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## **Iconoclasm in Visual Music**

### **Abstract**

From the earliest experimental film works to today's contemporary and diverse use of moving image platforms, the notion of visual music is considered synonymous with abstract animation, because in part, abstract imagery is employed across the vast majority of musical visualisation. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the absence of figuration and representation in visual music can now reengage with the problematic debate of representation versus abstraction - a debate that has taken place in other art forms and movements in the past.

### **Introduction**

Visual music is a type of audio-visual art, which employs the use of moving abstract images that are synchronised with music/sound. This approach to moving image works started prior to Modernism. However, it was during this period that it developed significantly and continues to expand the field in a variety of expressive ways in our current digital era.

Although the subject area of this paper is visual music it will start with an outline of several known abstraction-representation dialectics in art and more specifically, the rejection of representation caused by different ideologies, political dogmas, and spiritual beliefs. In doing so, it will demonstrate the lack of representation in the creation of artworks throughout history and focus on the past and current situation in visual music.

The abstraction-representation debate in visual arts is deep-rooted and has triggered some of the greatest conflicts in the history of art. Such examples include: two iconoclasms in Byzantine Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries; the label 'Degenerate Art' to describe Modern art during the Nazi regime; and the violent reactions in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Pakistan in 2006 over the cartoons that depict Muhammad.

### **Rejection of representation**

Representation and non-representation in art is not a simple argument based only on the inferences of the artists, the art critics or the audience. Most often it is beyond that; it is very much connected with beliefs, politics and ideologies. In Christian art, a momentous event took place during the Byzantine Empire era called the Iconoclasm: a conflict between the people who are in favour of representation/figuration (iconolaters) and the ones who are against it (iconoclasts). The iconoclasts believed that icons lead to idolatry and the iconolaters argued that they venerate the icons – not worship them (Gómez and Parcell, 1999: 48). The latter won the battle after struggle at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. The decision of the council was to accept representational images but only in the form of two-dimensional mosaics, icons and frescos (Asselt et al., 2007: 52); three-dimensional sculptures were prohibited since they are associated with idolatry and the real! (Bakker, 2009: 64). In contrast to the Eastern Orthodox Christians, the Western Catholic Christians enjoyed

the freedom of three-dimensional representation and figuration; the differences between the two Christian arts are evident still today<sup>1</sup>. In Islam, *aniconism* is the prohibition of figurative images that represent the Divine who is beyond description and representation (Ali, 1999: 15). Animals and humans are allowed as themes of figurative art anywhere except worship places because of the fear that it could lead to idolatry. A recent example of aniconism in Islam is the film *The Message* (1976) where the director Moustapha Akkad, bearing the Islamic audiences in mind, did not attempt to show Muhammad visually even though his role is central to the plot (Francaviglia and Rosenstone, 2007: 57).

There are instances in current history when representation took the form of satire in order to offend or criticise Islam. This in turn led to disastrous conflicts. The infamous cartoons<sup>2</sup> *The face of Muhammad* of Kurt Westergaard in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 September 2005 caused international outcry, which resulted in the attack of western embassies around the world and the death of more than 200 people according to New York Times (Cohen, 2012). In response to the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, the Iranian daily *Hamshari* announced an international Holocaust-cartoon competition. The 200 selected cartoons among 1,100 entries were exhibited in Tehran (Falk, 2008). Figurative imagery, when used within this context, can in turn have the power to cause international political and religious confrontation in our own modern history. Representation has been rejected for political reasons too. During the Cold War period, the USA used abstract art as propaganda against Communism and socialist realism (Saunders, 2001). The CIA secretly founded Abstract Expressionism to promote the intellectual freedom and the cultural rich democracy of the USA. Ironically, the majority of Americans did not appreciate abstraction (Saunders, 2001). In 1947, President Truman remarked: 'If that's art, I'm Hottentot' (Gamboni, 1997: 145).

It is worth mentioning that abstraction have also been rejected by authoritarian regimes in the past. In the first half of the twentieth century, representation in art led to a new bloodshed; however, this time the aggressor was in support of figuration. Under the Nazi regime in Germany, artists were strictly forbidden to practice almost any movement of modern art<sup>3</sup>, since these creative expressions started moving away from the traditional/classical approaches of representation and figuration<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, in the Soviet Union, the rival country of Nazi Germany, Joseph Stalin also promoted realistic art. Socialist realism became a state policy despite the fact that Russian pioneer artists expanded or founded modernistic ways of expression during the first half of the twentieth century, such as Suprematism, Constructivism and Abstraction. The popular subjects of Socialist Realism were the idealistic representation of the citizens, workers, peasants and state leaders. Non-representational artists were labelled as formalists and they were persecuted.

### **Rejection of representation in visual-music**

The above instances of rejection of representation show that different political, ideological and spiritual beliefs associate representation or abstraction with certain concepts. Representation is associated with 'the real', fleshliness, meaningfulness, immersion, tradition and sense. In contrast, abstraction represents freedom of expression, experimentation, emotion, spirituality, innovation, independence, openness of mind and art itself. Some of these concepts have been transferred into

visual music. William Moritz (1988) passionately explains the reason why abstraction is preferred as a form of expression by visual music filmmakers (like Fischinger):

Non-objective animation is without a doubt the purest and most difficult form of animation. Anyone can learn to 'Muybridge' the illusion of representational life, but inventing interesting forms, shapes and colours, creating new, imaginative and expressive motions – “the absolute creation: the true creation” as Fischinger termed it – requires the highest mental and spiritual faculties, as well as the most sensitive talents of hand (Moritz, 1988: 1).

Wassily Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstract art, expressed his admiration of the way music achieved expression without being merely representational. Music is a medium of expression of the inner world of the artist in contrast to painting, which was traditionally a representation of the outer world. Abstract painters influenced by music tried to create vibrant and rhythmical paintings that had no reference to the physical world. Music gave birth to abstract painting.

Early visual music animations appear to be like animated abstract paintings. The images that are employed to represent the sound in visual music are abstract; they are meaningless, non-narrative and non-representational (Stevens, 2009; Brougher et al., 2005). The images are influenced from the pure shapes of abstract painting (Penz, 2003) such as circles, triangles, free hand drawn lines to name but a few. Stevens gives a detailed definition of visual music:

Visual Music, also called abstract animation, is imagery that is structured and presented in such way that it is seen to change over time in much the same way as music is heard. It is normally comprised of a series of still or moving images. These images have no narrative nor are they representational. The images of visual music can be linked to absolute music that has no meaning (Stevens, 2009: 125).

In visual music every sound is translated as an image producing a synesthetic effect. The abstract shapes or colours correspond to the musical notes and the animation or timing corresponds to the rhythm (James, 2005). Consequently the entire composition of colours, lights, shapes and motion is a visual representation of the musical melody. There is no proven scientific correlation between image and sound, but there are emotional responses that certain images and musical notes can produce. Even though the imagery is created on the basis of a musical piece or score, the earliest films were indeed silent ventures. These works made use of the visual imagery as a nod towards its musical equivalent (Furniss, 1998; James, 2005). Nevertheless, the vast majority of visual music artworks are audio-visual.

It is apparent that during Modernism a close relationship between music and abstraction began to form: music gave birth to abstract painting and abstraction became the predominant element in visual music. This is also evident in the works of three great visual music filmmakers: Oskar Fischinger, Viking Eggeling and Norman McLaren. In Fischinger's *Radio Dynamics* (1942), plain colour parallel bars move symmetrically from the centre to the edges of the composition (James, 2005). An observer can identify that the bars are moving rhythmically but cannot make any

visual connotation to the real world. Traditionally colours are pure too: plain red, plain blue and so on. In *Symphonie Diagonale* (1924) by Eggeling, straight and curvy animated lines shape a number of diagonal abstract compositions. The lines are illuminated and white displayed on a black background. The arrangement of the lines is mostly parallel; however, some of them intersect and create angles or shapes. The lines are animated in a rhythmical fashion. Another instance is *Begone Dull Care* (1949) by Norman McLaren, an animation of abstract shapes painted and scratched directly onto the film strip. The images are colourful for most of the time except one part of the animation that is black and white. This abstract animation is a visual representation of jazz music composed by Oscar Peterson. In late visual music compositions, colour gradient and three-dimensional abstract shapes can also be found.

### **Contemporary audio-visual art and technology: Towards reality**

Before this paper commences its focus on the present state of visual music with regards to representation it will be useful to discuss the current trends in contemporary audio-visual art<sup>5</sup> and the impact of technology. Technology has influenced contemporary lifestyle, culture, perception and ways of communication and interaction. Additionally, it has also greatly influenced art and its production. The examples that technology has affected art are numerous; in many cases the medium becomes more than a tool and becomes vital in forms of arts such as electroacoustic music, photography, video art, interactive art, intermedia art, installation art, digital art and so on.

In 2000, Bolter and Grusin identified and analysed two principal paradigms that digital media refashioned from earlier media, which they named *hypermediacy* and *transparent immediacy*. Hypermediacy is the fascination with the medium itself; the design, the layout and the images remind the viewers that they are looking *at* a medium and not through a medium. Bolter and Grusin imply that this logic is similar to modernist art. According to Greenberg (1973: 68): 'Modernism used art to call attention to art'. Thus, the limitations of the medium (painting) must be acknowledged as positive factors. Similarly, in hypermediacy 'the artist strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgment' (Bolter; Grusin, 2000: 41). Transparent immediacy, on the other hand, is the attempt of immersion through the medium. The user/viewers are no longer aware of the medium but instead they directly interfere with the content of the medium. This strategy refashions figurative and representational forms of art that aim to represent, imitate or recreate reality. Bolter and Grusin argue Bazin's assumption that photography and cinema fulfil the artists' obsession with *realism* through the notion that computer graphics are the up-to-date expression of the desire for immediacy. Transparent immediacy can be found in virtual reality, photorealistic 3D graphics, World Wide Web, Digital Arts and film to name but a few. Lev Manovich in *Abstraction and Complexity* agrees with this idea:

In thinking about the effects of computerization on abstraction and figuration, it is much easier to address the second term than the first. While "realistic" perspective images of the world are as common today as they were throughout the twentieth century,

photography, film, video, drawing and painting are no longer the only ways to generate them (Manovich, 2004: 3).

Manovich also acknowledges that 3D computer graphics<sup>6</sup> are becoming more widespread:

Today for instance practically all of computer games rely on real-time 3D computer images - and so are numerous feature films, TV shows, animated features, instructional video, architectural presentations, medical imaging, military simulators, and so on (Manovich, 2004: 3).

In 2013, these ideas are enhanced with additional technological innovations such as augmented reality for androids, Google glasses, oculus rift and revival of stereoscopic 3D in film, TV and video games, 360 panoramic pictures, 360 street-view in Google maps, 360 videos, Holograms, 3D projection mapping, robotics and 4D Film.

### **Abstraction in contemporary visual-music**

As discussed above, the impact of technology within the arts and the refashioning of realism through digital media technology point towards a correlation or interdependence between two separate fields in the creation of works of art/media that tend to lean towards a type of representation. Following this line of thought, it is then also of interest to explore how these trends and debates affect the shifting role of representation within visual music, or if the use of abstraction will continue to be the predominant approach. One way to discover this is to look at the digital visual-music showcase.

There is a plethora of works, from well known artists to amateur artists, who have uploaded videos on youtube or vimeo – so many in fact that it would be an almost impossible task to identify every single one of them. However, looking at specific works that have been published in books or uploaded from websites that are dedicated to visual music research, one can gain a fairly substantial view of the state of visual music. In the book *Sonic graphics: Seeing sound* (2000) by Matt Woolman, the interplay between sound and sight through digital technologies is examined. It is a collection of works from digital visual music to graphic design, typography and print. The last chapter, entitled 'Atmosphere' looks at how virtual environments can be used to visualize sound. The interactive projects and digital visual music works that are showcased there are all to certain degree abstract. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (Brougher et al., 2005) is a book and a catalogue of an art exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Art and the Smithsonian Institute, which exhibited 92 works of 40 artists from 1900 to 2004. The works were produced in various media for painting to computer graphics and they were all abstract. In the main, websites that host collections of old and contemporary visual music works such as [centerforvisualmusic.org](http://centerforvisualmusic.org), [visualmusicarchive.org](http://visualmusicarchive.org) and [rhythmiclight.com](http://rhythmiclight.com), it is evident that non-representational images are dominating visual music in the field of interactive media, video art and installations.

Maura McDonnell (2010), in her essay 'Visual Music - A Composition of the Things Themselves' writes about the visual elements that constitute visual music. Again, the figurative elements or 'real objects' are only one small section in the visual 'grammar' of visual music and are composed in an abstract context. For instance, in Kapuscinski's *Juicy* (2009), representational objects such as fruits are used and composed in such a way to correspond with specific musical notes. However, the images of the fruits that appear in the video are out of context - they are taken out of their physical environment and manifest in an abstract, minimalistic environment. The correspondence of the chosen fruits with the specific sounds is fictional: most probably, if we could hear the music without watching the visuals we would not specifically think of these images, or imagine anything so near to what we see, for the simple reason that in the empirical world there is no such analogy. Only the hearing of the musical notes and the synchronous appearance of the fruits creates this illogical association. Instead of the fruit images, any kind of non-representational or representational imagery used out of context would equally create such an abstract effect. This idea is supported by what Ox and Keefer confirm in *On Curating Recent Digital Abstract Visual Music*: 'the majority of visual music work to date has been abstract' (2006: 1). Artists seem to favour abstraction over representation for the reason that the former gives them the freedom to express the mental world and be spiritual within their work (Moritz, 1988). The association of abstraction with freedom, as well as expression of an inner world and spirituality, reflects on the above mentioned representation-abstraction argument in history of art.

### **The end of Iconoclasm?**

Summing up, the *rejection of representation* has spiritual, ideological, political and aesthetical implications. Artists used abstract (and non-representational art) as a form of spiritual expression to shift the focus from the flesh to the spirit; from the physical to the spiritual world. Far later, the opponents of abstraction branded it as degenerate art because it was challenging to their ideology. Abstraction was also used as a tool of political propaganda to highlight the freedom of expression that the artists were enjoying under a particular political system.

In visual music, abstraction was initially employed to represent the abstract nature of music. However, music has expanded since modernism; real world/field recordings, electroacoustic sounds and even silence can be considered as material to produce musical compositions. Even though one of the main fashions in digital technologies is leaning towards realism and representation, it does not seem to have a great effect in visual music. Instead, it looks rather like abstraction has become a tradition in visual music. However, the innovations of digital technology have not left visual music completely unaffected with regards to representation and figuration. 3D graphics have been used as material in visual music such as in the works of Sylvia Pengilly, Baerbel Neubauer and Scott Draves. 3D graphics in visual music might be abstract in shape but they are frequently used as a medium to simulate human visual perception: volume, perspective view, shadow, refraction, reflection, and depth of field – all forms of phenomenological enquiry.

The creation of visual music immersive spaces is another small step closer to realism. An example is the installation of the United Visual Artists *Speed of Light* (2010), where beams of light are synchronized to sounds and are projected within

the physical environment to create abstract holographic sensations. Additionally, 3D projection mapping is a contemporary technique that unifies the physical space with 3D motion graphics, generating convincing illusions of animated interiors and exteriors of buildings. This technique, even though most often audio-visual, is not clearly visual music, since the sound is used in many cases as a soundtrack that accompanies the animation or as sound effects. Lastly, the music industry has produced 3D holographic characters that perform music and singing on stage; the most well known are Hatsune Miku in Japan and Gorillaz in Britain. Again in this paradigm the 3D figurative imagery appears to be visualization of the singers and the band members not the visualization of music.

As discussed in this paper, digital technologies have an effect in music (performances, music videos, music material) and audio-visual arts in general, that shows a new approach towards realism and immersion. Visual music is going through an evolution: from a state where virtually all works were abstract to a state that combines representation and abstraction. Will this be the end of the Iconoclasm in visual music?

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<sup>1</sup> The representation and figuration in Christian art is not only connected with the argument as to whether imagery is a path to idolatry or not, but also to another great debate in Christian doctrines; the argument between *Monophysites* and *Dyotheletes*. Benjamin Jokisch, in his book *Islamic Imperial Law: Harun-Al-Rashid's Codification Project* (2007), states that the Monophysites, who believed that Christ has only one divine nature, never dealt with images in a theoretical way. Conversely, the Dyotheletes -- who believed that Christ had two wills, the human and the divine -- did all they could to venerate images.

<sup>2</sup> Cartoons can be considered as a form of art (Bramiet, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> To Nazis, Modern art was a Bolshevick, Jewish conspiracy (West, 1988) that served a political and propagandist purpose: to introduce foreign cultures into the German society and lead to the loss of Germans' racial consciousness (Grosshans, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> The following statement from Hitler's hate speech on *Degenerate Art* in July 1937 shows clearly his aversion towards modern art and his belief that the artist must take reference from the physical world: 'I have observed among the pictures submitted here, quite a few paintings which make one actually come to the conclusion that the eye shows things differently to certain human beings than the way they really are [...] I want to forbid these pitiful misfortunates who quite obviously suffer from an eye disease, to try vehemently to foist these products of their misinterpretation upon the age we live in, or even to wish to present them as "Art"' (cited in Harris, 2005: 161).

<sup>5</sup> Visual music is part of the audio-visual art practice and theory. According to the *ElectroAcoustic Resource Site*, visual music is 'an area of audio-visual creation that is concerned with technological, metaphorical, analogical and imaginative mappings between visual images and music (and vice versa)' ([www.ears.dmu.ac.uk](http://www.ears.dmu.ac.uk), 2013).

<sup>6</sup> 3D computer graphics are mainly used to recreate believable virtual environments. Manovich here addresses a few instances (2004).

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## **Biography**

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