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MAGAZINE - CULTURE

# How Björk Became an MTV Star and Changed Visual Culture Forever

On the 25th anniversary of the groundbreaking album 'Post,' directors Michel Gondry and Stéphane Sednaoui and others reflect on its influential music videos.



PHOTO: COPYRIGHT STEPHANE SEDNAOUI

*By Raymond Ang*

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By the time Björk shrieked the last “Wow! Bam!” it was clear “It’s Oh So Quiet” was an instant classic. The music video for the 1995 track, directed by a pre-*Being John Malkovich* Spike Jonze, would become one of the era’s most influential clips.

*Post*, the album that featured the top 10 single “It’s Oh So Quiet,” was bursting with more era-defining visual daring. There was Björk bombing a museum in “Army of Me,” making out with a watermelon in “Possibly Maybe,” haunting a Georges Méliès–esque black-and-

white film in “Isobel,” lying in mountainous terrain as a projection of her untamed spirit plays across her face in “Hyperballad” and fully animated as a Betty Boop for the ’90s in the subversive “I Miss You.”

Working with maverick young filmmakers and artists like Michel Gondry, Stéphane Sednaoui, Hussein Chalayan and Jonze, Björk, who was 29 years old when the album was released, brought *Post* to fruition with a six-music-video run that helped expand the way people saw the medium. It transformed her life and career and those of her collaborators.



An outtake by Stéphane Sednaoui from the cover shoot for *Post*.

PHOTO: COPYRIGHT STEPHANE SEDNAOUI

This month marks the 25th anniversary of the release of *Post*. Björk’s *Post* collaborators have gone on to define visual culture in their own ways. Gondry won the Academy Award for best original screenplay for his 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Chalayan was awarded an MBE by Queen Elizabeth II in 2006. Sednaoui has successfully transitioned to photojournalism and fine art. Erik Wiese, the animation director of “I Miss You,” worked on *SpongeBob SquarePants* and was co-creator of *The Mighty B!* And Spike Jonze is the Academy Award–winning filmmaker behind films like 2013’s *Her*.

“She taught me not to look too much to the past,” Gondry says. “She told me that if you look too much in the past, and reject the present and the future, you can become bitter

and miss out on what's there and what's now and how to write the future.”

Launched in 1981, MTV in its second decade saw artists and filmmakers stretching the boundaries of the medium, from Mark Romanek's \$7 million video for Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson's "Scream" to the Prodigy's controversial Jonas Åkerlund-directed video for "Smack My Bitch Up."

"There was the period [in the '80s] when MTV was absolutely brand-new—it was just so fascinating to see music on television. But by the '90s, I think people were really stretching creatively," says Matt Pinfield, host of the network's popular alternative music show *120 Minutes* and manager of music programming at MTV during this era.

Neither a Lilith Fair girl-with-guitar or a *VH1 Divas Live* songstress, Björk (who did not return requests for comment) was one of the unlikeliest stars of MTV's second decade. But with *Post*, she found herself in heavy rotation beside acts like R&B trio TLC, rockers Red Hot Chili Peppers and pop diva Mariah Carey.

By the mid-'90s, Gondry, Jonze and Sednaoui had already established themselves as three of the top music video directors at the time. After a successful collaboration with Gondry and Sednaoui on her first solo album, *Debut*, Björk worked with them again on *Post*, inviting Jonze as well, for the first time.

"The first time we met, she was in Paris to do the cover of *Debut* with [Jean-Baptiste] Mondino and we met in a restaurant," Gondry says. "I remember we started just talking about our influences, what we liked, where we grew up. It was a constant exchange of ideas. And then my job was to take all these ideas and create a story."

"It's Oh So Quiet," a cover of a 1950s big band tune popularized by Betty Hutton of *Annie Get Your Gun* fame, was *Post*'s unlikely hit. But thanks to Spike Jonze's *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*-inspired video, featuring the Icelandic singer singing, dancing and *shushing* her way through a humdrum street seemingly possessed by the ghost of Bob Fosse, it became Björk's MTV breakthrough.

"She came in as my guest when the video for 'It's Oh So Quiet' came out," Pinfield says. "You know, there's 10 of us in the programming meetings.... We would sit and watch anywhere between 30 and 40 videos a week that people would submit on a Monday....

["It's Oh So Quiet"] really knocked everybody off their feet, man.... For years, you saw people kind of mimic that video."

Shot in one day, the video was famous for its tip to MGM Technicolor musicals and its clever use of production design, featuring dancing pillars, an animated mailbox and a muffler man.

"When we were doing this in '95, we had just been through Rodney King riots and the [Northridge] earthquake and epic fires and floods," says Dea Jensen, set decorator for the video. "And the town was emptying out.... And the AIDS crisis was the epidemic, if not pandemic, in the background at that point."

Jensen, a frequent collaborator of Jonze at the time, says the director, who declined to be interviewed for this story, always aimed to push the envelope. "And music videos, even though the budgets were probably better back then than they are now, there wasn't that much money to do what we were trying to do," he says.

Teri Whitaker, production designer for "It's Oh So Quiet," says that frugality was the impetus for the video's most memorable moments. "The art department was probably the lowest on the totem pole of money being spent," Whitaker says. "But that's how we came up with ideas like the muffler man and the pillars.... We were trying to think of things that were inexpensive. [For the muffler man, we realized] you can buy vents and things at the hardware store and dress it up."

For the second single, "Isobel," Björk and Gondry made the second music video in what would become a trilogy (with 1993's "Human Behaviour" and 1997's "Bachelorette"). Featuring surreal, black-and-white images, the "Isobel" video continued the tale of a feral girl discovering urban culture. Gondry has said that watching this video at [a screening at the Electric Cinema](#) in London inspired him to take the leap to feature films.

"For the first time, I saw my work screened on the big screen," he says. "I saw the impact of [the work] on people.... I never thought that I would have the capacity to do feature films. And even now, I would say—even if it's a bad movie—I'm always trying to revisit that experience again."

On the sensual and sorrowful "Possibly Maybe," Björk laments and celebrates a failed relationship. "I suck my tongue in remembrance of you," she sings. Björk wrote the song

about the end of her romantic relationship with Sednaoui, who also shot the album's cover, and when it came time to film a music video, she recruited him to direct it.



An unpublished image by Stéphane Sednaoui from a holiday trip in California, August 1994.

PHOTO: COPYRIGHT STEPHANE SEDNAOUI

“The desire to honor our memories as poetically as possible was mutual and made us feel lucky,” Sednaoui says. “Her song and my video were a way of saying things to each other that we couldn’t say otherwise.”

The fashion Björk wore at the time was also influential. During the album’s cover shoot, Björk chose to wear Cypriot-British designer Hussein Chalayan’s Airmail jacket. Chalayan’s Airmail collection evolved from his graduation collection at Central Saint Martins in 1993. “The stylist Judy Blame picked up on my collection and said to me, ‘You

know what, you have to meet Björk, she would love this stuff’... I was only 23, 24, and he took me to Björk’s house in Maida Vale on Warwick Avenue. And from then on, it just felt very organic and I started to make clothes for her, for some of her gigs and her performances.”

The mid-’90s would prove to be Björk’s last stab at the pop game. After the commercial highs of *Post*, she would dig deeper into her increasingly avant-garde interests and, in the years to come, thrill and challenge her audience with efforts like an experimental vocals-only album, a multimedia project released with a series of apps and a “utopian flute experiment.”

“All the modern things, like cars and such, have always existed,” Björk sang in “Modern Things,” from *Post*. “They’ve just been waiting in a mountain for the right moment.”

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