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PAPER

Visual Trends in Contemporary Visual Music Practice

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The first concepts of Visual Music date back to the 1920s and they usually included silent or sound films that showed certain movements of graphics of pure forms and shapes visually. Although, these early graphics and their motions may have resembled geometrically recognisable shapes and patterns, they were meant to show abstract visualisations. The earlier Visual Music practitioners challenged themselves to create these works that would have as little representation of the physical world as possible, therefore incorporating abstraction as the main visual trend of Visual Music. Today, the traditional Visual Music is, for this reason, automatically associated with an artist's abstract representation of sound.

This study looks at and attempts to see whether there is a new trend in this area that could distinguish contemporary Visual Music from the traditional abstract Visual Music. The study examines whether there has been a shift from abstraction to representation after almost a hundred years of Visual Music. Fifty works were collected and analysed from the Sound Image colloquiums of 2016 and 2017, (University of Greenwich, 2017) in order to categorise contemporary Visual Music into groups according to: a) sound-image relationship; b) abstract-representational aesthetics, and c) presence or absence of the third dimension.

Keywords: audio-visual music; visual music; hybrid media; digital arts; abstraction; representation; audio-visual art; sound; image; animation

Absolute Abstraction in the Visual Music tradition

Visual Music was born in Modernism; consequently it carried a lot of ideas and aesthetics from Modern Art. Modernistic features of early Visual Music showed significant elements of abstraction, creating *art for art's sake* and an avoidance to imitate the physical world. Continuing the theme of Modernism, artists attempted to produce works that had no reference whatsoever to physical reality, much like the trends of Abstract Expressionism and Formalism in painting.

In modernism, the artist has full control of the concept and outcome, whereas the work itself becomes aesthetically and philosophically self-conscious, self-critical and self-referential. This can be seen in Greenberg's 'Modern Painting' (1960), where he labels Kant 'the first real modernist' because he was the philosopher who initiated the self-criticism tendency in the nineteenth century; a tendency that generated modernist thinking. Moreover, modernism was a reaction to the long tradition of realism and bourgeois predilections of that century (Barth, 1984; Graff, 1973). In previous art movements, such as classical, religious, renaissance and romanticism, the painting was the medium to represent historical events, religious scenes or people.

Music in contrast to visual arts (painting or sculpture) was autonomous and self-defined without the necessity to represent something from the physical world. Instead, music was defined by its own elements, such as rhythm, tempo, and melody, and it also had the ability to evoke emotions without the need to use images or a narrative. Abstract painters tried to follow this route of musical autonomy by creating paintings that did not express any concepts or narratives. The protagonists are no longer kings or landscapes but the painting itself: the rhythm of succeeding colour along with the abstract shapes as well as the texture of the materials. For Greenberg, this was the epitome of modern art as it represents and expresses nothing else but itself (Maker, 2000). Another modernistic trend of traditional Visual Music is the naming of the works with titles that simply describe the visual (or sometimes the sound). In this way the works are independent of any narrative,¹ have deeper meanings² and may avoid any reference to the physical world.³ Works such as these include: 'Squares' (1934), 'Composition in Blue' (1935) by Oscar Fischinger, 'Dots' (1940), 'Loops' (1940), 'Stars and Stripes' (1940), 'Lines: Vertical' (1960) and 'Lines: Horizontal' (1962) by McLaren, to name a few.⁴

Early Visual Music works were produced by drawings or scratches directly onto film. The aim of the artist was to imitate the rhythmical elements of music with the pace the graphics, colours and lights appear, move and disappear (Mollaghan, 2015). For this reason, the artists, while making their visuals, were

listening to a specific music or sound at the same time. When Visual Music was presented to audience, on occasion it was played with music and sometimes it was screened silently. A good example of one of the earliest works created on this subject is 'Diagonal Symphony' by Viking Eggeling (1924). In this abstract animation, there are white geometrical objects appearing and disappearing on the screen. With little movement of the objects, the real focus was placed on how these simple objects transform from one to another. This silent film and the movement of different shapes designed in Art Deco fashion did not represent anything concrete. As the shapes moved, there was no real representation of reality and the whole work seemed abstract. 'Diagonal Symphony' and other similar early Visual Music works are removed from physical reality for the following characteristics⁵:

a) The films were silent.

In the era of silent film, the idea of not recreating the physical world seems to be one of the main challenges artists faced. For Rudolf Arnheim, cinema was something closer to pictorial art that needed no added elements of sound, as he believed this would disrupt the outcome of the film, because synchronised sound added no real value to the actual film (Arnheim, 1957). Arnheim believed that film transformed the world that was previously photographed, but the world being filmed was still stylised and not representative. In *Film as Art* (ibid) Arnheim makes an analogy between 'Sound Film vs Silent Film' and 'Wax museum ideals vs creative art', meaning that sound films are not creative artworks but like the wax museum statues, are a representation of something else.⁶

b) The imagery was abstract

With the growth of different arts, such as sculpture and theatre, Clement Greenberg believed that abstract imagery is the best way to keep politics and influences, therefore representation, away from art. His beliefs suggested that although the art of painting was restricted by a certain size and type of

blank canvases, it was still 'free' of the imitations of reality that were present in film, theatre or sculpture (Greenberg, 1993). He also believed that in arts the major quality gravitates more and more from representation to abstraction (Greenberg, 1961: 135).

c) There was no attempt to imitate the third dimension.

As aforementioned, Visual Music was always two dimensional abstract art that focused on staying away from concepts of reality and representation of physical elements. Although, abstract was still the way forward, there were artists who could not resist the influence of physical reality. One of them was Normal McLaren with his short film, 'Dots' (1940). McLaren placed appearing and disappearing dots on a red background accompanied by sound. The viewer could hear a certain sound every time a dot was placed on the red canvas (McLaren, 1940). This sound changed depending on the shape and size of the dot. The optical illusion of dots getting larger and larger made it seem like proximity of the viewer was getting closer and closer, therefore the increasing and decreasing size of dots was an attempt to imitate the human reality of perspective.

Oskar Fischinger created another example of the usage of early motion graphics to create a representation of sound visually through his short film, 'An Optical Poem' (1938). This two dimensional piece showed motions of objects change their position and size depending on the changes in sound and rhythm (Fischinger, 1938). Although, the objects were representing what Fischinger thought the sound could look like, the objects themselves were still two dimensional and very reflective of the artist's thought rather than reflecting a deeper meaning that would be known to all viewers. A similar but slightly more advanced concept was created by Mary Ellen Bute (Bute, 1936), as the viewers could see the use of a hybrid visual aesthetic of representation and abstraction. These representational images carry elements of experienced reality, such as lights and shadows, third dimension and textures, but unlike Fischinger's work, these images are composed in such a way that they are not recognisable objects.

Definitions of Contemporary Visual Music

After curating New York Digital Salon's Abstract Visual Music project in 2005 that included international works of contemporary Visual Music, Jack Ox and Cindy Keefer (re)defined contemporary Visual Music as algorithmically operated digital images and placed the submitted works of Visual Music into four categories (Ox; Keefer, 2006)⁷:

1. Visual music can be understood as a sonic composition translated into a visual content, with the elements of the original sonic 'language' being represented visually. This is also known as intermedia.
2. Visuals follow a certain narrative structure that compliments the sonic structure. The final audio-visual composition can include sound or it can be silent
3. A real time translation from visual to sonic or from sonic to visual. These images, which can be in different formats, are simultaneously projected as sound is being played.
4. The image composition can also be static (e.g. a painting). The theme is the artist's personal interpretation of specific music.

Sound Image Colloquium 2016–2017: Contemporary Visual Music Case Study

The methodology used for this study collected qualitative data by identifying what are the most popular visual trends regarding the imagery used in the practice of contemporary Visual Music. As mentioned in the literature review, due to the fact that traditional Visual Music trends were always in the line of abstraction, this research tested whether the contemporary Visual Music follows traditional abstraction or whether it has moved towards representation of experienced reality. This study used 50 works presented in the Sound Image colloquiums in 2016 and 2017. These case studies were selected by random sampling and further content analysis categorised these works into the following:

1. Relationship between sound and image – synchronisation
2. Representation, Abstraction & Hybrids
3. Attempt to imitate the illusion of third dimension

Relationship between sound and image – synchronisation

From the research, it occurs that 60% of the works that were submitted in the Sound Image conferences show exact synchronisation of image and sound. Every time a sound event occurs, a corresponding visual event will occur at the same time – this is often a movement, a change of shape, an introduction of a new graphic element or a scene cut. The duration of the visual event is usually identical to the duration of the sonic event. This exact correspondence of image and sound can also be noticed in real life as sensory experience – when a sound is sensed, it is often accompanied by a corresponding visual sensation. For example, the sound of a car; the sound of rain falling onto the window; a person talking.

In the 40% of the audio-visual works that were submitted, there was either a loose synchronisation between image and sound or no synchronisation at all. Loose synchronisation happens when there is a correspondence of image and sound in the aesthetics and pace. However, this does not mean that every sonic event will necessarily have an exact corresponding visual event. For instance, in Matthew Grouse's 'Eye of the Storm' (2017) the slow pace of the sound is similar to the slow movement of the colourful ink patterns, which creates a homogenous aesthetic but, at the same time, not every single sound event has corresponding visuals in this work.

Representation, Abstraction & Hybrids

Interestingly enough, the vast majority of the works (62%) continue the tradition of using abstract visualisations. Regardless of whether the sound event is composed by musical instruments, vocals, real world recordings or entirely computer generated electroacoustic sounds; the visuals remain abstract with minimum or no-reference to the physical world and the experienced reality. These abstractions are usually computer-generated graphics that sometimes have the appearance of particles as in 'F.A.K.120 Video Triptych' (2015) by Brian Hernandez or patterns as in *Sequential – RaumMerzGeist* (2016) by MERZfunder and 'Synthetic Electro Replicant' (2016) by Dave Payling. The visuals can also be completely minimal. This can be seen in the

live performance of Ryan Jordan 'Possession Trance' where visualisation of sound is produced merely by strobe lights.

Through this research, it was established that 28% of the examined works are hybrid – they belong somewhere in the middle of representation and abstraction:

1. Representational images are filmed from an unusual and unpredictable angle, like the extra close ups in 'Zhong' (2005) by Claudia Robles-Angel, that give an overall abstract aesthetic.
2. Visuals are heavily edited which makes them appear as abstractions; however, there are some noticeable representational elements that can remind us of a physical sensory experience. This could be seen in the work of Anuka Ramischwili.
3. Representational images are combined with abstract computer generated graphics to remind the viewer that the image does not aim to imitate or represent an experienced reality or physical world (Rami, 2017).
4. Shapes or movements of solely abstract computer graphics are inspired by the physical world.

Images are representational, realistic or clearly imitate the experienced world in only 10% of the audio-visual works.

Attempt to imitate the illusion of third dimension

Apart from the representational imagery, the illusion of the three-dimensional space is an imitation of experienced reality and physical space. It is noticeable that regardless of the appearance of the visuals (abstract, representational or hybrid), a significant number of works (30%) attempts the mimesis of the third dimension. In 20% of the works, three-dimensional graphics are blended with the two dimensional, therefore creating hybrid aesthetics. In some cases, abstract graphics seem to create temporary illusions of three dimensional space, as it appears in the work of Jean Piché, 'Skin Lines'.

Limitations

It is fair to acknowledge that there are a few limitations in this research, which may not give the exact insight into current trends of Visual Music practice. The Sound Image conferences are taking place in London, and although artists of different nationalities submitted their works, it is only fair to assume that some artists living out of the UK were perhaps less aware of the conference. Apart from the possible lack of awareness, some artists living abroad may have found it inconvenient to participate in the event even in case of their work being selected for presentation. Again, as the conference is held in London, due to perhaps location, language barrier and other similar reasons, it can be assumed that this study mostly represents western Visual Music.

Furthermore, the works that were submitted in 2016 and 2017 were not necessarily produced in the same year of submission, yet this study does not separate them into different years but rather treats them equally as a whole. Therefore, there could be slightly differences in approaches that were not considered by this study.

As this conference is mostly related to Visual Music, there might be artists who consider their work to be outside the Visual Music genre; however, the opinion of the artist was not considered in this study.

In total there were more than 100 works submitted in the two years of the conference. However, this study did not examine all works. It examined 50 randomly selected works, 25 from each conference, in order to give an honest picture of the visual trends in Visual Music practice. The data of Sound Image 2016 fairly matched the data of Sound Image 2017, however it should be acknowledged that 50% of the works that were left out could have influenced the outcome of the study if considered.

In order to simplify the outcome of the study for better understanding, data was placed into different categories with reoccurring themes. This could be seen as a limitation because all fifty works were not separately analysed in this document.

Conclusion

The results of this research show that the visual trends in Visual Music are in alignment with some contemporary practices of audio-visual and digital arts. The main trends in contemporary practices seemed to follow three categories: pure abstraction (Manovich, 2004), hybrid media and realistic graphics (often in virtual

environments) (Manovich, 2007; Grau 2003). Pure abstraction in contemporary practices uses a form of reduction to break down graphics to the simplest shapes and then, it reconstructs them into more complex forms. Hybrid media's main element is the amalgamation of different representational or abstract images, such as edited images, 3D graphics or text. Lastly, realistic graphics can be found in visual effects, video games, and virtual reality. However, taking into consideration all works examined by this practice, contemporary visual trends tend to match the first two categories as opposed to the third one.

Abstraction continues to be the predominant trend of Visual Music. Through this research, it was established even contemporary Visual Music artists are heavily influenced by the abstract tradition of Visual Music. It was found that the medium (computer) tends to be the main influence of the visual aesthetics of a given piece. The visual trends of contemporary Visual Music often are abstract compositions produced by heavily edited and overlapping representational images; computer generated simple shapes put together in the creation of complex compositions; imagery that resembles digital aesthetics such as glitches, noise, particles and data visualisations. On the other hand, there are small steps towards mimesis of the physical world. This can be seen through the use of representational recognisable images and the more prominent use of the third dimension.

Notes

- ¹ As in films.
- ² As it happens prior to modern art is romanticism.
- ³ Like in naturalism, classicism, baroque, realism and so on.
- ⁴ This study shows that 48% of titles of current Visual Music works are descriptive of the visuals (or sound).
- ⁵ Similar to purist ideals.
- ⁶ An attempt of imitation of physical world.
- ⁷ According to the Sound – Image relationship.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Emmanouil Kanellos is Senior Lecturer in BA Graphic Design & BA Animation Programmes in University of Greenwich. Kanellos is a PhD candidate with an interest in Visual Music, Virtual Reality, and 3D technology. He has presented his research in UK, Europe and USA. Throughout the years Emmanouil Kanellos has worked both as 3D Animator, Character Designer and CG Artist, collaborating with several advertising and design agencies (Saatchi & Saatchi, Seven-Shuffles, Udox) in London, Athens and Japan. His work has been shown in various places such as UK National TV and International channels. Emmanouil Kanellos also directs and produces 3D mapping projection artworks across the UK in collaboration with various video and sound artists.

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