Dancing in Music Videos, or How I Learned to Dance Like Janet . . . Miss Jackson

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In 1989, when I was a senior in high school, Janet Jackson's album *Rhythm Nation* 1814 was released. A slick concept album, it addressed social injustice and economic disparities, universal concepts that my teenaged naiveté witnessed on a daily basis as I got off the L train in the East Village of New York City to go to school. Some of the lyrics advocated social consciousness and I learned many of the songs by heart, but my overwhelming response to that album was corporeal. I wanted to dance like Janet. I remember programming our family's VCR for the MTV premiere of the 30-minute long form music video, which featured the first single from the album, "Miss You Much," along with two other songs, "Rhythm Nation" and "The Knowledge." Unbeknownst to me, I was participating in what historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin might call a "pseudo-event" or what Marxist theorist Guy Debord might label a "spectacle" of advanced capitalism. Boorstin's pseudo-event describes an event whose sole purpose is to be reproduced (via advertisements or publicity).[1] While Debord's spectacle, as he describes it, "is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[2] The video premiere and the subsequent video rotation of both "Miss You Much" and "Rhythm Nation" (long form) enabled a social relationship to occur between those who were fans of Janet. It was imperative that you not only owned the album, but you had to know some (or all) of the choreography from her videos:

> *Face forward. Legs a little wider than hip distance apart. Arms extended diagonally away from torso with the left arm diagonally down and the right arm diagonally upwards. The arms bend simultaneously back towards the torso, palms facing inwards, middle fingers barely touching as both hands figuratively cover the heart or left breast while simultaneously, the left leg slightly bends as you shift your weight towards that side of the body. Legs straighten again while the left arm rotates to make a 90-degree angle (the right arm stays in place) and the hand makes the universally known peace sign in front of the face so that the left eye can peek through the two fingers. The torso rotates slightly to the right, both arms follow, with elbows bent close to the torso, and the hands almost close but suddenly flap open twice . . .*

I have briefly described the beginning of the choreography for the chorus of "Miss You Much." It was also probably the easiest part of the choreography to learn and perfect. After infinite amounts of time in front of the television pushing the VCR rewind and play buttons, I learned it and I felt I had accomplished something. All I knew was that I just really wanted to dance like Janet. Senior year, I had a friend named Gavin. He was either a sophomore or a junior (I can no longer remember). When we would run into one another in the hallway, or on our way to class, or in the stairwell, or outside the school building, or on the First Avenue L train platform,

we would give each other a sly look and then suddenly break into those first eight counts of the *Miss You Much* choreography. We didn't care if people thought we were strange. For us, all that mattered was that in our reproduction of the choreography we were asserting its value—physically, choreographically, and personally—and our connection to Janet. In hindsight, the marketing, publicity and subsequent rotation of the spectacle of Janet Jackson's black and white music video on MTV meant nothing to me. I just wanted to dance like her and each time the video came on, it was an opportunity to see if I approximated her skill.

I employ the use of the rhetorical repetition of my desire in order to begin to articulate the relationship between mediated performances of popular dance and the audience/spectator; for it is through the ubiquitous availability of such mediated performances that dance on screen becomes (corpo)real and tangible. Dance and performance studies scholars speak to the ephemerality of performance, choreography, and even dance itself. In other words, once it has occurred live, on a stage, it no longer exists. The notable debate between performance studies scholars Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander comes to mind at this moment for it sets up the ontological predicament of dance, performance, spectatorship, and subjectivity.[3] If the live body is the sole arbiter of authenticity or reality, how might one consider its presence and representation through mediated sources? For Phelan and Auslander, the primary site for the consideration of the live body is the art performance space (e.g., a theatre space, the prosceniums stage, or a museum gallery). I wonder how popular dance forms might trouble their respective claims given the fact that in late capitalism most popular dance forms circulate primarily in mediated ways (e.g., music videos, YouTube, or television dance competition shows). Fortunately, Amelia Jones's article offers a prescient theoretical lens through which to consider dance in music video and the role of the performer/celebrity. Her pronouncement that body art, "through its very performativity and its unveiling of the body of the artist, surfaces the insufficiency and incoherence of the body-as-subject and its inability to deliver itself fully (whether to the subject-in-performance her/himself or to the one who engages with this body)" offers useful insights applicable to popular screen dance.[4] She calls into question the ontological status of both the live and mediated event by claiming, "There is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product."[5] As a result, Jones's insights allow me to consider how popular dance on screen comes with an arsenal of mediation already built-in. It is these statements made by Jones that I want to reflect upon as I muse about my affinity for dance in music video and my memories of Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation."

There is something about learning music video dances that makes me feel as if I "know" the celebrity, if only through the embodied, physicalized practice of rehearsal. Just as the cult of celebrity is a mode of production, popular screens provide fans different types of access to other modes of production. For example, if the body of one of Janet's fans can learn moves created exclusively for her celebrity brand to trademark and circulate through a variety of mediated circuits, then perhaps the fan body establishes the intersubjectivity that Jones refers to when she writes that "while the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange (viewer/reader ↔ document) is equally intersubjective."[6] Fan culture becomes an ancillary mode of production for the celebrity. Thus, a relationship is forged between the performer and her audience, and it can be a theoretically complex one, given the effects of mediation.

Gavin went to see Janet perform live at Madison Square Garden (I was unable to go as I was abroad with family), and he later admitted that watching the live version of "Miss You Much" was different and not as exciting as the first time he saw the video. Here, the live-ness or presence of the actual celebrity body (he was sitting really far away from the stage, so Janet remained a mediated presence on the screen above the stage) became a simulacrum of the mediated celebrity body, the one he had become habituated to experience. Thus, the live re-presentation of the original or 'authentic' mediated event—the live performance of the "Miss You Much" video choreography—materialized as the simulacrum of the video thereby instantiating Jones's assertion that "the relationship of these bodies/subjects to documentation (or more specifically, to re-presentation) most profoundly points to the dislocation of the fantasy of the fixed, normative, centered modernist subject."[7] Janet live was not the same as Janet at home on MTV and this realization destabilized Gavin's perception of Janet altogether.

Postmodern celebrity bodies, specifically pop music artists, engage in a self-fashioning choreography. Obviously tied to the demands of a patriarchal, globalized, late corporate capitalism, a pop artist like Janet Jackson is beholden to the demands of her record label and how it chooses to invest its capital through the type of image, music, and style Janet Jackson-as-corporate-brand represents. The process through which a celebrity pop icon trademarks herself offers an example of Jones's idea that the documentary traces of the artists' performance "could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible 'proof' of the self and its endless deferral."[8] The act of trademarking, whether through the celebrity image, dancing ability, sound, or talent highlights the process of becoming a corporate-produced subjectivity or even more specifically, a celebrity-brand/body. In this instance, the celebrity-brand/body shifts into the realm of commodity within the mediated terrains of popular screens (e.g., celebrity webpages, or sites such as MySpace, YouTube, Vimeo, VeVo, or even a Twitter account), which enable that very body's endless deferral. Thus, Janet Jackson (self) is not ever really accessible, yet she always *is* a mediation of that "self." And it is that mediated self, i.e., Janet-as-celebrity-brand/body that allows for a social relationship to exist between Janet and her fans.

I have a friend, Ed, whom I met in college. We loved going out dancing together. One day, I walked in on him watching the 30-minute "Rhythm Nation" video in a student center lounge. He was dancing along to the choreography in real time. I noticed the sweat on his forehead and some sweat marks on his t-shirt (he had been wearing a wool plaid shirt which he threw off as he was dancing). Like me, he wanted to dance like Janet. Unlike me, he absolutely did . . . and, I will admit, I was a bit jealous. Here, Janet was materializing not as a fully knowable body-as-subject, but as a physical body that labored (and sweated) to learn, practice, perfect, and perform those very moves that had Ed sweating inside the student center. In a way, Ed *knew* what it was like "to be" Janet . . . even if it was only by dancing like her. Jones's assertion that "the 'unique' body of the artist in the body artwork only has meaning by virtue of its contextualization within codes of identity that accrue to the artist's body and name"[9] seems quite appropriate to my argument. Janet's video dance performance becomes meaningful every time it gets repeated, especially since her celebrity trademark has always been innovative dance skill that requires practice and re-iteration.

Music video dance is made exclusively for mediation, circulation, and transmission in service of corporate and celebrity capital. Its navigation through the variety of media's circuits assures its 'real'-ness and its tangibility. The dancers in the video make it corpo-real

as do the fans that learn and imitate the moves.[10] Just as "body art depends on documentation,"[11] music video dance does as well; it cannot exist without it. I do not claim that there is a fully knowable self present in music videos, but what is available is a branded performance that resurfaces and is made "real" each time it is witnessed on the popular screen, re-interpreted by the performer for live audience at a concert or awards show, or re-enacted by fans in dance classes, or different sized screens in living rooms, classrooms and bedrooms. The first popular screen iteration exists as the documentary trace that will later provide the infinite acts of performative deferral. Thus when Janet performed "Miss You Much" (or another one of her tracks from *Rhythm Nation*) at her live concert, at the Grammy's, on *Saturday Night Live*, at the MTV Video Music Awards, her chorus of back-up dancers, all dancing in unison with Janet, highlight the transmission of (popular) dance forms from bodies to bodies and more importantly, the embodied-ness of popular dance practices and the crucial role that the screen plays in establishing such practices.

Watching the video several times on VeVo[12] in order to prepare for this essay, I found myself getting out of my seat and trying to remember the choreography. I managed to stimulate some of my muscle memory and some steps resurfaced here and there, but I was unable to complete a full eight counts (other than the first set that I described above). In other words, I failed miserably. Nevertheless, I reflected on how, almost twenty-two years later, my physical engagement with the performance is contingent upon its accessibility through a screen which lets me watch the video over and over until I can, finally, dance like Janet.

References

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Notes

1. Boorstin, *The Image*.

2. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2.

3. See Auslander, *Liveness*, and Phelan, *Unmarked*.

4. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 13.

5. Ibid., 12.

6. Ibid., 12.

7. Ibid., 12.

8. Ibid., 14.

9. Ibid., 14.

10. Here, I am reminded of a recent flash mob performance of the choreography of Beyoncé's *Single Ladies* in Picadilly Circus, London where about 50 women dressed similarly to Beyoncé (in the video) danced in order to promote both her upcoming concert at the O2 Arena and Trident gum which was sponsoring the event.

11. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia," 15.

12. Jackson, "Miss You Much."