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Visual Music— Aspects of a Non-Genre

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This essay is part of an ongoing research into contemporary manifestations of audiovisual art forms. Consequently, it does not aim to present an exhaustive overview of the whole panorama, or to frame final answers, but rather to address some critical points and formulate questions that might lead to a clearer view of the picture.

Given the framework from which this text has originated, a conference on experimental audiovisual settings, the choice of a title raises two points: why bring up the subject of visual music in this context, one of the oldest and most thoroughly discussed audiovisual practices? And why then describe it as a non-genre? These two questions are closely linked, and I will, in a first step, try to shed light on them. In a second step, I will focus on some examples of contemporary audiovisual production, the analysis of which can also contribute to a better understanding of what contemporary visual music might be.

To begin with, it makes sense to talk about visual music here simply because the term plays a significant role in the field of contemporary audiovisual art production, alongside terms such as live audiovisual performance, live cinema, and VJing, to name just a few. Compared to these other practices, however, visual music looks back on a comparatively long history: the art critic Roger Fry was among the first to use the term already in 1912.¹ Over time, the meaning of visual music has shifted, and the phenomenon is now part of the bigger context of audiovisual creation. In the following, some aspects of visual music and its interplay with other participants in the field of audiovisual creation will be discussed.

But before doing so, it is useful to address the aspect of genre. While writing this text, it became clear that it might prove unwise to use the term “genre” in its title, even as a somewhat polemical turn of phrase. In his “Introduction to Genre Theory,” Daniel Chandler describes the attempt to define genre as a “theoretical minefield.”² While this text will venture only as far as necessary into the dangerous area—all the more as its main purpose is not to discuss genre theory but audiovisual creation—it is nevertheless useful to look at visual music from the perspective of genre theory, because it helps describe some of the questions we are dealing with in its contemporary manifestations. The term visual music can be applied to a wide array of different forms and media of audiovisual creation, which, at first sight, don’t constitute a coherent body of works. This is, by the way, a core problem of genre definition: you need a body of works that constitute a

¹ In Internet sources such as the Wikipedia article on “Visual Music” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_music, date of access: November 23, 2017), it is often suggested that Fry coined the term “visual music” when writing about Kandinsky’s paintings. But, as Joost Rekveld correctly states, “the truth is more messy” (Joost Rekveld. “The Origin of the Term Visual Music,” <http://www.joostrekveld.net/?p=1105>, date of access: November 23, 2017). The first source from Fry’s writings where he mentions “visual music” is the catalog of a Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Gallery in 1912 (see: Roger Fry. *Vision and Design*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1920, p. 157). Fry uses the term again in connection to Kandinsky’s paintings in an article published on August 2, 1913, in *The Nation* (see: Frances Spalding. *Roger Fry: Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 168).

² Daniel Chandler. “An Introduction to Genre Theory,” p. 2, http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/intgenre/chandler_genre_theory.pdf, date of access: November 23, 2017.

genre because they show the characteristics necessary to define the genre, but to identify that body of works, you already have to know these characteristics—which leads to a kind of vicious circle.³

Still, when we read about a “visual music festival,” we probably have a more or less distinct idea of the manner of works we can expect to see and hear. This is rather typical, because the everyday use of genre categories in all kinds of paratexts, such as programs, press announcements, etc., normally is unproblematic. When we choose to go to the cinema to see a documentary, we don’t think of the whole package of scholarly texts discussing possible definitions of the documentary as a genre. We have a clear expectation of how the film may work, based on experience and conventions of what a documentary is in the cultural context we move in.

Visual music in its earlier manifestations, in the 1920s for example, is a more or less well-defined phenomenon,⁴ whereas texts on contemporary visual music often give little definition of what they consider to be visual music. It seems that no matter how clear the core of contemporary visual music may be defined by convention, this core is surrounded by a vast area of vagueness, a mixture of lacking and contradicting definitions in combination with a quickly evolving and ever changing practice. The following examples of websites⁵ are chosen to give an idea of the situation, not to criticize their approach: the “CAMP—International Festival for Visual Music”⁶ offers no further description; what visual music means in the context of the festival can only be deduced from the featured artists and their program notes. The “Call for Entries” of the Frankfurt-based Visual Music Award 2013 provides more information: it starts with a general paragraph referring to the absolute film movement and the “visual symphonies”⁷ its artists created on film. Contemporary equivalents can, as a short paragraph on “Target Groups” suggests, come from very different areas, such as media art, design, experimental film, music video, and “allied disciplines.” The award includes a live contest, so the product may also be a live performance, including “VJing performances, interactive applications.” The “Criteria of Evaluation” demand a “coherent overall concept accompanied by an [sic] holistic multi-sensual and expressive aesthetic based on distinguishable excellent skills in technical possibilities.” Even if these criteria ask for a “holistic” and “multi-sensual” approach, there is no specific reference to the relationship between sound and images to be found, the only clue within the “Call for Entries” regarding this point being the term “visual symphonies.” There is, however, a definition of visual music to be found on its own page of the award’s website, drawing a historical line from Pythagoras to Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye, which gives a general idea of the organizers’ viewpoint: “Visual music refers to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Definitions can be found in publications such as: Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman, Judith Zilczer (eds.). *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, or Veruschka Bódy, Peter Weibel (eds.). *Clip, Klapp, Bum: Von der visuellen Musik zum Musikvideo*. Cologne: DuMont, 1987.

⁵ Interestingly, some websites, and with them some definitions, had already changed in the short time between the presentation of this argument at the “Experimental Audio-Visual Settings” conference in June 2013 and the editing of the text in August 2013, thus confirming the unstable nature of the definition of visual music.

⁶ <http://www.camp-festival.de/>, date of access: August 10, 2013.

⁷ <http://www.visual-music-award.de/index.cfm?siteid=7>, date of access: August 10, 2013.

the transposition of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic coherences in pictures through the composition of space and time. It's a dynamic art form in which a special effect is achieved by the equal-footed interaction of visual and musical material." According to this definition, musical elements are transposed into some sort of time-based images, which, given the references, presumably means moving images; visual and musical materials come together as equal partners to create a special effect that is not further specified. But even so, this definition, together with the "Call for Entries," gives us an approximation to what contemporary visual music actually might be—even though the field is vast, spreading from cinematic productions to interactive installations and live performances.

A number of websites dealing with visual music attempt no definitions of the term but offer a bibliography or links to longer, scholarly essays. The Center for Visual Music in Los Angeles, for example, hosts a bibliography of online texts on the subject, most of them dealing with historical visual music, but some of them also addressing its contemporary manifestations. By just picking one of them, the reader finds herself again in the middle of the definitional dilemma: according to Cindy Keefer and Jack Ox, one of four possible forms of visual music is "a visual composition that is not done in a linear, time-based manner, but rather something more static like a 7' x 8' canvas." While this definition is obviously linked to the historical origin of the term, it is in clear opposition to the definition given on the Visual Music Award website that seems to exclude static works.

Berlin-based media art platform fluctuating images, which the author of this text co-directs, also hosts some longer texts on visual music on its website; a short description of a screening on "Contemporary Visual Music," however, laconically sums up the problem by describing visual music in its contemporary use as an "umbrella term for all kinds of things: music with a color organ or oscilloscope techniques, expanded cinema or animated films."¹¹

Interestingly, most texts don't venture to state what visual music actually is: a genre, an audiovisual art form, a cultural practice ... Even the most recent publications on contemporary visual music are reluctant to frame the phenomenon precisely. The editorial of the 2012 issue of the magazine *Organised Sound*, focusing on contemporary visual music, once again mentions the "broad scope of the term visual music"¹² and presents some (historical) definitions: visuals being composed as if they were music, following a musical structure—which appears the most useful definition to the editors—visual music as a cross-disciplinary practice merging the roles of composer and filmmaker, and visual music seen in relation to technological developments in real-time animation.¹³ These three approaches—which are, by the way, more or less what one will find in the short Wikipedia entry on visual music—address different parameters. The first, formalist definition addresses the form and structure of the work,

¹¹ <http://www.fluctuating-images.de/en/node/385>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

¹² Nick Fox-Gieg, Cindy Keefer, Margaret Schedel. "Editorial," in: *Organised Sound* 17 (2012), p. 98; online at: doi:10.1017/S1355771812000015, date of access: November 23, 2017.

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 97.

the second addresses the role of the producer, and the third the media. Which also raises the question if they really exclude each other, or if they show different sides of the same phenomenon.

This brings us back to the “all kinds of things” mentioned before, the feeling that visual music is so hard to grasp. Genres are normally considered to be inter- or, more recently, transmedial. If we know what constitutes a western in film, we will also be able to recognize one in literature or in a comic book. The disconcerting thing about visual music is that, from the very beginning, it has always jumped from one medium to the other, from color organs to film, from painting to graphical sound, etc. It is as if, over time, all possible new media had been added to the repertoire and taken in tow, so that today visual music can hardly be described by the use of media. Even worse: the term visual music consequently doesn’t make any statement about a lot of other parameters, such as the mode of presentation, the context, the format or function of the audiovisual creation. It can be linked to a live performance, as with the color organ or other instruments such as Thomas Wilfred’s Lumia or Clavilux, or it can be “canned” visual music, fixed on film. Or both.

For historical examples, there is at least an idea what visual music looks like: the visual part usually is abstract, a counterpart to the equally abstract music, such as in Oskar Fischinger’s black and white *Studies 1–12* (1929–1934) or in his *Composition in Blue* (1935), for example. These early examples of visual music were linked to the notion of “absolute film,” and very quickly more links developed to new concepts of dance, so that the abstract choreography of forms as “absolute dance” became a model for dance and vice versa.¹⁴ In this bodiless choreography of animated forms or objects, the human figure slowly emerged: it had never disappeared as a performer of visual music instruments, but now it was also reintroduced in film, as a dancer, for example in Len Lye’s *Rainbow Dance* (1936). Then, three decades later, Jim Henson’s *Time Piece* (1965) completed the mixture of traditional, animated visual music with non-animated parts.

One can find visual music practically everywhere: allusions to it pop up in very different contexts, for example in Busby Berkeley’s musical choreographies of the 1930s or, later, in Expanded Cinema and in music video. This permeable border of visual music is also reflected in theoretical texts. Peter Weibel and Veruschka Bódy, for example, draw a historical line from “Visual Music to Music Video”¹⁵ in the title of their 1987 book, and when VJs start to look for the ancestors of their practice, they relate to visual music as well, as e.g. Niklas Völker aka Codec, member of the Berlin based VJ collective Pfadfinderei, did in his unpublished diploma thesis from 2003.

Meanwhile, the problem remains: what is visual music today? As contemporary genre theory suggests, we have to be flexible—genres are not seen as fixed ontological entities anymore. The idea that definitions are dynamic and contextual might appear helpful. Only: if they become too dynamic and open, they lose their contour and their meaning. Here, an attempt to describe visual music in relation to other audiovisual practices or genres can contribute to the stabilization

¹⁴ See Gregor Gumpert. *Die Rede vom Tanz: Körperästhetik in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende*, Munich: Fink, 1994, p. 216.

¹⁵ Bódy, Weibel 1987.

of the vacillating borders. The other available categories in the audiovisual field do not necessarily address the same factors: some only describe the form a presentation takes (e.g. audiovisual installation), others point to a certain context (e.g. VJing to the club context) or technical carrier (e.g. music video to film/digital video). As has already been shown, there are no such clear relations to the term visual music. But if it doesn't address these points, what is at the core of the term? Looking at the historical definitions and the contemporary use of it, it rather seems to address the quality of the audiovisual combination. The analogicity drawn in historical definitions between the visual part and the musical composition, stresses a structural relationship that would go beyond a merely random combination of audio and visual elements. In the 1960s, Dick Higgins' concept of "intermedia" as the merging of two art forms or media to form a new one, the "intermedium," adds the idea of sound and image coming together to form a new, inseparable audiovisual entity.¹⁶ Taking this as a starting point, visual music can tentatively be defined as a description for audiovisual productions pursuing the basic objective of a structural interplay between, and intertwining of, visual and acoustic components, which leads to a new, genuinely audiovisual creation of its own.

With this short working definition in mind, the next step can be attempted, an analysis of examples. Here we will focus on performative work rather than on pure filmic productions. Even if there are still many interesting productions of filmic visual music work, in performative productions we can find various new approaches to the question of how to create a correlation between image and sound that are worth exploring.

Contemporary approaches to visual music often stress the notion of performance in the sense of an audiovisual setting where musicians and image producers play and/or improvise together as equal members of a group. This is, for example, the approach of the CAMP festival, where musicians and visual artists are invited to improvise together and develop audiovisual performances over a certain period of time. When this concept is pushed a little further, and a sort of stage or installative situation is added, we get close to the notion of "music theater"—although the English term might be misleading in this context. In German, the term "Musiktheater" is often used to describe forms other than operas or musicals, it has especially been applied to the work of Maurizio Kagel, and nowadays to some productions of Heiner Goebbels, for example. So, the concept is originally very much linked to contemporary music.

The production *Harry* (2009) by the Paris-based Homemade Collectif could be taken as an example that doesn't originate with a big institutional context of contemporary music and opera houses. This audiovisual performance, which takes its inspiration from a text by Hubert Selby, is presented by A-li-ce, a video artist and VJ, and two musicians, André Fèvre and Domitille Sanyas. *Harry* is conceived as an audiovisual set and installation in motion. There is no traditional stage setting, the visual performer sits on the floor, working with objects, a live webcam, and some prepared video footage, while the

¹⁶ Dick Higgins. "Intermedia," in: *Something Else Newsletter* vol. 1, no. 1. New York: Something Else Press, 1966.

two musicians walk around the room from one sound point to another. There is no fixed composition, the performers improvise together according to a structural framework worked out in advance. The piece follows a clear structure: building to a short climax after which follows a continuous going down until the end. All three performers are equal partners, none of the contributions ever becomes predominant.¹⁷

The work of Berlin-based group *Transforma* is oscillating between audiovisual performance, music theater, and real-time film. Like many VJs and video artists, *Transforma* were exploring the possibilities of digital animation when they started to work together in 2001. Subsequently, they became more and more interested in different materials and their specific surfaces, in the sounds that they make. This is, by the way, a very common development from the digital to the post-digital, in which *Transforma* have been on the forefront.¹⁸ They started handling objects and materials first in the studio, filming their performative actions and using the footage for their audiovisual performances on stage. Then they decided to transplant their production sets from the studio to the stage.

With *Asynthome* (2010), an audiovisual performance co-produced with the artist Yro, they completely abandoned any pre-filmed staged action in favor of live performance on stage—as actors and musicians as well as on film. There is no prepared footage used at all, everything the public sees on stage or on screen takes place live. Only a basic structure is pre-determined: when and where which camera, light, or sound source is to be switched on or off, and when and where which member of the group is to act. Editing and montage are likewise performed live on stage. Consequently the post-production, “a core element of cinema [...] here drops its ‘post’ prefix to become a practice one might best describe as real-time post-production.”¹⁹ *Asynthome* is “a kind of real-time cinema, in which everything, from acting in front of the camera to recording, to post-production, takes place live on stage.”²⁰ Audiovisual performance and its “making-of” happen at the same time, as elements of the same artistic process.²¹

Asynthome is a very complex construct, but at the heart of the production still lies the question of the relation between sound and image, the central question of visual music. Which leads us back to our initial premise: if we define visual music as a description for audiovisual productions pursuing the basic objective of a structural interplay between, and intertwining of, visual and acoustic components that leads to a new, genuinely audiovisual creation, then the questions of how audio and video come together in this kind of production, and whether visual music is a genre or an audiovisual practice, are no

¹⁷ For an excerpt of the performance see: <http://vimeo.com/12207495>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

¹⁸ For a definition of post-digitality see: Daniel Kulle, Cornelia Lund, Oliver Schmidt, David Ziegenhagen. “Welcome to Post-Digital Culture: A Short Introduction,” in: Kulle, Lund, Schmidt, Ziegenhagen. *Post-Digital Culture*, <http://www.post-digital-culture.org>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

¹⁹ Holger Lund. “*Transforma*—on Form,” <http://transforma.de/about/holger-lund/>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For an excerpt of the performance see: <https://vimeo.com/14853063>, date of access: November 23, 2017.

longer of major importance. Generally it seems to be one important characteristic of contemporary visual music that it opens the way to an exploration of performative dispositives.

At this point, the history of visual music again becomes of interest: one of the definitions mentioned above stresses the relation of visual music and technological developments.²² As Brougher's article on "Visual-Music Culture" in the catalog for the 2005 exhibition on visual music at the MOCA in Los Angeles implicitly shows, visual music artists have always taken up the newest developments in media technology, or even contributed to invent new instruments themselves—from color organs and film to experiments with oscilloscope techniques, from early computer animations in the 1960s to video and the exploration of digital technologies.²³ Thus it is very fitting that many VJs turn to visual music when they draw up their genealogy. However, when we observe new developments in media technology in the dispositives of *Homemade Collectif* and *Transforma*, these are not due to the use of the most up-to-date technology, but due to a mix of analog and digital elements to overcome the shortcomings of pure digitality: they have become post-digital.

So here in conclusion we come back full circle to the vagueness of the term stated at the beginning of this essay: we find that visual music is interesting in the context of experimental audiovisual settings not only because the term is being used to describe certain kinds of audiovisual productions, but because it is a practice that has a tendency to push further the exploration of all possible audiovisual settings.

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²² See Fox-Gieg, Keefer, Schedel 2012, p. 97.

²³ Kerry Brougher. "Visual-Music Culture," in: Brougher et al. 2005, pp. 88–178.

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