roster of anything up to 30 directors at a time. Two or three of these would be specialists in a particular style, music genre or sub-genre. An executive producer would build up her portfolio by acquiring new directors to specialise in a targeted portfolio of music genres.

Coaching was a time-consuming strategy. The reputation, power, influence and salary of an executive producer rested on her proven ability to identify and sign new directors. During the late 1990s, the sector saw an explosion of talent in Scandinavian production companies. Executive producers made strategic connections and partnerships with production companies in those territories. In the coaching of a director, the executive producer would cross-pitch incoming bids from more established directors to the 'baby' directors on the roster. She would also encourage directors to cross over into alternative genres. This was not always easy, and it relied on strong negotiating skills and the degree to which her creative judgement was trusted and respected by video commissioners.

Poaching was not only time-consuming but costly. The business of poaching an established 'monster' director could take up to twenty-four months of secret meetings in backstreet hotels and large sums of cash. Poaching peaked in the winter months of December to February when executives sought a seasonal clear-out of their talent cupboard. Every December, the level of suspicion, distrust and tension between directors and their executives would increase as the market opened for transactions. One of my directors would wait until everyone had left before checking the tray of incoming faxes. Another confessed that he dropped hints that another company was trying to poach him every six months in order to ensure a continual flow of great briefs. 'We Make Monsters' was the sign on the door of my sales executive's office in the mid-1990s. Humour played a key role in institutionalised methods for conflict management in the production culture.

*The producer*

On the model examined thus far, the producer does not appear to have had a great deal of power. This reveals a weakness in Pardo's framework: the exclusion from his six moments of film production of possibly the single most important way in which the production team wield their power: through determining how much money was available for the treatment. The producer controlled the production budget, and she alone was privy to confidential information about costs. No one on the crew, not even the director, was permitted to see

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the budget. The unwritten rule was that provided the producer agreed to most of his creative requests, the director would not ask to see a breakdown of the budget or be consulted on budget decisions.

So, while the music video producer did not hire the director or source the original dramatic material, she did exercise very considerable discretionary power over the materialisation on screen of the director's original concept. She was usually responsible for doing the bid budget for the job, which involved research and planning with the director to figure out technical methods to achieve creative effects. She had personal relationships with suppliers based on trust that had been established on previous film projects. She would judge whether or not to call in the favours owed to her by suppliers from previous films in order to secure extra special discounts or supplies. An in-house producer would take on more senior responsibilities than a freelance producer. Regular and ongoing partnerships between directors and producers were almost always considered best. A busy director would need to rely on his producer to set up a job if he was absent finishing the post production on another job. A regular in-house producer would already know the identity of the director's preferred crew and would be able to pencil them in without consulting with the director beforehand.

Directors and musicians spoke a highly guarded artist-to-artist language. Producers, by contrast, were relegated to a lower non-creative domain: the technical business-to-business language of finance, overages, law, copyright and contracts. But this gave them opportunities to exercise power and to influence creative decisions. An experienced producer would have put aside secret financial padding in the budget to use at her discretion. This gave her creative control over whether a particular shot on the storyboard could be achieved. An inexperienced or less skilled producer might not have been able to create such budget padding. An experienced commissioner would have some influence on the budget by being able to approve overages or request budgetary changes. But provided the video turned out well, the commissioner would ask no questions about how the money was spent and would not intervene in the producer's domain of power.

*Three cultures of production*

The question this analysis raises is how to make sense of the fact that the role of the film producer in music video is so different from the role of the film producer in the theatrical sector. Part of the answer may be that video production in the 1995–2001 era represented an interaction

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of expectations and unwritten codes of practice derived not just from film but also from photography and music.

*Photographic cultural production*

It is no historical accident that many of the very early video directors in the 1984 to 1994 period such as Storm Thorgerson and Nick Egan were celebrity portrait photographers and album cover designers. They brought with them the expectation of huge degrees of creative control over the production process. In the television advertising sector, by contrast, directors such as Frank Budgen at Gorgeous were much more used to working in teams with the agency copywriter and art director. Some video photographer-directors also expected their moral rights to be protected. In the mid-1990s, the French director, Stephane Sednaoui, protested, unsuccessfully, against the standard clause in record company contracts requiring directors and producers to waive their moral rights (Knight 1996).

*Popular music cultural production*

Directors adopted expectations of their producers that many musicians held about their managers. Artist managers in the 1995–2001 golden era functioned as life coaches, counsellors, business advisers and business partners. Highly successful managers such as Paul McGuinness (who managed U2) and Simon Fuller (who managed S Club 7) provided this service in exchange for residuals on record sales in the 1990s. In large part, British production companies met these expectations of their video directors. Not only producers but also personal assistants, production assistants and director's representatives were employed to provide those services that artist managers provided in the music industry. Executive producers were employed to provide the overall career management.

*Feature film production*

For the production, directors and producers would call upon film crew who worked in feature film production and television drama. The directors of photography and production designers would bring role behaviours and expectations from these more regulated sectors. Equipment and facilities such as studios, lighting and camera kit were hired from these sectors. Expectations about codes of conduct were applied to producers who had not had any formal training in film

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production and had not learned their craft by observing established drama producers at work.

As the sector matured between 1990 and 1994, however, a new generation of producers and directors entered the arena. These directors wanted to write and direct feature films and had no prior experience in any other field of cultural production. They had grown up watching music videos on MTV. They liked music. They hung out with bands. But most of all they wanted to direct feature films. Through their British production companies, directors such as Jonathan Glazier, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze and Jamie Thraves took advantage of the low barriers to entry in music video to start learning their craft as narrative film-makers. They were strategic in their use of budgets and opportunities afforded by the record labels, particularly in the UK market. They read books and watched behind-the-scenes documentaries about how to direct feature films. They attended Robert McKee's Story Seminars. Their production companies opened divisions in feature film production and television drama. They brought the culture of production of theatrical films into the spheres of music and photography.

Producing music videos in the 1995–2001 period was a practice that occurred through a series of conflicts and institutional controls between different parties. The divergence between discourse and practice was exacerbated by a lack of industrial professional organisation characteristic of the theatrical and television sectors through the Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT). How tensions were resolved was determined in large part by corporate structures and practices that specific individuals brought to the table in terms of their conduct and expectations. Expectations based on cultures of production in photography regularly caused conflict with the corporate expectations of record labels. These also caused problems when video directors sought opportunities in the feature film sector. The expectation of high levels of power and control was often cited by feature film producers as a reason why video directors so frequently failed to cross over into successful careers as directors in the more esteemed sector of theatrical production.

I am not arguing that these practices were determined and conflicts resolved solely by cultures of production in the economic domain. The exercise of power in an individual music video production during this period involved not only the three cultures of production but the specific local production cultures of the production company (and its parent companies), the client record label and the artist manager. The territory of production (particularly its copyright laws), the personality

and production style of the director, and the creative relationships existing between individual workers such as the director and the artist also influenced how power was exercised. This is consistent with Negus' argument that culture produces an industry, and that production does not take place simply within a corporate environment (1999: 19).

The above analysis leads to a number of suggestions for advancing research into British production methods and creative producers.

Firstly, there may well be a positive and significant relationship between the lack of a coherent set of codified rules of practice and the level of innovation in creative works produced. Producers in the 1995–2001 period had to define roles and rules on the basis of the needs of an individual production rather than on the basis of standard trade agreements. This facilitated greater freedom and creativity. In other words, the 'kick, bollocks and scramble' method of production may be precisely what enabled directors such as Jonze and Gondry to develop their unconventional performance and narrative breakthrough styles. A loose or diverse production method may favour creative innovation. A formalised and fixed production method, by contrast, may inhibit such innovation. This hypothesis merits further research.

Secondly, we need more empirical research into cultures of production and, specifically, into the work that film producers undertake. But data on the kinds of power relationships that explain why films were made in some ways rather than others and by whom will be very challenging. Producers tend to conceal politically sensitive areas of discrete power. Because budget management is a sensitive and heavily guarded area of creative practice, most producers will be reluctant to discuss it. They may well prefer to concur with the public view that such a power does not exist and that directors alone exercise control over creative operational decisions. A theoretical framework which distinguishes between the power to determine an agenda (legitimate and illegitimate), the power to determine the outcome of production decisions (covert and illegitimate as well as overt and legitimate), and the ability to influence decisions during all the creative moments of film of production will be a necessary extension to Pardo's analytical approach.

Ethnographic research methods lend themselves to this kind of investigation and have been applied productively in the USA (for example, Bechky 2006). Only by gaining the trust of 'the natives' will a researcher be given access to practices used off-stage to exercise power in the film production process. But the use of participant observation raises ethical questions that will need to be carefully addressed.

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### *Conclusion*

Applying Pardo's framework of creative moments in film production to production processes in the 1995–2001 golden era of music videos in Britain demonstrates that power over creative decision-making was shared between video commissioners, executive producers, producers and directors. Pardo argues that, in the theatrical sector, the producer's creative contribution is exercised indirectly (2010: 10). Evidence from the British music video sector in 1995–2001 shows that, on the contrary, the creativity of the producer was exercised in a very direct way, by making budgetary and technical decisions that affected the actual production of the film. The absence of a strong regulatory professional association and the evolution of music video production through the impact of three distinct cultures of production account in part for the uniquely fluid role expectations and power structures in this sector. The 'kick, bollocks and scramble' production method may have been a necessary condition for the extraordinary levels of genre innovation that are evident in the videos produced during this period.

### **Notes**

1. Such as *Staying Ahead: The Economic Performance of the UK's Creative Industries*, London: Work Foundation, July 2007, at: <http://www.theworkfoundation.com>.
2. Not all of which would have been shot in the UK. Caston et al. (2000).
3. See Barker and Taylor (2007) on artists' quest for 'authenticity' in pop music.
4. Hatcher (2006) has written an excellent explanation of moral rights law regarding film directors and producers in the UK.

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