

A QUICK LOOK AT VERTICAL MUSIC VIDEOS' PAST AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays we find more and more videos, especially music videos, that were released on a vertical or portrait format. These format certainly were uncommon ten to fifteen years ago, but nowadays videos that use vertical format can be found anywhere, from amateur youtube videos to professionally made music videos. Certainly, the development of mobile phone technology plays a significant part in how the format came to be but does the mobile phone itself creates the advent of the vertical format? This paper attempts to explain how the vertical format became a format that slowly became popular. From looking at various vertical format videos from the past, examining the technological advances and other contexts that may also influence the format's formation, and also the way people captures moving images; the author attempts to provide an insight on how the vertical format videos became a common thing nowadays. Based on several literature reviews, the author also compares the vertical format and the horizontal format in hopes to provide insight on how these formats differ. The author also tries to predict how the future of the vertical format may influence cinematography on other media in the long run. The paper concludes by pointing out several ideas on how to respond to the vertical format itself.

Keywords: Vertical Videos, Music Video, Aspect Ratio, Cinematography

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The first time I was made aware of the existence of music videos that use vertical formats was when Coldplay announced their new music video for their song 'Amazing Day' (Image 1). The video was announced on their website on the 3rd of January, 2017; and then

on the 5th on youtube (Anchorman, 2017). The video introduced me to something new, on a new format which I use but never thought can be used commercially or popularly. This epiphany came to me simply because I never saw a music video embracing that format.



Image 1. Stills from Coldplay's Amazing Day Music Video.

After a quick look, I found out that there were also many music videos that embraced the vertical format, such as 'NAV' by Wanted You featuring Lil Uzi Vert, 'B.A.N.' by Saweetie, 'Chun-Li' by Nicki Minaj, and most recently, 'Without Me' by Halsey (Image 2). Some artists used to create vertical music videos as alternatives of their horizontal counterpart, but some started to create vertical music videos as complements of the horizontal counterpart. Highsnobiety.com stated that the release of the vertical music videos is often used to "sustain fan attention and maintain buzz" (Hall, 2018).



Image 2. Stills from other Vertical Music Videos 'NAV', 'B.A.N.', 'Chun-Li', 'Without Me'.

Roberta Pate, from Spotify, explains that nowadays music is enjoyed mostly with mobile devices, and the vertical videos are perfect as most mobile devices have vertical screens (Cirisano, 2019). Pate points out the connection between the number of mobile devices used to the rise of vertical music videos. Coldplay's 'Amazing Day' uses footage that was sent by fans all around the world for Coldplay (Image 1). They wanted to show their fans day and encourages their fans to take videos using their phones (Anchorman, 2016). Later, Coldplay selects and compiled the clips sent to create their 'Amazing Day' music video. The project that Coldplay made shows that many people are able to take vertical videos easily, and musicians (Coldplay) can utilize the vertical format as a format for their music videos.

Seeing this phenomenon prompts me to take a deeper look at this matter. After various literature reviews and studies, I will try to present my findings on this paper. This paper will try to recount the history of vertical videos while showing how the format started and evolved until today. This paper will also show how relevant vertical videos nowadays, especially for music videos. Last, the paper will also attempt to present some perspectives on how we can respond to the rise of vertical videos.

LITERATURE STUDIES: VERTICAL VIDEOS

Vertical videos are videos can be seen as a portrait video. The video is tall, different from traditional videos that are wide. The format is known to popularize by Snapchat, which prompts people to share videos directly using their phones (Peterson, 2018). But if we look further, the first known (or at least publicized) vertical video was a clip by Étienne-Jules Marey, titled 'Falling Cat' (1894). The film shows exactly what the title said, about a cat that was dropped and successfully landed on its four legs (Aleph, 2016). Though there were no in-depth notes on why Marey choose a vertical format, it seemed logical that he would use the vertical format to show something that would move in a vertical axis. The vertical format, however, wasn't widely used by filmmakers at the time. In 1930 there was a meeting in hopes of standardizing movie formats. The intention of the standardization was simply a commercial and economical drive (Sébire, 2014). With a standardized format, the production of films and projector, the size of screens for the movie theatre and television can be standardized, hence reducing unnecessary productions.

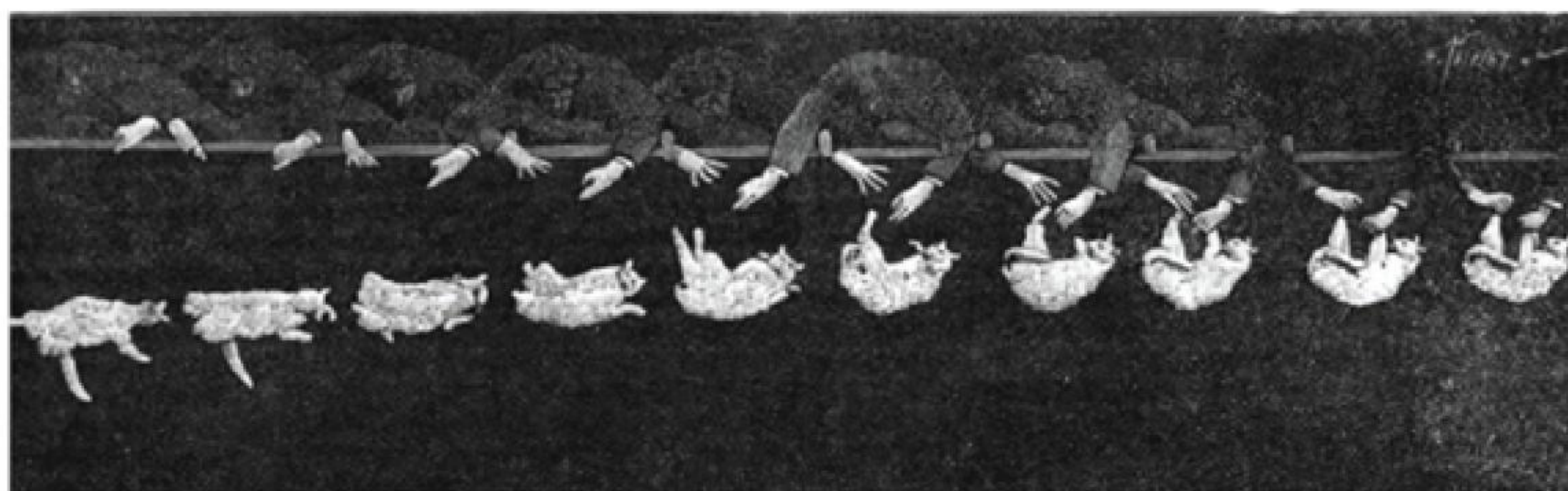


Image 3. Stills from Étienne-Jules Marey's 'Falling Cat'. Image from Faena.com

On 2012, before Snapchat became a well known social media platform, there was a PSA that went viral. The PSA was made by Glove and Boots to inform and educate (and perhaps ridicule) about the vertical format (Moriarty, 2017). At the time, Snapchat only has features to share 'snaps' or images to others. Later in 2012, the app introduced Snapchat Stories, a feature that enables people to share videos. The format that Snapchat uses was a format that was indigenous for the mobile phone device, the vertical format. The popularity of the format and the success of Snapchat encourages others to follow to adopt the vertical format. Instagram later created two new features, Instastory and also IGTV, which both are

video sharing features that mainly encourages the vertical format. ESPN also created SportsCenter, a platform targeted for younger viewers that shows shorter video stories using the vertical format as well (Peterson, 2018). Facebook adopted a 2:3 vertical video format in response to the rise of vertical format videos. Twitter launched Periscope, a live streaming video application initially only in vertical format.

Other than digital platforms, the vertical format is also made popularized by musicians, especially with their vertical music videos. As mentioned before, many musicians launched vertical music videos as additional content. Initially, most of the vertical videos were made after the official horizontal music video (Cirisano, 2019). The vertical version can be seen as a derivative, but more high-quality vertical music videos can be seen, such as Halsey's 'Without Me' that shows a different version of the horizontal and vertical music video (Image 4).

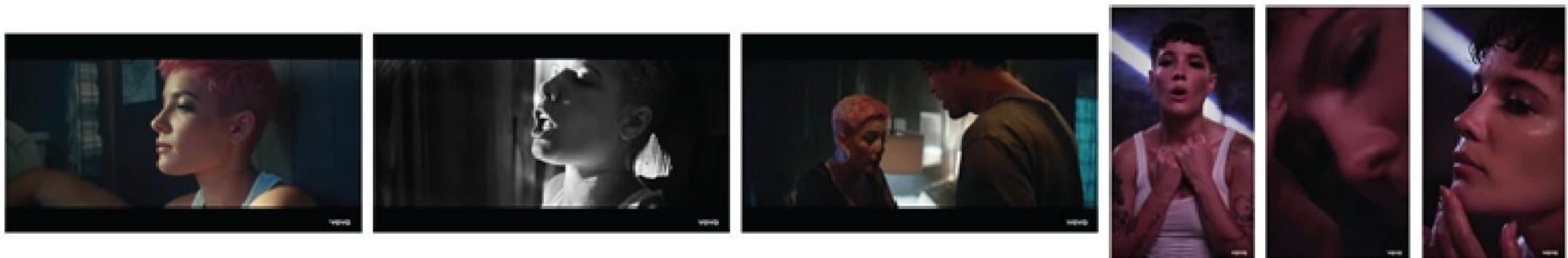


Image 4. Stills from Halsey's Horizontal Music Video and Her Vertical Music Video

Another monumental milestone for vertical videos advancement can be seen with the advent of Vertical Cinema, a vertical video film festival in 2013 in Austria (Pogue, 2018). The festival shows fourteen experimental films that were made in vertical format. The films on the festival can be seen as part of performing art, not a pure film, as it was combined with scenography for its screening ("About" 2013). A year after, The Vertical Film Festival (VFF) was also held in Australia (Sébire. 2014). The VFF was held biennially, and opened submissions from filmmakers, encouraging them to try the vertical format as their choice of format. Both festivals try to re-introduce the vertical format to movies, as both questions the relevance of movie format standardizations in today's age.

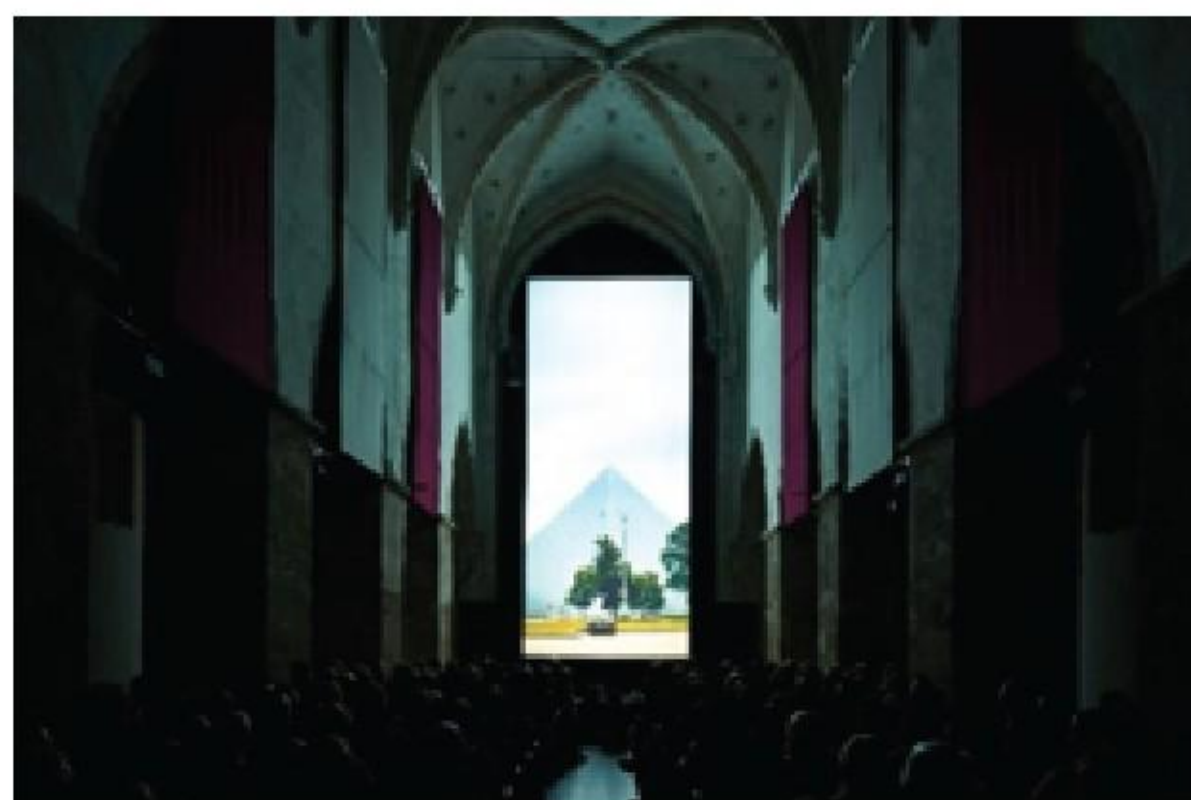


Image 5. Pyramid Flare by Johan Lurf. The image was taken by Marcus Gradwohl at the Vertical Cinema. Image from verticalcinema.org

The journey of the vertical format's usage is always filled with tension, especially when 'pitted up' against the horizontal format. The vertical format is seen as an idiocracy, and the horizontal is seen as the norm. Though the formats were conditioned as such by external factors, such as economic and also technological factors, the recent years started to show a different perspective on how the formats differ. The two formats are starting to co-exist, with the horizontal still being the higher echelon.

COMPARISONS OF VERTICAL & HORIZONTAL FORMATS

To discuss the differences between the vertical and horizontal format nowadays, we have to discuss the fundamental differences of the two, about the aspect ratios. Aspect ratios are proportions of how the image appears on the screen (Kirby, 2014; "Aspect Ratio" 2015). Aspect ratio numbering formats are usually the width of the image to the height of the film, resulting in numbers such as 1.33:1 (Academy Aperture), 1.85:1 (European Widescreen), or 2.77:1 (Cinerama). Most aspect ratios found are used for landscape or horizontal formats (Image 6), vertical formats weren't used or standardized before. Aspect ratio once was used to describe the films in which the movies are shot, but although the technology of shooting images no longer require films, the term aspect ratio is still used to refer the width to height ratio of the image (Nugent, 2015; Fandor, 2018).

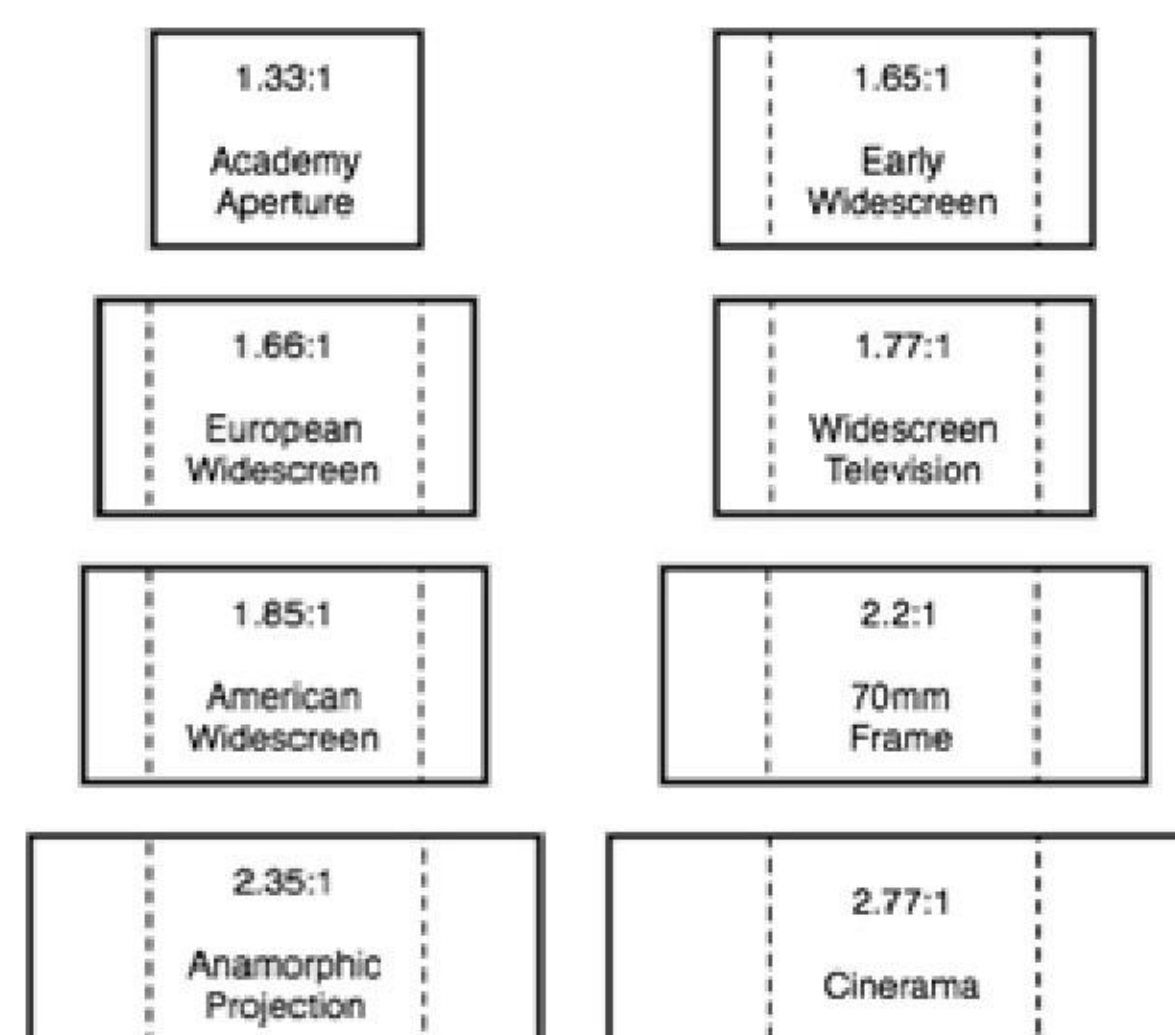


Image 6. Some Examples of Horizontal Aspect Ratios.
Image from filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu

As the rise of vertical videos started to grow in tandem with the advancement of mobile devices, vertical video aspect ratio started to appear. The aspect ratio of vertical video is often similar to the aspect ratio of the mobile screen devices, or sometimes it is 'masked' by the application or platform to follow a certain 'standardized' vertical aspect ratio (Moriarty, 2017). We can see the difference as the first numbers are smaller than the second number of the ratio, hence showing that the size of the image or frame has a smaller width than the height.

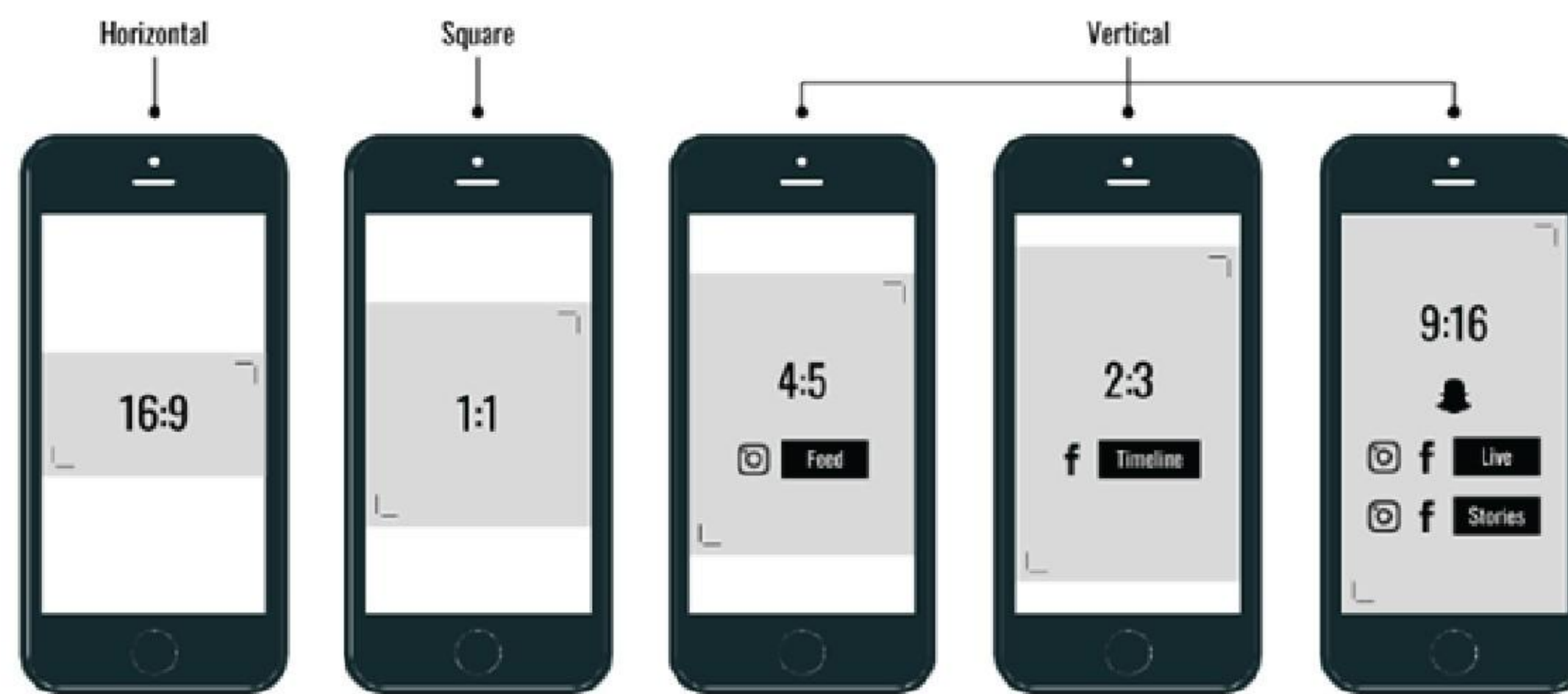


Image 7. Mobile Screen Aspect Ratios. Image from Therese Moriarty's post.

The horizontal format is traditionally used for films and movies. The 'widescreen' format or the 2.76:1 is used to show the landscape or setting of the image (Fandor, 2018). It is also used in many movies to show drama, tension or simply provide a cinematic look (Nugent, 2015). Some directors such as Andrea Arnold prefers 'box-like' aspect ratio such as the 1.33 to show a claustrophobic feel as the aspect ratio made the subjects within the frame feels trapped and has no room to breathe or move (Fandor, 2018). Though considered a basic and standard aspect ratio, the 1.37 (also known as the Academy ratio) nowadays is often used as an homage or to refer to 'early' periods of the film, before the wide-er aspect ratio are used in movies (Nugent, 2015). On the other hand, the vertical format is considered best to show subjects that involve people. The vertical format is best to show people as people are tall in shape, therefore using the vertical format can show more parts of the people. Therese Moriarty points out that many oil painters used vertical orientation to paint people, the vertical orientation is also known as 'portraits' for this reason (Moriarty, 2017).

As the vertical video is said to be 'reborn' from mobile devices, showing a mobile screen in a vertical format outshines the horizontal format. A music video from Harrison, titled 'How Can It Be' shows a chatting application, showing the interaction between the two participants using their mobile phones. This 'scene' seemed normal and creates the feeling that we are one of the subjects in that scene (particularly the girl as she is shown on the left side of the chatting application). A similar scene, however, looked 'different' and rather 'odd' on Katy Perry's 'Roar' lyric video. Perry's video shows a Perry texting on her group chat while others reply using texts and also emojis to further introduce the lyric of the song. This 'scene' may seem weird as the content of the chat were unnatural, but perhaps the main reason why the 'scene' felt off was simply that it was a horizontal format video. This prompts the viewer to rotate their phones to see the video in full screen, however, this doesn't simulate the same feeling as Harrison's video did, as Harrison used a format that was natural and indigenous to the device.



Image 8. Still from Katy Perry's 'Roar' Lyric Video and Harrison's 'How Can It Be'. Both Video Showcases the Mobile Device Screen on Different Formats.

The difference of the format also lies beyond the format, especially on how people treat the formats. Forbes said that we hold our phones 94% of the time, Ooyala's 2017 research shows that 60.3% of videos are seen from mobile devices, these researches indicate the tendency of consuming videos on mobile devices (D. Simone Kovacs, 2018). Aaron Shapiro, the CEO of Huge stated that human's lazy behavior (to rotate our phones) also encourages the creation of more vertical videos (Flynn, 2017). As long as the humans don't change or the technology doesn't shift beyond the vertical format video, it seemed that the popularity of the portrait format won't decrease. While the formats differ only in how they look, that doesn't mean the difference are only in the form of the formats; the way people perceive and interact with the format is also different. This shows that simple formal qualities of an image can determine how the image is seen.

DISCUSSIONS: THE VERTICAL FORMAT FOR MUSIC VIDEOS

As previously stated on how musicians use vertical for their music videos, most musicians created vertical music videos as a companion to their horizontal versions. They create this 'secondary' music video as another means to promote their songs, to create more content from the same source (music) or even to sustain fans' interest in their music. This made vertical music video seemed like it is treated solely as a promotional, not an artistic medium that has its own possibilities.

This is not to say that there aren't any musicians that try to experiment or innovate on the use of vertical formats for their music videos. One Korean boy band that tried to experiment on their music video is Big Bang with their song 'Last Dance'. To be fair, their music video isn't exactly 100% vertical format; they alter the orientations of the screen so that some scenes seemed like it is a normal horizontal oriented video, sometimes it was upside down, and sometimes it was vertical oriented (Image 9). Their take on this new

perspective of the music video is something fresh after most vertical videos seemed like it used a repetitive formulated approach (showing the artist singing and staring to the camera).

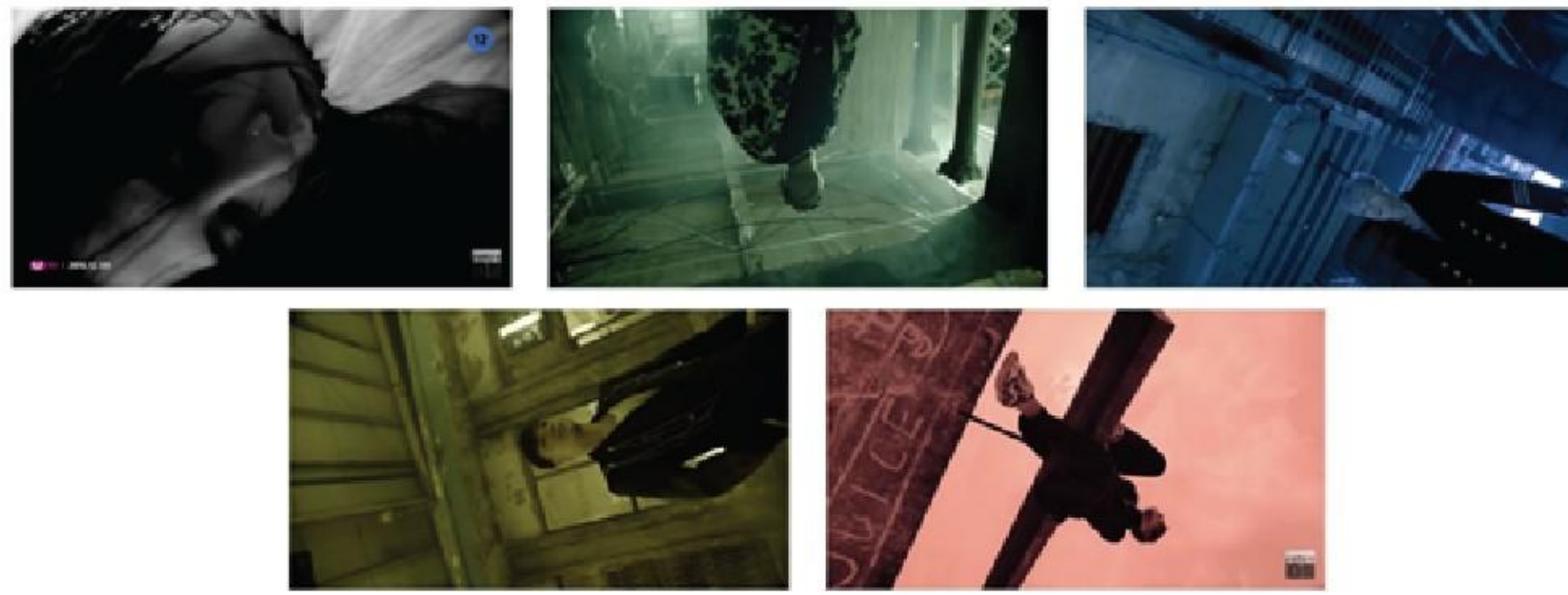


Image 9. Stills from Big Bang's 'Last Dance'

Music videos are in the end the musician's visualization of their song. The visual helps to convey things that can't be heard from the song itself. The vertical format surely does help musicians to find new ways to approach their listeners. May it be simply another additional promotional medium or a new artistic possibility, music videos are enriched by the advent of vertical formats. Similar to how movies seem to utilize different aspect ratios for different storytelling, music videos can possibly adopt the way movie use their aspect ratios and image orientation well.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF MUSIC VIDEOS

While many people argue that vertical videos will become a dominant format to see in mobile devices, I think those kinds of opinions are similar to when people say that print will be dead by the advent of computers. For me, the horizontal format will never die, even if the mainstream media will use vertical videos. Music videos, on the other hand, will see a rise in vertical formats, but that is not to say that there will be no musicians using the horizontal format either. The Harrisons became known for their music video for their 'fresh take' with vertical music videos when other musicians use horizontal formats. Coldplay capitalizes the people's proficiency in taking vertical video and ask them to contribute to their vertical music video. Big Bang, on the other hand, disorients the viewers by showing a music video that can't be categorized as a vertical or horizontal music video by its form. Some musicians also experiment on 360-degree music videos and AR for their music videos. Who knows what will be the next innovation on music videos.

Vertical music videos are a different form compared to their horizontal counterpart, but it can convey a different message and meaning, and in different situations, it can be something useful or something disruptive. In the end, designers or cinematographers must see possibilities that are provided by their surroundings to find 'the best' solution for what they need to do. The vertical format is another solution, not the only solution.

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