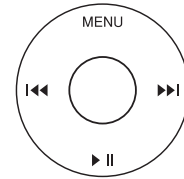


Visualizing Music



Songs summon visuality. Story songs in particular use words and instruments to paint a visual picture and evoke imagination. Al Stewart's 'The Year of the Cat' (1976) paints a Casablanca-inflected exoticism, using saxophone, piano and the lyrical mention of Peter Lorre. Maximo Park's 'Books from Boxes' (2007) is anchored to a rain-swept day in the north of England and Sunderland's football ground, the Stadium of Light. Many songs evoke images, colours and sensations. Visuality and the visual media are woven through music, whether these involve seeing a busker perform on a street, watching a DJ in a club, the wash of music videos providing wallpaper for gyms or creating new relationships between sound and vision on an iPad.

Such saturated visuality offers a stark contrast to the nineteenth century. The aspirational abstraction of 'classical' music aimed to give it social status and an equivalence to painting. The artistic form was cold, aloof and disconnected from the realities and struggles of daily life. The best art and culture was socially aspirational, summoning our best selves and embodying the excellence and highest achievements of individuals. To enact this project, 'art' was disconnected from live music and the historical conditions that created its production and performance. Before the infiltration of such a high cultural agenda, music was unthinkable without performers. Viewers could see as much as hear the music being played. With the arrival of both the radio and the gramophone, the purity of music involved its separation from its means of production. To this day, the visuality of music remains a site of controversy and threat, whether describing the scarcity of clothes worn by women in hip hop videos, the decadence of Roxy Music album covers, the fashion of Lady Gaga, or the quirky clichés of films like *Moulin Rouge* or *High School Musical*.

When visuality was tethered to popular music through the twentieth century, the 'threat' to youth via music increased. The conservative critic Allan Bloom, who featured in the last *Popular Music: Topics, Trends and Trajectories* chapter for 'Listening to Music', not only disliked the Walkman, he also exposed the threat and horror of music videos.

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing a math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV ... A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy (1987: 74–75).



Bloom rendered popular music a threat because it encouraged rampant sexuality, violence and short cuts to success. It was seeing – rather than the listening to – music that made it onanistic. On similar grounds, Julian Johnson abused popular music, particularly its ubiquity, repetition and the ‘manipulation’ of sound through technology. The visual elements provided the greatest threat.

The surface is everything. We live in a visual culture that attaches primary significance to the exchange of signs – of power, attraction, status, wealth, desire – that are overwhelmingly visual. Even in music visuals are everything; hence the ubiquity not only of the music video but the marketing of the star. And when it comes to the music the surface sheen is everything; the music is literally one-dimensional (2002: 58).

Even through the critique, Johnson confirms that music is attended by visual elements. The link between sound and vision was not invented by MTV. In venues for live performances, the singer, DJ or band members are seen, admired and watched as much as heard. Magazines present the smiling face of performers. The album cover – in its largest and most expansive form as the packaging for long-playing records – was a design opportunity to visualize music. An album sleeve protected the vinyl but was also an advertisement that distinguished one record from another product. Its project was a complex one, giving visibility to sound and a soundtrack to design. The most famous covers are from the height of the album’s success as a format, including The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), Roxy Music’s *Country Life* (1974) and two conceptual covers: The Velvet Underground’s *The Velvet Underground* (1968) and The Rolling Stones’ *Sticky Fingers* (1971).

The era of the LP was a critical moment in the visual history of popular music. Peter Gammond stated at the height of the long-playing record’s popularity,

Records are no longer brittle objects in brown paper wrappers. They are permanent documents, and it is expected that they will come in tastefully designed covers with full and accurate information on their contents (1980: 27).

While the visual elements of popular music were enhanced through record covers, this mode of visibility has declined with a change in platform. Through the downloading of MP3s, these ‘permanent documents’ have not survived. The iPod Video, the iPhone and iPad have instead created different relationships between visibility and music. Music videos are self-standing cultural artifacts and products to be purchased and downloaded. These digitized sonic and visual files are not permanent, but convenient and mobile. The iTunes Store added the sale of videos to its music range in October 2005 and full-length movies followed in September 2006. A platform that started playing music and audio files is now using the iPod’s screen to play texts of visual culture, including music videos, film and television, games and a suite of applications.

While applications and album covers show how music can be visualized, the most obvious example remains the music video. Activating visual and sonic literacies, music



videos are texts of excess, incorporating thousands of editing cuts within a three-minute period. Music videos are advertisements, promotional materials that accompany – most frequently – a single song. The 1980s are particularly associated with music videos. While there are many full-length musical films that create a powerful relationship between a song and image, including Paul Robeson's 'Ol' Man River' from *Show Boat*, the longer form and narrative construction of these musicals meant that the song's function was subsumed in the story. Conversely, music videos are forms of short film that trial new visual techniques. Abstractions and non-narrative techniques are common. The earliest music videos – particularly those from The Monkees and The Beatles – were used to promote singles without performers touring.

In the 1970s and 1990s, music videos offered a distinct visual history of popular music. Aural and visual codes were collapsed, with musical genres like the New Wave and New Romantic movement gaining from this tight dialogue. Music videos have circulated via clubs, television programmes, videos, DVDs and now portable music devices. Music videos also hooked into a range of other histories, including

- the history of film
- the history of television
- the history of popular music
- the history of dance
- the history of postmodernity.

Music videos found their natural home in the segmented flow of television. Occasionally they accessed a bigger culture, as shown by Ultravox's *Vienna* or Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. The use of film noir or horror codes enabled the deployment of sophisticated editing and a reshaping of the boundaries between high and popular culture. Music video enabled new cinematic options. Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer* and A-ha's *Take On Me* blended new modes of animation with live footage. Because music video moves between commerce and art, popular and avant-garde, realism and modernism, the visual and sonic possibilities of a four-minute music video are radically distinct from a ninety-minute film. The impact of music videos on cinema, from *Risky Business* to *Moulin Rouge*, is obvious and important to recognize.

The proliferation of screen cultures has ensured the development and expansion of new ways to see music. Video games use sound effects to convey interactivity and the relationship between a player's behaviour and the screen action. A range of composers has gained great success for their work in writing game soundtracks. Koji Kondo is known for his work with Nintendo. As the sound cards improved, soundtracks for games became increasingly complex. *Grand Theft Auto* is an example of how found sounds can capture an environment and move the player through both the streets and the game. The Xbox also increased the level of interactivity, by allowing players to create customized soundtracks for some games by inserting a compact disc into the platform. This gaming market matters to popular music. One in every four dollars spent in the USA on

entertainment is linked to gaming (2008 Gaming Industry Data, 2009), and it delivers music to consumers in new ways. For example, the unsigned band Avenged Sevenfold had their music launched on the Madden NFL 2004 Xbox game, while Electronic Arts (EA) games have included a range of performers on their releases, including Kings of Leon, Blink-182, Green Day and Fatboy Slim.

While popular music is positioned best within a wider history of sound, its visual history is also provocative, complex and dynamic. With the growth in both gaming and screen-enabled mobile music platforms, the visual elements of popular music are areas of development and growth. Computers have created new visual opportunities for music. For example, whenever a Windows environment was activated, 3.25 seconds of music played. Brian Eno created this 'song' in 1995. It is probably the most played sample of music in the world, yet it is forgotten because primacy is given to the screen. Computer-mediated environments are transforming the relationships between sound and vision. The screen has become a new space for a visual communication about music. Particularly through YouTube, not only music but also screen-based communication can be the basis of a marketing campaign. Social networking sites allow a free release of music from both new and established performers, along with the accompanying videos. Domestic platforms such as the range of Flip cameras, with resident editing software, allow bands to produce visual accompaniments to their songs at low cost and with limited expertise in film making and editing. Direct uploading to YouTube is also possible. Frederick Levy rewrote Andy Warhol's famous slogan for this Web 2.0 environment, titling his guide to the portal as *15 Minutes of Fame: Becoming a Star in the YouTube Revolution* (2008). Such social networking sites confirm that music is not only visible, but also that screens are preserving and disseminating new histories of sound.

Key Questions

1. How does seeing a performer change how you think about music?
2. What was the role of the album cover in advertising the songs included in a package?
3. Now that songs are downloaded without visual covers, has the visuality of popular music declined?
4. What potentials and problems do social networking sites and YouTube offer to new bands, performers, DJs and producers?

Further Reading

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