



Watching Mark Romanek's music videos evokes the free-floating sensation of stumbling into someone else's dream. Or nightmare, as in the case of the director's disturbing clip for Nine Inch Nails' hit "Closer," from the band's 1994 album, *The Downward Spiral*.

Shooting with a 1920s silent movie camera, Romanek prods your senses with a sepia-toned parade of phantasmagoric images. Writting eels and scowling businessmen haunt an abandoned laboratory littered with skulls, empty beakers and industrial detritus. Beetles struggle in sawdust, and a spot-lit rhesus monkey grimaces from the camera's unblinking eye like some simian refugee from one of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin's fetishistic, post-mortem tableaux. Holding court within this carnival of the Id, Trent Reznor confesses that he "wants to fuck you like an animal."

Moodily as hell, this NIN video delirium gorges itself on art-historical references, ranging from Francis Bacon's lush paintings of the body as raw meat to Man Ray's 1923 surrealist metronome, "The Object To Be Destroyed." In this piece and his earlier videos, if isn't unusual to find Romanek working as a visual sampler, appropriating images as a point of departure.

"It's sort of like an ion collider," says Romanek, 40, during a phone interview while working on a video for Macy Gray's single, "I Try." "I take the song, and I take an aesthetic, and then, I smash them together. If you do it right, and you pick the right particles, then you get a really great reaction. It's sort of this equation, I hope. It's like the music plus this hermetic universe equals this new thing."

You no longer have to suffer through MTV's deluge of Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync videos to catch a glimpse of Romanek's striking imagery. The filmmaker's image garden of "new things" is blossoming on the pages of his new book, *Mark Romanek: Music Video Stills*, published by New

Mexico's Tondo Books.

This compilation of video stills from Romanek's greatest hits unfolds like a cross between an MTV centrifuge of pop-cultural moments and an underground movie in print, with cameo appearances by Madonna ("Bedtime Story" and "Rain"), David Bowie ("Jump, They Say" and "Black Tie, White Noise"), R.E.M. ("Strange Currencies"), and En Vogue ("Free Your Mind"). The book's mid-career retrospective also includes sightings of Sonic Youth ("Little Trouble Girl"), Beck ("Devil's Haircut"), and even Janet Jackson with her big brother, the king of pop himself ("Scream"), as the inhabitants of Romanek's dream factory.

"Music video doesn't have to be a pejorative," Romanek says. "It's like the last bastion of this place where there's this enormous, cinematic poetry, creative freedom, and technical innovation."

"If you look at work by people like Jonathan Glazer, or Chris Cunningham, or Matt Mahurin—I get nervous naming names because I'll leave people out—[music video] is some of the most exciting short filmmaking. And there isn't a lot of short filmmaking going on besides this where people give you \$0, 60, 70 or several thousand dollars to make a short movie. And pretty much let you do what you want. Whatever you think would be cool."

Romanek says that his music videos function as an ongoing "sketchpad" where he works out both conceptual and formal ideas he plans to use making feature films in the future. But unlike most music-video directors longing to make the leap into feature filmmaking, Romanek has already made his feature-length directorial debut with 1984's *Static*, long before indie filmmaking became fashionable.

"You want to make a great film early on, like Orson Welles or Roman Polanski," Romanek recalls. "The fact is I wasn't really ready personally, as an artist, to do it. But I had

this freak opportunity to do it, which I grabbed. And I made a movie I'm not embarrassed by—because it's not terrible by any means—but it's so dramatically unrepresentable of what I'm capable of now."

Having made a name for himself in the music-video realm, Romanek is still holding fast to his dream project of making a biopic on the late photographer Diane Arbus, best known for her dark images of freaks and social outcasts. At first, the pairing might seem odd. But when you really look at Romanek's work, one can see that many of his videos also deal with the limbo of being an outsider.

"Arbus is a spectacular enigma," Romanek notes. "And the film that I'd want to make would never be interested in attempting to resolve the enigma. The enigma is the engine of what is interesting about Diane Arbus, and I want to make a piece that explores her almost as this Rorschach ink blot of a human being."

You would think that someone with this director's résumé would feel as if they had completely mastered their chosen medium. As an artist, however, Romanek is still a work in progress. And he is more than cognizant that each new work offers an opportunity ripe with the possibility for artistic growth.

"I'm trying different voices," Romanek says. "It's a very important idea for me. This idea of if you hear a single trumpet note, you can know that it's Miles Davis. Or Picasso makes a mark, you would immediately recognize it as Picasso's."

"As a filmmaker or any creative entity, that's what you're after. And I don't think I'm there yet. I think I've made a conscious effort to forego what you might politely term as 'sampling' as much as possible. In the last few videos, I've tried to make my own—within reason, because you're still influenced by stuff that's out there."

Lenny Kravitz, "Are You Gonna Go My Way?"



Mark Romanek

Janet Jackson, "Got 'Til It's Gone"

