

The Music Video Container

by Carl Eugene Stroud

A Description of “Montero (Call Me by Your Name)”

On top of a colorful, pinkish view from above the clouds, a title and credits appear. Descending through the clouds, past purple plants growing out of red grass, a stream flows through a hilly countryside with white mountain tops and stone ruins. Following the stream, behind a half-collapsed bridge, a giant stone face points toward the sky. A black snake with orange markings slithers across the purple soil, toward a young black man, with long hair and a tight-fitting, sparkly suit that resembles fish scales. Leaning against the white trunk of a succulent purple and pink tree and playing a pink guitar with long, glittered fingernails, he sings as the snake, now much larger and with an upper body resembling a person with dark skin, slides down the tree.

The snake startles the man. He drops his guitar as he jumps to his feet and starts running through the reddish grass. He makes eye contact with a gray tree that looks like a person wrapped in branches and leaves. Small, light blue and purple flowers bloom, revealing the human-like face of the snake, licking his lips. His head is pointed at the top with a purple third eye and a lustful look. A face takes shape in the pink storm clouds, surrounded by lightning. The man stops as the snake-like creature appears. Wearing a sheer black blouse with pointed shoulders, the creature holds the man's face between long black fingernails and looks directly into his eyes. As he looks back at the snake with the upper-body of a man, the long-haired man falls back onto the ground, his eyes glazed over, as if under a spell. The snake follows him to the ground, and the man reaches for the creature's face, embracing it in a deep kiss on the lips. As the man lies on his back, the creature licks his scale-covered navel. Moving quickly across the grass, back to the tree, an illegible transcription, surrounded by pictographs, is carved into the trunk. The letters turn to fire and the image breaks into flames that disperse, revealing the next scene.

A black man with large diamond earrings, blue eye makeup, and a mustache, wears a tall, curly, blue wig and a patchwork denim suit with large, almost horizontal lapels and a tall rising collar. His long blue fingernails are wrapped around the arm of a shirtless

black man with a pink wig and a fluffy, pink fur sash, fastened by the diamond covered figure of a ram's head. Another mustached man, in a shirt made of mismatched denim sections, with the same blue eye make-up and a shorter blue wig, holds his other arm. The shirtless man sings as he enters a large amphitheater full of granite statues. Another man with a tall, blue, curly wig peaks out from behind a large fan made of cut up jeans, as the escorted prisoner is thrown onto the ground. Four chains are attached to his arms by large shackles that go most of the way up from his wrists to his elbows. He stands in a loin cloth, in front of his denim clad judges. Surrounding him from above, a large crowd of screaming, shirtless figures made of cracking stone; one of them throws something and hits the prisoner in the head.

He sings as he floats, chest up, through the clouds towards an angel-like figure in the sky. Suddenly, a pole rises from below and he grabs it. Now, with long red braids, tight, black, Calvin Klein underwear, and tall, black high heels and stockings, he starts to slide down the pole, through the amphitheater and underground. Spinning, stretching, and humping the pole on the way down, his necklace and braids swing as he descends toward a lava lake surrounded by red rock. On the ground, he runs across a bridge toward a black, menacing castle. He cockily strolls past tall statues highlighted with glowing bits of lava. A red-skinned devil, with several small horns protruding from his forehead, face piercings, and a crown made of woven threads rising into two curled horns, sits on a throne, looking stoically forward. He wears black pants, his red skin visible through the black latticed straps of a harness-like "shirt" that attaches to long black gloves resting on the arms of the chair. The man leans in close to say something into his ear; then, climbs on top of the muscular demon's lap, facing him. The lap dance continues as he rolls over. He kicks his heels into the air as the devil caresses his body with his gloved hands. Two large skulls with fire glowing through the eye sockets sit on either side of the throne. He licks the devil's face. As he changes positions, he rests upside down with his head between the devil's legs, spreading his own legs in the air. The man makes repeated orgasmic facial expressions as he continues his lap dance, eventually creeping around to the back side of the throne. He places his hands on the devil's head from behind and snaps his neck. The man takes the black horned crown and places it on his head, as two black wings spread from behind his back. His eyes glow white.

A Description of "Hustle"

A poem, written in black words, appears in front a background of white and gray colored clouds. From between two brick buildings, a blue arrow pointing left marks a one-way street. A folding chair leans against the wall. Through a red, metal fence and across two streets, there is a six-floor apartment building. A name appears on the screen in black; then, another name appears in white, juxtaposed in front of an apartment complex with external balcony corridors and satellite dishes on the outside wall.

In a parking lot, in front of a plain, four-story apartment, made of beige bricks with white window trimming, a blue car is parked to the right and a gray car to the left, the black pole of a streetlight in front of a metal children's playground. Two black women stand with serious expressions, next to each other, facing forward. They both wear black and white Nike sneakers. One is dressed in a black sweatsuit. The other is in a beige version of the same sweatsuit. On top of the hooded sweatsuits, they wear vests of the same color. The vests hang from their shoulders and clasp on the side, resembling bullet proof vests.

As the woman in beige steps forward, the woman in black pulls her back. This propels the woman in black forward until she is stopped by the woman in beige. They seamlessly take turns moving away from each other while the other one is pulling, tugging, hugging, and grabbing, preventing them from separating. They move around an axis. Circling around them, a dirty, old, mismatched brick building, with white windows and a small security camera, is colored only by a couple of potted plants draped over a maroon railing. The woman in black comes off the ground as she supports herself on the woman in beige. They spin. They grab hands. One of them tries to free herself. The other clings to her. They alternate roles constantly until the woman in beige breaks free and begins dancing alone in the parking lot. Her arms extend fully as she confidently moves in broad swinging motions, and her limbs carry momentum that she re-centers and uses to propel her spinning and twirling.

In front of another beige, brick apartment, with beige window trimming, there are rows of storage units, with white and blue paint peeling from metal garage doors. The woman in black, in front of a security gate, outside of the storage buildings, stares sternly before jumping both feet off the ground and starting to dance. She alternates between large, fully extended motions with her arms and smaller, tighter, repeating motions with her feet, hands, and elbows. She spins and walks with intention as her arms swing in all directions.

Moving down the street, the woman in black on the sidewalk, the woman in beige in the road, they continue to dance, in front of a different apartment building with blue railing and trim. A blue, metal fence and a mossy wall line the sidewalk. There are cars parked on the street and another drab building in the background. They bend their knees and squat. They stand up and kick their legs in the air. The woman in black slightly behind, like a trailing shadow, they mirror each other as their shoulders and knees rise and fall in unison.

A close-up of a dark, brick wall with yellowish mortar, a tree with thin branches and no leaves in front of a gray sky, a red, metal fence runs along the sidewalk. On the other side of the fence, the women continue to move, entangling themselves, now, in a less antagonistic way, as one of them bends backwards and off balance the other one cradles her. They continue dancing as they move along the sidewalk, next to the red fence. Sometimes touching, sometimes leading, sometimes following, they break into a run as they reach the parking lot.

Moving quickly through a forest, dead leaves on the ground. Blurry figures of the women moving through the trees, dancing, leaping, touching, embracing, wrestling, their arms swing as they run. Then, in the dark, the small yellow moon shines through the branches of the trees, and the women dance next to each other on dead leaves in a clearing. The woman in black on the left, the woman in beige on the right, their motions are synchronized as their arms swing up to the right then to the left. Their torsos turn with their elbows pointed up and out. Their heads tilt back as their arms make large arcing motions. Stepping to the right then to the left. They kick their legs forward and turn 180 degrees. Stepping in place, they do

it again and again. In a mirrored gesture, they each swing a hand up, toward the space between them.

Shallow, foamy water washes onto the shore, as the women hold hands. Both wearing beige pants and short, white tank tops, they walk into the water barefoot. Standing knee deep in the water and facing each other, the woman on the right closes her eyes and leans back while the woman on the left wraps her arms around her, reaching into the water and cupping some in her hand. A flower lays on the sand, surrounded by fallen petals and small stones, as the waves gently flow onto the shore.

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“The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” a 1986 essay by Ursula K. Le Guin, describes “a fundamentally unheroic kind of story” (6) which is based in an anthropological theory of how storytelling developed. It is, however, also suggestive of what we should modify about our interpretation and telling of stories today. Le Guin distinguishes two possible approaches.

In the 2021 music video “Hustle,” by Sons of Kemet, there is no central hero or clear plot. Two women, dancing and turning, kicking and holding onto each other, “cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since [their] purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process” (7). Le Guin says this kind of story is “full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions” (8). The developments in the video are subtle, and the contradictory motions of the choreography imply instability which could be read literally as physically being off balance but also as instability of meaning.

At the climactic end of the 2021 video by Lil Nas X, “Montero (Call Me by Your Name),” the Hero kills the ultimate Christian symbol of evil with his bare hands. In spite of its densely crafted, surreal visual spectacle, at its core, the video is essentially “the story [that] the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero.” But what struggle is overcome by murderous heroes? He did not kill Christian bigotry or hatred. Nevertheless, the ending still makes sense because it fits within the narrative as a whole. We know where the story is going the whole time because, like a tragedy, this is its intelligibility. It is a version of the killer story, in which Le Guin says the “shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)” (6). The plot is clear and the symbolism blatant. The video is explicitly communicative, and if audiences want to understand its message, the hero must be central to their interpretation. So, recognizing the polemic of the video’s message requires a narrow and traditional reading of its narrative.

Repurposing meaning and inadvertently nodding to tradition is not only a structural feature of stories about the Hero. Vulgar applications of Christian imagery in art require that the audience be steeped in prevailing religious dogma. When provocatively displaying traditional symbols, the pre-established meaning remains the foundation for the ironic meaning. If we want to understand the subtext when artists appropriate symbols from the powerful, we have to maintain our familiarity with the original myth. We have to think like the Christian Hero thinks.

Without an understanding of Christian beliefs, the most significant aspects of the video would be the colors, the costumes, or the special effects. The snake and the devil take up what Le Guin calls “large areas of theoretical nonsense (inhabited largely by tigers, foxes, [and] other highly territorial mammals)” (4), in this case Christian boogiemens or maybe the Hero himself. Though the imagery and symbolism in the video express disdain for anti-homophobic, Christian values, the re-appropriated symbols are reactionary and, therefore, depend on their original referents to give them their force. The symbols in the video aim to incite future reactions which can themselves be reacted to decisively, powerfully, and heroically.

The Hero of the video explicitly lusts after these symbols, in a quest for power, seemingly as a means for overcoming the judgmental morality of traditional culture. But there is nothing revolutionary about the Hero thirsting for power. We understand the story told by this video so clearly because the Hero has always been a power center. This is nothing new. It is not the Hero in this particular story that is problematic. But rather, the Hero as a narrative feature is inherently corrupt. The story of the Hero seizing power is a tragedy. Le Guin adds that “[the] fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now)” (8).

Like Le Guin’s interpretation of literature, the music video medium should also be seen as a container, like a pregnant womb, full of meaning. In the video of the two women dancing, as they hold onto and tether each other, their movement is an ambiguous symbol that is not easily captured and tied down. Together, as a

unit, combining only two plain contrasting colors, their dance is like a bag “holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us” (7). They do not resemble the yin-yang simply because of their coloring but also because of the variable meaning and application of their dichotomy.

From an entertainment perspective, as pieces of pop-culture, “Hustle” is a more boring music video. Its backdrop is mundane, and unlike in the Hero’s story, its focus alternates and evolves, so it is hard to follow. In the Hero’s story, the controversy is the intrigue. The story is scandalous and focuses explicitly on the interplay between the status quo and a single individual. It is a personal quest portrayed through an immediately apparent sequence of events. This pattern of cause and effect in the plot centered on the Hero transforms him into a character/cause. Everything in the story seems to pivot on his actions. The hero in the story is the only thing that matters. Even the audience depends on his greatness to help them understand. *He* will show us what is important. What is his opinion? How does he react? Will he be stronger than his adversaries in the end? The Hero is the measuring stick against which everything else must be compared.

The intrigue in the *other* video is not linear. Its message is more dialectical and less rhetorical. If it is compelling at all, it is afterward, during our critical reflection, that we feel compelled. Like a purse full of stuff, there is no focus. And, perceiving ourselves as heroes in our own stories, we find it frustrating that the video leaves its audience to sift through the objects, only incidentally able to find things to interpret and relate to. Whether it is missing a root cause, a particular narrative trope, a long pole, a pointy arrow, a hero, or a plot, in a music video which serves as a container, there is not one clear, obvious thing to follow. And so, what we end up following reflects more on us than on the video.

But we find this boring. It is not romantic. It is not fun. It is not a sufficient escape. We want clarity; we want meaning; we want to get to the point. And if we consider ourselves heroes, in our own stories, this is a logical frustration since “the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato” (Le Guin 8). Why should we want to get in this bag? Why should we even bother to reach one hand in? We may not be potatoes, but we are also not

heroes; we are humans. As such, we have real-life, personal reasons not to perpetuate inevitably tragic theories for interpreting our lives. Because, while he makes for romantic and adventurous art, the Hero as the primary focus is itself a myth. So, in believing the myth that we ourselves are heroes, we ignore the fact that there are a lot of things to carry, and heroes do not do the heavy lifting off-screen. On whose shoulders are the heroes in our stories relying, and should we not broaden our focus to include them in our understanding of heroic deeds? The flaccid simplicity of the Hero avoids the harder, penetrating significance of music videos as containers.

Ursula K. Le Guin. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Literature" (1986). [Dancing at the Edge of the World](#). Transcribed by Cody James.

Lil Nas X. "Montero (Call Me by Your Name)" (2021). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k>

Sons of Kemet, feat. Kojey Radical. "Hustle" (2021). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDepEUnJwpY>

Like novels, paintings, and poems, music videos contain a complex array of meaningful objects. In piecing through these works of art, we recognize objects from our lives. The meaning of these objects merits a serious critical analysis. These are detailed, textual descriptions of the music videos for the song "Montero (Call Me by Your Name)" by Lil Nas X and the song "Hustle" by Sons of Kemet. Then, using "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," an essay by Ursula K. Le Guin, I analyze these music videos, by contrasting the stories that are told through their images.