Out of Whack

The Aberrant Identity
of Tierra Whack

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Tierra Whack is a young rapper from Philadelphia. *Whack World,* her independently-released first album — or, as she prefers to describe it, "audiovisual project" or "visual and auditory project" — came out at the end of May 2018, when she was 22. *Whack World* is fifteen minutes long, and consists of fifteen separate songs, each of them lasting exactly a minute. Each song is accompanied by a music video, directed by Thibaut Duverneix. Short songs have become more common in hip hop over the past few years, especially among younger, independent rappers who, like Whack, post their music on Instagram, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, and other DIY sites. But few rappers have pushed brevity to the degree that Whack has. "What distinguishes Whack," Doreen St. Félix writes, "is how her concision avoids stasis, and transports us someplace new." Or as Briana Younger puts it, "where others stretch small ideas and repetition, thinning them out for easy absorption, Whack uses the time constraint to make her big ideas seem larger than the space they're allotted."

Whack World's fifteen videos were each posted individually on Instagram; indeed, their length is partly explained by the fact that the platform limits videos to no more than a minute each (St. Félix; Maher). The songs are also available by themselves, without the visuals, on streaming music services like Spotify and Apple Music. But the entire suite was posted as a single long-form video on YouTube and Vimeo; *Whack World* is clearly designed as an audiovisual whole. Although its fifteen sections are entirely distinct from one another, the album has a cumulative power when heard in sequence (Christgau), and all the more so when the songs are seen as well as heard (Breihan, "Tierra Whack").

Audiovisual interchange is at the heart of contemporary media production in the age of Web 2.0. We can no longer take for granted the existence of sounds and images in isolation, strictly separated from one another. Each seems to attract the other; they accrete together. Moving images require a soundtrack; sonic sequences cry out for visualization. Images and sounds are both transcribed and edited, after all, on the same computing devices, and rendered through the same underlying binary code. We encounter the online world in audiovisual streams (and in tactile and proprioceptive streams as well, at least to some extent, thanks to the development of haptic interfaces on phones, tablets, game controllers, and other devices). Tierra Whack herself, like most musicians, has of course often released songs without video accompaniment. Nonetheless, she says in an interview that "I have to have

some type of visual in my head to finish a song. I can't finish a song if I can't see anything" (Horn).

Indeed, media reception today, no less than media production, crucially involves audiovisual feedback and sensory crossings. The film theorist Vivian Sobchack insists upon the importance of "synaesthesia ("cross-modal transfer among our senses") and coenaesthesia ("the potential and perception of one's whole sensorial being") not just when we watch movies, but in our perceptual experience generally (*Carnal Thoughts*). We feel across different bodily systems, and ultimately with our entire bodies, even when we are overtly focused upon just a single sensory channel. We often think of digital or virtual media as dispersed and disembodied, as many media theorists (including Sobchack herself) have tended to argue. But this formulation ignores (or at least massively understates) the way that such media, with their simultaneous immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin), pull us in two

directions at once: they both enthrall us and distract us. In our current digital environment, which claims not to show us representations so much as to provide us with actual experiences, multisensory crossings are intensified further than was ever the case before.

How does this work for music videos in particular? Cutting-edge digital technologies are probably deployed for military and surveillance purposes first of all, well before they show up anywhere else. On the Internet, these new, computationally intensive technologies, with their "data-gathering and passive sensing capacities," are used by corporations and government agencies in order to "grasp the 'operational present' of sensibility at time frames from which conscious activity is excluded" (Hansen, *Feed Forward*). Such media are too fast for us; they register changes beneath the threshold of apprehension.

This means that they work without our awareness, let alone our permission, and that they are able to influence our desires and feelings prior to our becoming aware of them (if we ever do). To the extent that such technologies eventually do leak out into publicly available forms of cultural expression and entertainment, they are found above all in computer games and in pornography. Music videos tend to lag behind these other genres when it comes to technological innovations; but videos are still usually ahead of movies and television. This is the case both for economic reasons (it is a lot cheaper to use new technologies in a three- or four-minute video than in a feature-length blockbuster

or an extended TV series) and for formal ones (music videos are not constrained by the demands for continuity that come up in extended narratives, so they are freer to experiment, and to go off in different directions even at the risk of incoherence).

Music videos are also difficult to account for, because they originate as adjuncts to previously existing sound recordings. The rock critic Robert Christgau begins his review of *Whack World* by playfully promulgating the basic Commandments of Orthodox Rock Criticism, one of which is: "Thou shalt not watch the video." Rather, Christgau says, the rock critic must strictly "stick to music music music." Christgau goes on to make some sharp observations about Whack's vocals and instrumentals. He notes the musical "fragments gain emotional weight as they accrue," and adds that "the most emotional moment of all is the 15 seconds of wordless, keyboard-brushed cymbal ticks that transition out of Whack's final line: 'I know that I am worth mo-o-o-ore'." But once he has gone through all this, he concedes that the video too is essential, and even that it might well give us a "reason for living… and we all need those these days" (Christgau).

Despite Christgau's disclaimers, his insights are only amplified when we attend to the images of *Whack World* as well as the sounds. The "emotional moment" at the end of the album registers visually as well as aurally. Whack is nearly motionless for all of the minute-long video for "Waze," the final song on *Whack World*. She sits almost en-

tirely still, aside from moving her lips to the words of the song ("I was lost 'til I found my way"). She wears a multicolored shirt/dress; her hair is tied back in a straightened ponytail. She is seated on a chair by a table in a small and mostly featureless room. A teacup and teapot are on the table in front of her, but she ignores them. Thick wads of cotton, looking a bit like solidified smoke, tumble slowly out of the window of a house crudely depicted on the back wall. It's a picture of the house that we just saw in three dimensions in "Doctor Seuss," the song and video just previous.

"Waze" alternates between long shots of the entire room, and somewhat closer shots showing only the left half of the room, with Whack at the table. As the song continues, the cotton keeps oozing out from the picture on the wall, until it has almost entirely filled the room. And thus we reach the song's culminating moment. Whack goes silent, but the cotton still undulates towards her. The cymbals continue to play, punctuated by an occasional "brush" from the keyboards. A few seconds later, synchronized to the next keyboard stroke, the video cuts to a freeze frame of the longer shot. Cotton fills the center of the frame, obliterating everything except for the face and torso of Whack herself. As the music continues, the credits roll over this freeze frame. When the music ceases, the credits continue to run in silence; the freeze frame is held for another thirty seconds or so.

Such lingering muddies the question of just exactly when the album/video actually ends. In this way, the image track responds to the sound track—but without illustrating the lyrics in any straightforward or literal way, and also without directly mimicking the formal structure of the music. The sounds and the images respond to one another, but they still both go along their separate paths. And they both end in a sort of suspension or hesitation. The music continues after the vocals have cut off; and the freeze frame is held after the music ceases. Whack announces her self-recovery, and her refusal to settle for less than she wants, needs, or deserves; but there is no guarantee as to what will happen to her next. Here, as throughout *Whack World*, sounds and images relay each other —or resonate with each other, to use a sonic metaphor—providing emotional punctuation and amplification.

What can we make of such audiovisual crossings? The first academic book on music videos, E. Ann Kaplan's *Rocking Around the Clock*

(1987), used the tools of feminist film theory in order to parse the unusual features of what was then a new medium. But the second book on the subject, Andrew Goodwin's *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* (1992), instead approached music videos from the perspective of pop music studies, and of Birmingham School cultural studies more generally. Goodwin sharply criticizes Kaplan; he argues that she and other film theorists of the time misunderstand music videos, due to their unfamiliarity with pop music conventions, and even more because of the "visual bias of [their] theories," which "necessarily neglect the analysis of sound" (Goodwin).

Recent film theory has started to pay more attention to music and sound, as well as to "cross-modal transfers" of the sort discussed by Sobchack. But film analysis still starts with the visual register. In the movies, we usually take it for granted that the images come first. However, we now realize that this does not mean that the visual dimension is somehow autonomous or self-sufficient. Michel Chion, the great pioneer of theorizing sound in cinema, insists on the added value that sound provides to moving images:

> By added value I mean the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression "naturally" comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression

that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image. (*Audio-Vision*)

Chion's argument here is not far from the logic of deconstruction. Chion's added value may be compared to what Jacques Derrida calls the supplement. Derrida famously insists that the seeming plenitude and self-presence of the human voice, which we imagine to be primary and autonomous, is always already conditioned and compromised by—and indeed cannot exist without—the supposedly secondary activity of writing (*Of Grammatology*). Chion makes a similar argument in inverted form. He shows us that the seeming plenitude and presence of the cinematic image is an illusion. Sound in the movies is commonly dismissed as secondary and inessential (it "merely duplicates" a pre-given meaning); and yet, sound is necessary in order to produce (or "bring about") the very impression that cinematic images mean on their own and stand by themselves. This was already the case even in the era of so-called silent film, which nearly always relied on live musical accompaniment for its full emotional effect. The arrival of the "talkies" only expanded the range of ways in which sound was able to add value to what was seen. In particular, Chion notes that cinematic sound both temporalizes images that otherwise might appear relatively static, and gives linear definition to "rapid visual movement" that otherwise might seem blurry and indistinct.

Chion, writing in 1990, only discusses music videos briefly. But he implicitly suggests that they, too, operate according to the logic of added value—only with yet another inversion. In music videos, contrary to the movies, sound comes first. Videos are made to accompany, to illustrate, and to advertise previously-existing songs. Images are matched to music that has already been recorded, music that seems "sufficient to itself."

Nonetheless—or precisely because they are ostensibly secondary and inessential—these visuals provide added value, often in the form of what Chion calls "a joyous rhetoric of images." The video track spatializes the flow of the music, giving it body and location. This includes (but is not limited to) presenting the persona of the singer and the other musicians, interpreting the lyrics visually and narratively, and matching the music with dance.

In all these instances, the images are supplemental: they work to produce meanings and feelings that we then attribute to the music in and of itself. This added value was already crucial in the very first decade of music videos, the 1980s. Just think of the two preeminent musical artists of that decade, Madonna and Michael Jackson. Neither of their careers could be imagined without the music videos that put their performing bodies on display. The meaning of Madonna's songs is crystallized in her ever-changing costumes and personas; the magic of Jackson's rhythmic and melodic inventions is expressed in his dancing

no less than in his voice and in the instrumental backing. Such performers absolutely need to be seen as well as heard. We might say that the video image is the heretical supplement that haunts Christgau's Church of Stick-to-music Orthodox Rock Criticism.

Of course, music videos themselves have changed in major ways — formally, technologically, and contextually — in the years since MTV started broadcasting them in 1981. When Kaplan, Goodwin, and Chion were writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, music videos were only available on cable television channels. They were designed by videomakers, and understood by critics and viewers alike, to be part of what Raymond Williams famously calls televisual flow: "a sequence or set of alternative sequences" of programming, continuously available without beginning or end (*Television*). Flow undermines any notion of discrete media events, each accessible on its own.

Today, in contrast, the discrete events have taken over. While streaming platforms like YouTube still propose indefinitely extendible autoplay sequences, they also offer us certain affordances that old-style

television programming did not. We can watch any particular video on demand, rather than having to wait for it to come up in the course of the programming. We can play videos over and over, pause them when we like, and mix and match them at will. YouTube has arguably led to a second "golden age" of music videos, reversing their decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Unterberger). It's not only that we don't need MTV to watch music videos anymore, but also that, as Tom Breihan puts it, "music videos are way more culturally relevant than anything that MTV actually does air" (Breihan, "Straight to Video"). Videos that have a strong cultural impact—for instance, Rihanna's "Bitch Better Have My Money" (Rihanna and Megaforce, 2015) and Childish Gambino's "This Is America" (Hiro Mirai, 2018)—do so almost entirely online, without ever appearing on broadcast or cable televison.

Music videos are also produced in very different ways today than they were in the 1980s and 1990s, and are therefore able to present us with new and different sorts of moving images. The digital tools that we take for granted now were just starting to be developed back then. Many of the most interesting videos from the past decade or so could not possibly have been made prior to 2000. It is not just that the necessary technology was lacking, but also that— in the absence of the requisite digital tools—nobody could even have imagined certain looks and appearances. Think of Rihanna's "Disturbia" (Anthony Mandler, 2008), with its superimposed images, FKA twigs' "Papi Pacify" (FKA

twigs & Tom Beard, 2013) with its GIF-like looping, or Grace Jones' "Corporate Cannibal" (Nick Hooker, 2008), with its dramatic morphing effects (Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos*; Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*). Marshall McLuhan points out that every new media regime works to "alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*). And Stanley Cavell observes that the potentialities of a new medium cannot be known in advance merely "by thinking about them," but have to be invented in actual acts of creation: "only the art itself can discover its possibilities" (*The World Viewed*). Today, digital production and online digital streaming articulate images and sounds in new, previously unanticipated ways. Radical technologies shatter old unities, and give birth to new ones.

Whack World exemplifies many of these changes. It gives us some idea both of how disparate the contemporary mediascape is, and also of how these disparate parts can hang together, without forming anything like a unified whole in the old sense. Whack says in an interview that, in her original conception for *Whack World*, she wanted to use "a crane machine, a claw machine," so that she would be "picked up from the actual claw and dropped into each set" (DeVille). This turned out to be too expensive to do. But the idea remains relevant for the completed video sequence, because it suggests how separate the fifteen songs/videos are from one another. In their succession, they form a composite in which the discrete events, despite having a particular order, do

not coalesce into a flow in Williams' sense of the term. Sometimes we get tenuous visual transitions from one song to the next. For instance, "Hookers" is set in front of a trailer; Whack walks into the trailer at the end of the song. The camera follows her; as the next song, "Hungry Hippos," begins, the image becomes blurry and unfocused. When it sharpens again a few seconds later, we naturally assume that we are inside the trailer. At other times, the shifts are more abrupt. An arbitrary wipe marks the transition from "Hungry Hippos" to the following video, "Pet Cemetery." Even when the transitions suggest some sort of continuity, the sixty-second time limit for each individual song makes it impossible to build up anything like an overall, continuously developing mood. Rather, this structure almost requires radical changes of direction from one track to the next.

The fifteen sections of *Whack World* differ wildly from one another, both musically and visually. No two of them are alike. Each one offers us a distinct tableau, creating a striking mini-environment for the expression of one of Whack's very particular moods. Some of the songs are entirely closed and self-contained. Others are suspended and open: they seem to stop in the middle, with no final cadence, and no filling out of the verse-chorus structure. But even when the latter is the case, I always get the sense that any further expansion or repetition would be superfluous. The song has said what it has to say, so there is no real reason to go on. As for the images, each of the songs is set in a single

room, with its own lighting and its own props. Most of these sets are lurid and cartoonish, with distinctive color schemes. And in each of them, Whack has a different appearance: she wears different clothes, sports different hairstyles, and makes different gestures and facial expressions.

And so, even if the maximum song length is initially determined by platform constraints, this brevity is positively expressive in its own right. Whack's presentations of her various moods last no longer than the moods themselves do. As St. Félix puts it,

> Whack uses her brief songs to riff on those swooning states that young women enter intensely and fleetingly—infatuation, frustration, mania, grief, that sudden and intoxicating burst of self-confidence that mercilessly dissipates into self-loathing.

As *Whack World* passes through its many short-lived moods, and its many modes of expression, it does for contemporary hip hop something like what, in the pre-Internet early 1980s, the Minutemen did for rock, in such albums as *What Makes A Man Start Fires?* and *Double Nickels on the Dime*. With the brutal concision of their songs, the Minutemen worked both to cut the crap (this is their version of punk's well-known disdain for long, self-indulgent guitar solos), and to expand the boundaries of musical and emotional expression (thanks to their odd rhythms and instrumental clashes). Similarly, *Whack World* multiplies the music's styles—with sounds that vary from trap to mumblecore to mournful

R&B to slow organ chord progressions to carnivalesque circus riffs to what Christgau aptly describes as a "hooky hillbilly stomp,"—while at the same time reducing each particular instance to its expressive core.

Each song on *Whack World* thus suggests both a different mood and a different musical sub-genre. Some tracks are playful and silly; others are painful; still others are bitter or grudgingly resigned; and some are upbeat, even triumphant. Whack both sings and raps, and her vocals are often heavily processed. In "Fuck Off," singing in an exaggerated country twang, Whack exults that she feels "ten feet tall" as she tells off an obnoxious ex: "I hope your ass breaks out in a rash/You remind me of my deadbeat dad." In "Sore Loser," feeling lonely and lost after another breakup, she describes herself as "shit dead like a corpse, corpse, corpse"; she lies motionless in an open casket, rapping in a near monotone over swirling, dissonant bass tones and a vicious drum riff, as the camera slowly tracks from her feet to her head, and then at the end back down to her feet, all in a single take.

In an entirely different way, "Silly Sam" is a playfully lilting yet also sarcastic ditty about some guy entirely absorbed in literal and metaphorical games. I guess that means he's a "player." Whack looks bored at the start of the song, but soon enough she is smirking right at the camera. In "Pretty Ugly," her intonation takes on a harsh edge as she boasts about her prowess as a rapper, and threatens to obliterate her rivals, all the while staring at the camera through an array of distorting

lenses. In "Doctor Seuss," she is trapped in a toy house far too small to contain her, in a scenario reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*; her voice is pitch shifted, so that it descends, bar by bar, from a cartoonish treble all the way down to a slurred, barely intelligible bass, ending with the suggestion to "think less about living and more about dying."

In contrast, "Fruit Salad," with Whack's continual declarations that "I eat all my vegetables" and "lower my cholesterol," takes place in a room scattered with gym equipment. The back wall is a solid yellow. Whack wears a heavily padded gym outfit, with a bright yellow top that matches the wall. She moves through a series of exercises: riding a stationary bike, lifting a medicine ball, and so on. Her trainer, a white man with a ridiculous fake moustache, oscillates on some sort of exercise machine on the right side of the frame. He is identified by the lyrics as Luigi from *Super Mario*, and his green shirt adds another layer of color clash. "Fruit Salad" has an internally discordant look, and it is hard to know how seriously we should take Whack's proclamation of

a health gospel; but its particular sensibility distinguishes it from any other sequence in *Whack World*.

All fifteen sections of *Whack World* deserve—and indeed stand up to—this sort of close and extended scrutiny. But as I repeatedly watch and listen to the video, I also find myself tripping out on particular, momentary details. In "Silly Sam," there's a moment when Whack turns towards the camera and smirks, while she is playing patty cake with somebody we cannot see, except for his hands sticking out from the wall (9:53). In "Pet Cemetery," she mimes being pulled forward by a dog on a leash, as she laments how "they took my dog away" (7:28). In "Fuck Off," she is wearing black-and-white-checked bib overalls; she takes a pair of scissors out of a bib pocket, cuts the cords of a bunch of helium-filled red balloons, and then—once the balloons are all gone—carefully puts the scissors back into her little pocket (8:57). Carol Vernallis writes of "peak experiences," or moments of "bliss," that overtake her at particular points in particular music videos, when, in conjunction with the images, "the song foregrounds its own affordances, its own powers of levitation and drive." I wonder if my responses to these particular moments in *Whack World* is something like this, even if in my case they arise out of disjunction and absurdity.

Whack World overwhelms us with its kaleidoscopic variety of ever-shifting feelings. Indeed, despite their short length, Whack's individual songs often go off in surprising, contradictory directions. The

lyrics and visuals alike are filled with offhand remarks and seeming non sequiturs. Heavy emotional states are mixed with silly jokes and everyday observations. "Cable Guy," which uses the boredom of repeated channel surfing as a metaphor for rejection and emotional disconnection, also turns network call signs into ridiculous acronyms: "ABC (All Boys Cry); MTV (Men Touch Vaginas); BET (Bitches Eat Tacos)." The following song, "Four Wings," is mostly about Whack's love for "salt, pepper, ketchup, and hot sauce" on her fries; but it also touches on mourning for a friend who died, and gives us the heartfelt advice that, "if you love somebody I promise that you should tell 'em."

In interviews, Whack diagnoses herself as "being ADHD and getting easily bored" (DeVille). She says that "my moods are like a roller coaster… It's hard for me to just feel one way all the time" (Horn). And she insists that, when listening to other people's music, "the first 30 seconds" of a song are enough for her to tell "if I like it or not" (Horn). *Whack World* fully embraces this condition; it is at once skittish and supersaturated. In "Sore Loser," Whack rapidly moves from dumping a boyfriend because he bores her to desperately telling another prospective suitor, "free sample you can have me." In "Black Nails," the album's very first song, she resolves to "just be myself… listen to myself." In the accompanying video, however, we do not get to see Whack's face at all; it is covered by a hood adorned with a cartoon portrait. Whack enacts her lines instead with hand movements, and with her brightly painted
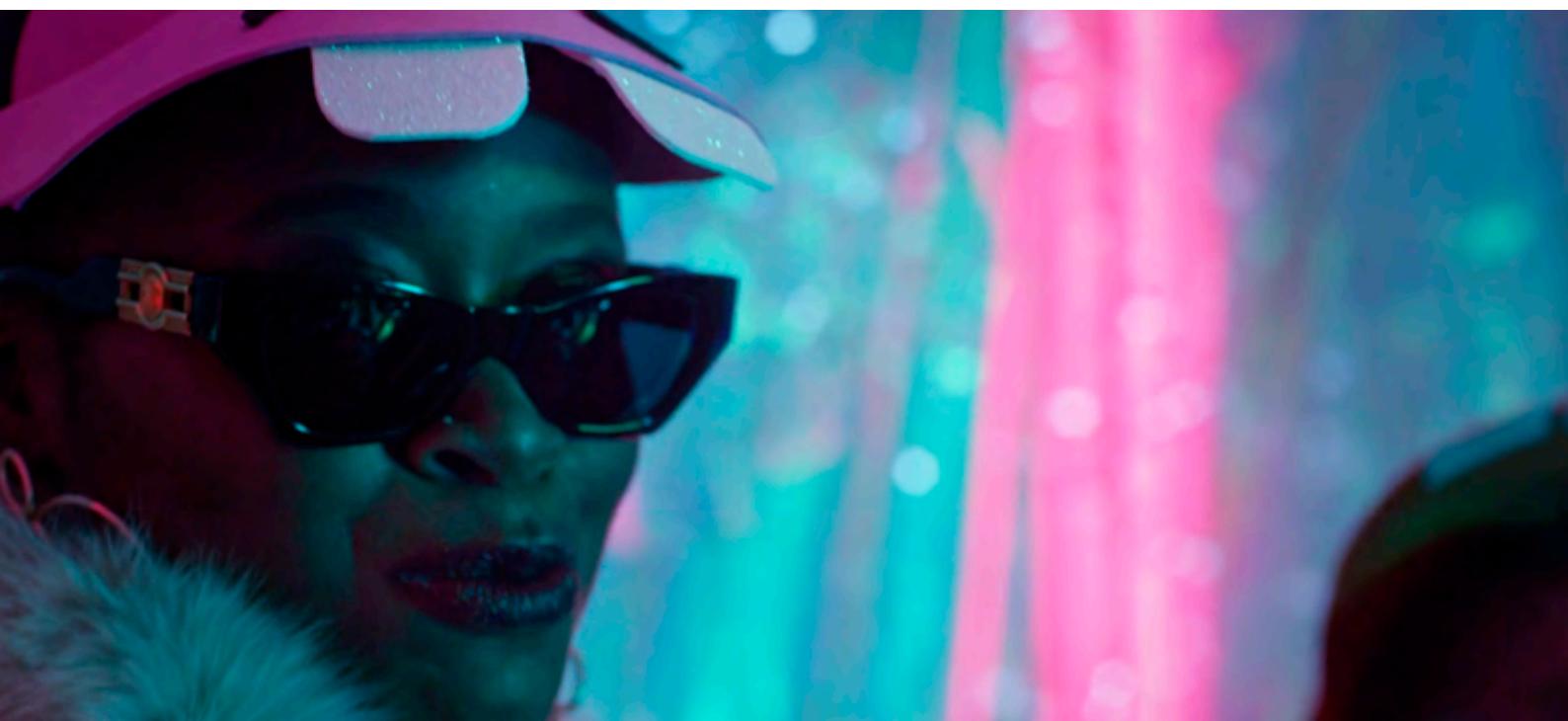
and adorned fingernails. The line "listen to myself" is illustrated by a hand held to the side of the head, thumb and pinky outstretched, in the conventional gesture for talking on the phone. For Tierra Whack, listening to herself apparently involves distance and mediation. Indeed, there seems to be a change of direction, and a different message, in every line of the song. "Myself" is not necessarily a stable entity.

This oblique playfulness continues through all the fifteen minutes of *Whack World*. As Briana Younger rightly says, the album, with all its humor and imagination, creates "an opportunity for Whack to celebrate herself." But I want to add that, by the very act of being herself, without limit or reserve, Tierra Whack also gives voice to something that is more than—or other than—personal. For she contains multitudes. Taken cumulatively, her songs and videos express the perpetually-shifting state of "infinite distraction" (Pettman) in which we all find ourselves in the world of social media and Web 2.0. Whack doesn't lament this condition, and she doesn't offer a cure for it. But in the act of claiming

26

distraction for herself, she does transfigure it. With its manic intensity, and its unexpected twists and turns, *Whack World* holds out the prospect of something that media theorist Dominic Pettman calls for: an "enabling form of distraction," one that might "open up the range of encounters" beyond our boringly habitual ones. The aim is not to return to older forms of rapt attention that were aligned with older media regimes, but rather "to rethink distraction as a potential ally" in our hypertrophied present (Pettman). Whack's short, ever-shifting attention span becomes the key to another experience of time. Non-linear disturbances rupture the feedback cycle between repletion and boredom.

The video for "Hungry Hippo" (a title invoking a popular children's game) presents pearls and other jewels laid out on a nude body like sushi, and eaten by partygoers with chopsticks. Against a garish blue and pink background, Whack wears furs, sunglasses, thick lipstick, and a silly party hat; she gives us a sophisticated glance, with just the trace of a smile, as she proudly intones: "He likes my diamonds and my pearls; I said, thank you I designed it."

This claim to authorship clearly applies to *Whack World* as a whole. We know that Tierra Whack designed it, even if we do not quite know who she really is — and even if she does not quite know who she is either. Indeed, the more sides of herself she puts on display, the more uncertain her identity becomes; she reminds us that she is "not your average girl."

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