

# Narrative strategies and music in visual albums

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Thesis BA Muziekwetenschap MU3V14004

2018-2019, block 4

University of Utrecht

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## Abstract

According to E. Ann Kaplan, Andrew Goodwin and Carol Vernallis, music videos usually do not have a narrative, at least not one like in classical Hollywood films. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state that such a narrative consists of events that are related by cause and effect and take place in a particular time and place. However, articles about music videos have not adequately addressed a new trend, namely the so called “visual album”. This medium is a combination of film and music video elements. Examples are Beyoncé’s much discussed visual album *Lemonade* from 2016 and Janelle Monáe’s “emotion picture” *Dirty Computer* from 2018. These visual albums are called ‘narrative films’ by sites such as The Guardian, Billboard and Vimeo, which raises questions about how narrative works in these media forms, because they include music videos which are usually non-narrative. It also poses the question how music functions with the narrative, as in most Hollywood films the music shifts to the background. By looking at the classical Hollywood narrative strategy and a more common strategy used in music videos, called a thread or motif strategy by Vernallis, I have analysed the two visual albums. After comparing them, it seems that both *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* make use of the motif strategy, but fail in achieving a fully wrought film narrative. Therefore, a different description to visual albums than ‘narrative film’, could be considered.

In conclusion, this thesis sheds a light on the rarely acknowledged form of visual albums and how these musical media forms could be analyzed and examined, with theories about narrative in film and music video.

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## Introduction: from the single to the visual album

In the 1960's, the album usually followed after some successful singles and so the single became the crucial product in promoting an album. In the 1970's, after a short shift to the album as the first material, there was a return to the single preceding the album as the main marketing strategy.<sup>1</sup> In the 1980's, MTV started to distribute music videos for the songs as a form of promotion of the single and the artist.<sup>2</sup> However, while music video became a booming industry in the eighties, in the 00's of the twenty-first century, music videos were lesser made as the profits and budgets had fallen, although there has been a revival with the rise of YouTube in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Besides, now is the decade or probably the century of downloading and streaming, which has led to the decline of album sales.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be a real concern for most artists, so what can they do to turn this around and make the album industry flourishing again? A possible answer to this problem came from Beyoncé. In 2013, she released an album with each song accompanied by a music video, in one go. Three years later, in 2016, Beyoncé made a similar album, but this time with an accompanying film, named *Lemonade*. Beyoncé called it a "visual album", which is a combination of film and music video.<sup>5</sup> After the release of this experimental album, other artists began to make similar albums. One of those artists is Janelle Monáe, who released her *Dirty Computer* as an album and "emotion picture" in 2018.<sup>6</sup> The visual album thus seems to be a new trend in the music business, which is why we should take a closer look at this new medium.

Unfortunately, not much has been written yet by scholars and academics on this

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<sup>1</sup> Will Straw, "Pop Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jody Berland, "Music Video and Media Reconstruction," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith et. al (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Vernallis, "Reconfiguring Music Video: Beyoncé's "Video Phone"," in *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 181-183.

<sup>4</sup> The web page <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-46735093> contains graphs and tables which show the sales of CDs over the last decade in the United States and United Kingdom: they note a decline of at least eighty percent. Rollingstone mentions a decline in album sales as well and even speaks of the album or LP being 'doomed'. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-album-is-in-deep-trouble-and-the-music-business-probably-cant-save-it-753795/>.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Carpentier, "How Beyoncé's *Lemonade* Became a Pop Culture Phenomenon," *The Guardian*, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/26/beyonce-lemonade-jay-z-becky-pop-culture>.

<sup>6</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture], Vimeo, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/268498567>.

phenomenon. That is why I will try to fill this gap somewhat with this thesis by analysing the visual albums from Beyoncé and Monáe.

Both *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* sometimes are called “narrative films”.<sup>7</sup> However, authors like E. Ann Kaplan, Andrew Goodwin and Carol Vernallis have been discussing the presence of a narrative in music videos. One of their arguments is, that when the focus is on the narrative, the music shifts to the background, like film music, while the music is the motivation for a music video.<sup>8</sup> Visual albums include music videos or music clips and have a length which tends to that of a film, so what narrative strategies are used in visual albums? What is actually a narrative? What are the narrative strategies used in *Lemonade*? What are the narrative strategies used in *Dirty Computer*? And how does music function with these narrative strategies?<sup>9</sup> I have chosen *Lemonade*, because it is a well known and much discussed visual album, released not long ago, and *Dirty Computer* because it is a very recent visual album (2018) and thus seems to build on the trend. I have analysed them by looking at their (narrative) structure, because this is different from traditional music videos, and audiovisual relations, because of the multimedia nature of the visual album. Authors like Vernallis often use an audiovisual analysis when analysing music video; one has to analyse images, audio and lyrics as they often respond to each other.<sup>10</sup>

In the first chapter, I explain theories about narrative in film and music video discussed by different writers. In the second chapter, I take a closer look at narrative in *Lemonade* by analysing its structure, visuals and audio. The third chapter has the same approach, but this time to Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*. In the fourth and last chapter, I make

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<sup>7</sup> The Guardian has called *Lemonade* a “narrative film” and Billboard calls it a “narrative movie”. On Vimeo, *Dirty Computer* is called an “emotion picture”, which is described as a “narrative film and accompanying musical album” by the video device. Carpentier, “How Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.” Miriam Bale, “Beyoncé’s ‘*Lemonade*’ Is a Revolutionary Work of Black Feminism: Critic’s Notebook,” Billboard, last modified April 25, 2016, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7341839/beyonce-lemonade-black-feminism>. Janelle Monáe, “*Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture],” Vimeo, released May 7, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/268498567>.

<sup>8</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music, Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* has a length of 58 minutes, Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* is around 48 minutes. Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, 2016, DVD. Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture], Vimeo, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/268498567>.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4-7.

comparisons between the two visual albums regarding narrative and music. In the conclusion, I summarize my final conclusions and thoughts.

## Chapter one: Theoretical frame; different narrative strategies

In this chapter, theories about narrative in film and music video are discussed and a few strategies of how narrative can work are explained. There has been a discussion about whether music videos are mini-films with narrative, or rather defy the classical Hollywood codes. E. Ann Kaplan says that music videos are non-narrative, because they avoid the traditional narrative techniques of cause and effect and the traditional concept of a character.<sup>11</sup> According to Andrew Goodwin, the direct address to the viewers in most music videos goes against the indirect modes of narration in traditional films.<sup>12</sup> Carol Vernallis states that most music videos are non-narrative, too, meaning that they do not meet the criteria for a classical film narrative.<sup>13</sup> These criteria are explained by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their book *Film Art: An Introduction*. According to them, a typical narrative for a film should consist of events or actions that are related by cause and effect and take place in a certain time and space. This helps the audience to make sense of the film and the actions that occur during the film. Characters such as humans, animals or other (fictional) figures often function as causes and have at least some traits; these traits serve the actions of the characters which help developing the narrative. Events thus have to relate to each other; someone falling, for example, is an effect of jumping, or losing consciousness, or someone else pushing them, and these events can also be effects of earlier events. No event can stand on his own and events have to be related, or as Bordwell and Thompson state: "A random string of events is hard to understand as a story".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Direct address reveals the construction or machinery of narration and thereby breaks the spell of illusionism. In most feature films, actors do not address the audience directly; if they are looking straight into the camera, they are actually looking at another character or something in the narrative world. In music videos, however, artists often look into the camera while singing; they address the audience directly, as they try to sell their song. Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 72-73.

Time in a narrative can be presented by events in chronological order, but can also consist of flashbacks and flashforwards that can be of any order, too.<sup>15</sup> Another important component of a film narrative is space, and this refers to particular locations, for example New York, or a planet, or a street.<sup>16</sup> In sum, a classical film narrative consists of cause and effect relations, time and space and characters with traits, that serve the changes in the story.

Music videos rarely have a laid out narrative like in narrative films. Kaplan and Vernallis state this is because the music video has to follow the form of the pop song and the function of music video is to promote the artist and the song.<sup>17</sup> Besides, as Goodwin mentions, the song often has a repetitive structure instead of a linear and varied one, which makes it hard to develop the narrative.<sup>18</sup> However, there are some exceptions, although music videos with a narrative similar to that of a narrative film often are longer than most music videos, take place in the past and include narrative elements like dialogue. An example of this is the music video for 'Crazy' from rockband Aerosmith, or the extended video *Thriller* by Michael Jackson.<sup>19</sup>

According to Goodwin, Kaplan and Vernallis, most music videos thus tend to be non-narrative. However, there are other strategies to create a different kind of narrative. One of those strategies is described by Vernallis, who calls it a thread or motif strategy. This means that there are certain motifs in the visuals and audio that reoccur throughout the video. In her book *Unruly Media*, Vernallis gives the example of the video for 'Fortunate', which has seven threads, such as images of glass, butterflies or lights.<sup>20</sup> Motifs can symbolize a certain meaning or suggest a narrative when the music video lacks a fully-wrought narrative like one in most Hollywood films.

Now that we know some of the narrative strategies films and music video can use, we can take a look at visual albums, which form a mixture of film and music video, and see what

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<sup>15</sup> Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 79-81.

<sup>16</sup> Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, 47, Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Popsongs often have verses and choruses that return and the same lyrics for the choruses. Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, 79, 84.

<sup>19</sup> Vernallis gives an analysis of a possible narrative in 'Crazy' in *Experiencing Music Video*. Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 4. In *Sound and Vision*, Kobena Mercer gives an analysis of *Thriller*, which defied the conventions of most music videos at that time. Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith et. al (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 93-108.

<sup>20</sup> Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 236-238.

strategies are applied there. In the next chapter I explore these theories for Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* and in the third chapter I do the same for Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*.

## Chapter two: music and narrative strategies in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Beyoncé's *Lemonade* addresses the struggles of African Americans in the United States and especially African American women: themes such as racism, discrimination, sexual violence and suffering occur multiple times throughout the visual album. There are references to the past; slavery, but also to more recent events like Hurricane Katrina or the Black Lives Matter movement. Beside these general themes of racial inequality, *Lemonade* also addresses Beyoncé's personal life, specifically her marriage to Jay-Z: some of her songs on the visual album refer to infidelity and love, as we will see.<sup>21</sup> However, *Lemonade* seems to have no narrative with certain characters that are moving towards a goal.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the narrative of *Lemonade* is shaped by themes and reoccurring motifs in audio and visuals. The structure of *Lemonade* is as follows:

1. 'Intuition'
2. 'Pray You Catch Me' – Music clip
3. 'Denial'
4. 'Hold Up' – Music clip
5. 'Anger'
6. 'Don't Hurt Yourself' – Music Clip
7. 'Apathy'
8. 'Sorry' – Music clip
9. 'Emptiness'

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<sup>21</sup> Johanna Hartmann, "Sound, Vision, and Embodied Performativity in Beyoncé Knowles' Visual Album *Lemonade* (2016)", in *European journal of American studies* 12, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>22</sup> A classical film narrative can have a 'goal-oriented' plot, which means the narrative is centered around a goal the characters want to achieve. This could be for instance the hunt for a treasure. Bordwell and Thompson: *Film Art*, 85.



10. '6 Inch' – Music clip
11. 'Accountability'
12. 'Daddy Lessons' – Music Clip
14. 'Reformation'
15. 'Love Drought' – Music Clip
16. 'Forgiveness'
17. 'Sandcastles'- Music clip
18. 'Resurrection'
19. 'Forward' – Music clip
20. 'Hope'
21. 'Freedom' – Music Clip
22. 'Redemption'
23. 'All Night' – Music Clip
24. 'Formation' – Music Clip

As the structure shows, there are fragments in between the music clips that are named after a certain emotion or feeling. The order of these feelings could refer to the different phases someone can go through after being betrayed, or after suffering.<sup>23</sup> The emotions develop from negative, such as anger and apathy to more positive ones, such as forgiveness and hope. The music clips often correspond to the different emotions, feelings or stages of processing.

### **Cause and effect relations**

The events in the music clips in *Lemonade* do not have a lot of cause and effect relations, nor is it clear in which exact time and space the events take place, but there are some clips that tend to have a film narrative: these are 'Pray You Catch Me' and 'Hold Up', for instance.<sup>24</sup> In 'Hold Up', Beyoncé comes out of a city hall filled with water, and then walks through the streets until she receives a baseball bat by which she starts to slam car windows, a camera and a hydrant. There are some people watching her and responding to her actions by looking

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<sup>23</sup> Carol Vernallis, "Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Avant-Garde Aesthetics, and Music Video:" The Past and the Future Merge to Meet Us Here", *Film Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2016).



<sup>24</sup> According to Bordwell and Thompson, a film narrative must exist of events that are linked by cause and effect relations and take place in a certain time and space.

at her and dancing along with her in the water coming out of the hydrant she smashed. However, it is not clear from the images why she is being aggressive and slamming windows. At the beginning of the poetry fragment ‘Denial’, we see Beyoncé plunging into the water, which is a direct effect of her fall from the previous clip for ‘Pray You Catch Me’. In the end of this clip, Beyoncé jumps from the roof of a high building and seems to be falling into the city streets. The different clips and fragments are thus linked by these events. The meaning behind Beyoncé’s fall could refer to her husband’s infidelity, which caused her a broken heart, after which she fell into the deep, into the water while suffering. But, by opening the doors of the city hall, Beyoncé released the water and the feeling of drowning, and became angry.

**Motifs in *Lemonade***

Despite the lack of a clear Hollywood narrative, the music clips in *Lemonade* do have a lot of motifs in visuals and audio that reoccur, a narrative strategy that is used in many music videos according to Vernallis.<sup>25</sup> Something that comes back in multiple music clips, are the images of nature, such as trees, water and grass. Water is an element that occurs many times, but the meaning of it is not always clear from the images only. Therefore, I now give an audiovisual analysis of this motif and some interpretations for it. Figure 1 shows a schematic analysis of the ‘water’ motif in some music clips.

**Motif ‘Water’**

	<b>Hold Up</b>	<b>Love Drought</b>	<b>Formation</b>
Images	1. Beyoncé walking out of a city hall filled with water	 Beyoncé and a group of women walking in line through water	1. Beyoncé standing on a drifting police car which is sinking into the water 2. Damaged houses in the water 3. Beyoncé at the end plunged into the water
	 2. Beyoncé slamming a hydrant with a baseball bat,		

<sup>25</sup> Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 236-238.





	<p>dancing in the water sprays from the hydrant</p> 		  
Lyrics	<p>1. –</p> <p>2. “What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy? Jealous or crazy? Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately, I'd rather be crazy. Hold up, they don't love you like I love you”</p>	<p>“If I wasn't me, would you still feel me? Like on my worst day? Or am I not <b>thirsty</b>, enough?”</p> <p>“You, you, you, you and me could calm a war down You, you, you, you and me could make it <b>rain</b> now You, you, you, you and me could stop this love <b>drought</b>”</p>	<p>2. “My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma”</p> <p>“They never take the country out of me”</p> <p>“We gon slay”</p>
Music and sound	<p>1. Sound of water splashing, music: sounds hidden, far away, or deep; reverb effect on guitar, repeated ska rhythm</p> <p>2. Hi-hat sound when hitting the hydrant, guitar ska rhythm</p>	<p>Space sounds, rising synthesizer, hiphop beat</p>	<p>3. Literal sounds of water at the end</p>

Figure 1: table with audiovisual characteristics for the motif 'water' from Lemonade.

At the beginning of 'Hold Up', Beyoncé opens the doors of a city hall which release water from the inside. After that, the music slowly and vaguely comes in; the ska guitar riff sounds like it is coming from the deep, from the water, as it sounds slowmotioned and heavy. This matches the images and motif of water really well and reinforces the meaning of water, as if Beyoncé is coming out of the water, out of suffering from the previous 'Denial' poetry fragment. At one point in 'Hold Up', Beyoncé smashes a hydrant, which causes water to spray. She starts to dance in the watersprays and is soon joined by a group of children and teenagers. The riff is the same as from the beginning, but it does not sound 'underwaterish' anymore, while the images show water from the hydrant. This is perhaps because Beyoncé is not under water anymore, but above it. At the same time, the lyrics go: "What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy? Jealous or crazy? Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately, I'd rather be crazy. Hold up, they don't love you like I love you". The last sentence is repeated, meaning the water could be referring to love; the water or love from the city hall is gone, and now Beyoncé finds water on her own way.

The lyrics of 'Love Drought' address Beyoncé and Jay-Z's relationship, with some literal references to water: "Or am I not *thirsty* enough?", "You and me could make it *rain* now", and "You and me could stop this love *drought*". Drought is the opposite of wet, of water. The water in this clip could be referring to love once more, or the power of water to heal a relationship and suffering. In the music, we hear space-like sounds and synthesizers, accompanied by a hip-hop beat. It gives the clip a bit of an alien feeling, but it does not directly correspond to the water motif. A possible interpretation could be the reference to remote planets, where there is no water, no life, only drought.

The music clip 'Formation' shows Beyoncé on a police car which is floating on water and images of damaged houses surrounded by water. At the end of the clip, we hear literal sounds of water, as Beyoncé immerses into it. The motif here refers to the consequences of Hurricane Katrina, which caused a lot of damage in New Orleans, Louisiana. Beyoncé critiques the lack of attention to the many people of color that lost their lives in the hurricane.<sup>26</sup>

Water is an important theme in African American History, as described by Anissa J. Wardi. She says it has a reference to the body, which consists of seventy percent of water

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<sup>26</sup> Hartmann, "Sound, Vision," 9-10.

and needs a frequent refill of water; therefore, water symbolizes life. At the same time, it refers to death; in times of slavery, the waters of the Atlantic Ocean were crossed over by colonial ships with captivated Africans and many of them died during these crossings. Therefore, water also refers to memory, a memory of bodies and of places, always present and moving in the African American tradition.<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned before, there are many other motifs visuals and audio to be found throughout the visual album, but the water motif seems to be very prominent, especially because it refers to both the personal and the political themes. Water, as it were, unites them. Other motifs in *Lemonade* are images of a plantation house and its natural surroundings; this motif references slavery. Another motif is the football stadium, with corresponding horn sounds, which addresses the exploitation of Afro-Americans in American football.<sup>28</sup> The motifs described here are only a few, but it seems clear that Beyoncé uses the narrative strategy of threads or motifs throughout her visual album more than the classical Hollywood narrative strategy of cause and effect relations and space and time.

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<sup>27</sup> Anissa J. Wardi, *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 4-6.

<sup>28</sup> Hartmann, "Sound, Vision," 9.

## Chapter three: narrative strategies in Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

With *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe has created another story about a futuristic world which critiques the machinations of social inequality in the areas of gender, sexuality and race. It features a high-tech dystopian city with a commentary on technology, arguing that its capitalist past abused the bodies of black women.<sup>29</sup> Monáe's ideas are a form of Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery, who describes this as "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future".<sup>30</sup> With her works, Monáe reflects on the past while at the same time creating a new future in which Afro-Americans are highly developed.<sup>31</sup>

*Dirty Computer* has a rather clear laid out narrative, with reoccurring characters whose actions sometimes form causes for the effects in the story. The main character, Jane (Monáe), has been taken to an institute where her 'dirty' mind will be cleaned. This job is done by two white men who are looking at her memories, which are presented by some of the music clips. Through Jane's memories, we learn more about her past and why she is a 'dirty computer'. The music clips are linked by passages with dialogue. The structure of *Dirty Computer* is as follows:

1. Intro, film title, dialogue with background music
2. 'Crazy, Classic, Life' – music clip
3. Filmscene with dialogue
4. 'Take a Byte' – music clip
5. Filmscene with dialogue
6. 'Screwed' – music clip

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<sup>29</sup> Cassandra L. Jones, "'Tryna Free Kansas City': The Revolutions of Janelle Monáe as Digital Griot." In *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2018), 42-43.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Dery, as quoted in Gayle Murchison, "Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle," in *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, vol. 22 (2018): 81.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, "Tryna Free Kansas City," 43.

7. Film scene
8. 'Django Jane' – music clip
9. Film scene
10. 'Pynk' – music clip
11. Filmscene
12. 'Make me feel' – music clip
13. Filmscene with dialogue
14. 'I like that' – music clip
15. Filmscene with dialogue
16. 'Don't Judge Me' – music clip
17. Filmscene, film music, filmtitle, credits
18. 'Americans' – music clip
19. Credits
20. Epilogue scene with the scientists.

Monáe says her album is structured into three parts: the first four songs are about society, the middle part is about celebrating being a 'dirty computer', by which she means: "We all come from the dirt. I also see us as computers. We're downloading, uploading things in our brains, in our hearts, and some of the things that make us unique can be seen as these bugs, and these viruses. And for me, I see all my bugs and viruses as features, as attributes. This album is about celebrating other Dirty Computers who have been pushed to the margins of society". The last part of the album is about standing up for yourself and your rights and fighting for freedom: "This album is centered and rooted around love. And no revolution, in my opinion, will last if we don't speak out of love."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nicole Mastrogiannis, "Janelle Monáe Reveals Important 'Dirty Computer' Messages & Meanings," iHeartRadio, iHeartMedia, 19 April 2018, <https://www.iheart.com/content/2018-04-20-janelle-mone-reveals-important-dirty-computer-messages-meanings/>.

### **Cause and effect relations**

Now that we know the story and main themes of *Dirty Computer*, what about the narrative strategies and music in this film? 'Crazy, Classic, Life' is the first music clip and flashback and shows some cause and effect relations, that are especially clear at the beginning and the ending of the clip. In the beginning, we see Jane and Zen (played by Tessa Thompson) in a pink, flying car, when suddenly a droid faces them to check their identities. After the droid has left, Jane and Zen go to the trunk and free their friends. Together with these friends they join a pool party, where Jane meets the third main character and her love interest, Ché. At the end of the clip, after the music has stopped, the police breaks into the party and starts to arrest people. This seems to be an effect of the illegal actions by Jane and Zen from the beginning, but also the poolparty itself, which was joined by queer people, who thus are not heteronormative and 'dirty', or different. The act of the police seems to be an act of homophobia.

The second music clip, 'Screwed', shows some cause and effect relations, too. At the beginning of the clip, we see Jane, Zen, Ché and their friends on the top of the roof, looking hangover, especially when one of them has to throw up. This is likely an effect of the party from the previous music clip for 'Crazy, Classic, Life'. Then, the droid we have seen from this previous clip appears and the group starts running away from it. At the end of the clip, Zen is being caught by the police while her friends are hiding and this seems to be the effect of the droid searching for them, but also of the happenings in 'Crazy, Classic, Life'.

### **Motifs in 'Django Jane' and 'I like that'**

The two clips for 'Django Jane' and 'I like that' are different from the other ones and it is unclear if they function as memories of Jane or as something else. In 'Django Jane', the camera enters a sort of a secret club behind closed doors, somewhere in an underground place, and throughout the video we see Monáe rapping on the forefront, accompanied by female dancers. There are no events that cause other events, or characters doing something that has effect on other characters or events, which makes it hard to speak of a clear narrative. However, if the images do not seem to have a narrative, the music and especially lyrics could make things more clear. In the images, motifs of Monáe in a suit and wearing a



crown, surrounded by other women, come back throughout the whole clip. Figure 2 shows audiovisual elements for these motifs.

**Motif ‘underground’**


	<b>Django Jane</b>
Images	<p>Monáe sitting on a chair, wearing a crown and a suit, surrounded by other women in suits; location seems to be an underground parking lot</p> 
Lyrics	<p>“Yeah, yeah this is my palace, champagne in my chalice. I got it all covered like a wedding band. Wonderland, so my alias is Alice”</p> <p>“We gon' start a motherfuckin' pussy riot Or we gon' have to put 'em on a pussy diet”</p> <p>“A-town, made it out there Straight out of Kansas City, yeah we made it out there”</p> <p>“Momma was a G, she was cleanin' hotels Poppa was a driver, I was workin' retail”</p> <p>“Remember when they used to say I look too mannish Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it Y'all can't ban it, made out like a bandit”</p>
Music and sound	Hiphop/trap beat, rap style

Figure 3: scheme with audiovisual characteristics for the clip ‘Django Jane’.

Monáe is rapping in this song and her lyrics are typical for hip-hop, which often refer to the artist's past life and their struggles to get where they are now. The title 'Django Jane' is a reference to Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained*, which addresses slavery. About the location of 'Django Jane' Monáe raps: "Yeah, yeah this is my palace, champagne in my chalice. I got it all covered like a wedding band. Wonderland, so my alias is Alice".

Wonderland, as in the story by Lewis Carroll, is a place underground, which can be entered through a rabbit hole. The place in 'Django Jane' seems an underground place as well; the accompanying hip-hop beat and rap style could refer to the underground scene of hip-hop, as it used to be.<sup>33</sup> It can also reference the working class, as working underground with the wealthy class above them; Monáe herself is from a working class family, as many Afro-Americans are.<sup>34</sup>

The song thus seems to focus more on political subjects, like female empowerment and inequality. Monáe uses the hip-hop style to be more direct, as she is rapping the messages to us, as if she is saying it in our face. 'Django Jane' is not a narrative clip, but emphasizes the lyrics more instead, and thus the political messages.<sup>35</sup>

In 'I like that', we see Monáe and copies of her surrounding her, while she is singing most of the video to the camera. There are no actions that cause events; the classical Hollywood narrative is hard to be found here. Figure 3 shows a scheme for this clip:

### **Motif 'minor and major'**

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Scott, "Sublimating hip-hop: Rap music in white America," *Socialism and Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2004): 147.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, "Tryna Free Kansas City," 43.

<sup>35</sup> "Django Jane by Janelle Monáe," Songfacts, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/janelle-monae/django-jane>.

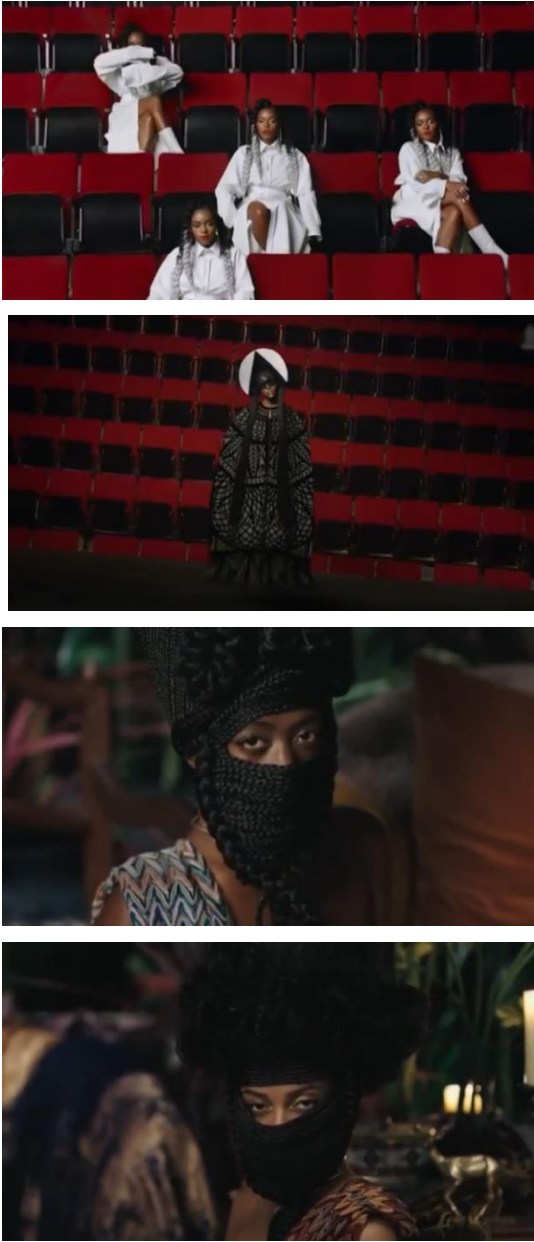
	<b>I like that</b>
Images	<p>Copies of Monáe wearing the same black and white clothes; Monáe in futuristic black clothes; Afro-American women with braided hair.</p> 
Lyrics	<p>“A little crazy, little sexy, little cool  Little rough around the edges, but I keep it smooth  I'm always left of center and that's right where I belong  I'm the random minor note you hear in major songs”</p>
Music and sound	<p>Gospel background vocals, hiphop/trap beat, guitars  Key: C major, chord progression: F-G-C-Dm (IV-V-I-ii)</p>

Figure 3: scheme with audiovisual characteristics for the clip ‘I like that’.

This clip is about self-love, as Monáe sings what she likes about herself and that she does not care what other people think of her. It is interesting to see if the line “I’m the random minor note you hear in major songs” corresponds with the music. As it appears from the analysis in the scheme, the song is indeed in a major key (C-major) and has one minor chord, namely Dminor. However, when Monáe sings “minor”, a Cmajor chord is played, and when she sings “major”, a Dminor chord. But, this could be just the intention for the meaning of the song: when a major chord is played, we expect to hear a corresponding ‘major’ or happy lyric, but instead we hear minor, something different; Monáe is not what you expect, she is different and she likes that. The gospel vocals and trap beat could reference African American culture, but they do not directly address the lyrics; they add an extra layer to the person Monáe, referring to her roots. This is the same for the images, which show Afro-American women with braided hair when Monáe sings ‘minor’ and ‘major’.

‘I like that’ is another music clip that does not have a clear narrative, but directly contributes to the general themes of the album, in this case the theme of self-love. The music corresponds to the lyrics with its key and chordprogression and reinforces the meaning of the lyrics, or adds something to it.

### **Film music during ‘Americans’**

The last music clip of the film, ‘Americans’, seems to focus more on the narrative instead of the music, as Monáe is not singing throughout the clip, even while we hear her singing. The gospel-like, uptempo music rather functions as film music; the attention is more drawn to the images, as the characters are trying to escape the institute; we are curious to see where they are going to. This is a crucial moment in the story; all this time the characters have been prisoners, and now they have a chance to be free; the story is coming to a close. This passage can be interpreted as escaping and conquering oppression and reaching freedom; the freedom of loving who you want, expressing what you want, and just being who you want to be, without any restrictions.

In *Dirty Computer*, there are multiple music clips, and there are some motifs that occur in more than one of the clips. The three main characters Jane, Zen and Ché appear frequently throughout the film. Apart from these characters, there is the motif of a crucified

female Jesus. This could refer to the homophobia within religion.<sup>36</sup> Another visual element that comes back in multiple music clips, is the droid, which could reference the power of technology.

As we have seen, one music clip has a clearer narrative than the other. However, every clip does add something, whether through the visuals, through music, or all together. *Dirty Computer* comes close to the strategy of the Hollywood narrative and uses this as well as the motif strategy, though it still does not have a fully wrought narrative with time and space indications like in most feature films.

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, "Tryna Free Kansas City," 63.

## Chapter four: Comparing narrative strategies in *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*

Both *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* show different narrative forms, but have some things in common as well when it comes to narrative. Regarding the classical Hollywood film narrative of cause and effect and time and space, both visual albums show that they use this strategy, but not to the same extent. *Lemonade* does not have a clear narrative with characters with names that serve as causes, but there are some cause and effect relations, especially in the first music clips and poetry fragments. *Dirty Computer* has a clearer narrative structure, with characters (with names) that reoccur, dialogue scenes in between (and sometimes as part of) the music clips but not always a clear idea of time and space.

When it comes to the classical Hollywood narrative, *Dirty Computer* thus seems to come closer to this ideal than *Lemonade*, but still does not achieve this completely. This is mainly due to the music clips, which do not always have a clear narrative in which all events are related by cause and effect. *Lemonade* has more of such non-narrative clips which form a collage of visuals and audio with references to themes such as racial inequality and infidelity. Beyoncé refers to these themes by using motifs in visuals and audio, more than the Hollywood narrative. Monáe uses the motif or thread strategy as well, but there are not a lot of motifs that really stand out and occur many times, like in *Lemonade* the motifs for water and plantation houses for example. The motifs that come back almost throughout the whole film of *Dirty Computer*, are the three main characters. By using a lot of motifs, *Lemonade* addresses the issues more or less directly, instead of using a narrative frame or story which mimics a world with problems, as *Dirty Computer* does with its fictional world and fictional characters. Therefore, *Lemonade* feels more 'real' than *Dirty Computer*. Another reason for this could be the references to Jay-Z, Beyoncé's real husband, and perhaps also the use of homevideos, which share some moments of Beyoncé's private life.

According to Goodwin and Vernallis, the music must not be left out when analysing a music video.<sup>37</sup> In visual albums, the music sometimes seems to fade to the background, as

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music, Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

during 'Americans' for instance. On such moments, the music becomes film music. This happens when the narrative reaches a crucial point and the audience is not addressed directly by the artist. In 'Americans', the three characters want to escape the institute they were in. It is a narrative climax which brings the images to the fore, more than music. In some clips the music is more prominent, as in 'Django Jane' and 'I like that', in which the images do not have a clear narrative. Music often helps to make the meanings more clear or to reinforce a certain meaning of a motif. Examples are the water sounds or the music sounding 'underwaterish' to the water motif in 'Hold Up', reinforcing the meaning of water, or the hip-hop beat in the clip 'Django Jane', which matches the images of an underground scene and thus emphasizes the meaning of 'underground'. However, to have a full understanding of the deeper layers of a visual album, all the components, from the music and sound, images and lyrics to the fragments with dialogue or other elements, must be considered, as they all contribute to the narrative or themes in their own way.

## Conclusion: narrative in visual albums

All in all, despite the length of visual albums tending towards that of a film and despite the label 'narrative film' that is given by The Guardian, Vimeo and Billboard to *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*, they both do not fully achieve the film narrative as described by Bordwell and Thompson. Rather, they resemble music videos, which often do not have a clear narrative, but use motifs in visuals and audio to address a theme or a certain meaning. *Lemonade* clearly uses this strategy with large, reoccurring motifs, such as the water motif and the plantation houses. *Dirty Computer* uses this strategy too, with characters as motifs and reoccurring symbols. Monáe's visual album comes closer to the Hollywood narrative than *Lemonade* does, with named, reoccurring characters and dialogue scenes which help develop the narrative around main character Jane, but it still lacks specific indications of time and place. On top of that, the music clips still do not have a full narrative, with all events related by cause and effect, at least not like in Hollywood films. That is why visual albums *Lemonade*

and *Dirty Computer* could be better described as 'extended music videos', and *Dirty Computer* perhaps as an 'extended narrative music video', as it has *some* kind of a narrative.

However, to make hard conclusions about visual albums in general, one has to analyse more than two visual albums and go deeper into all aspects of it. The lack of time and space have kept me from doing this, yet I hope to have made a contribution with this thesis to the relatively new research field of the complex visual album.



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