



RHYTHM IN IMAGE & COLORS IN MUSIC

# **RHYTHM IN IMAGE & COLORS IN MUSIC**

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Diploma research essay  
2006, Royal Academy of Arts  
the Hague Netherlands

▶ **TYPOPHONICS**

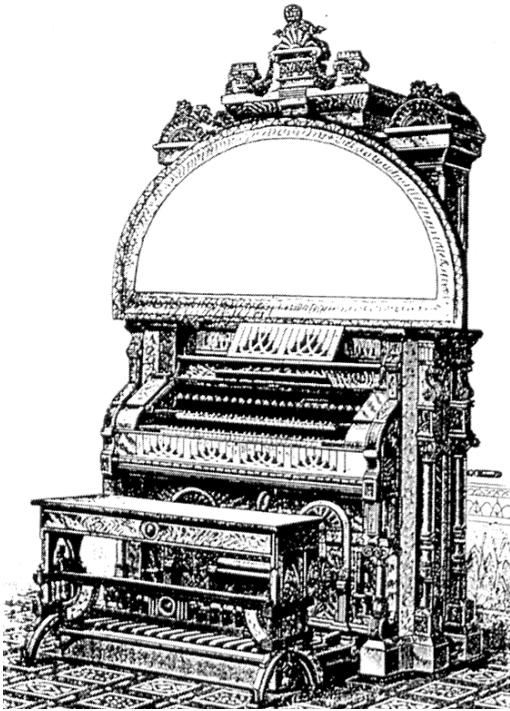
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Brainbridge Bishop  
Color organ  
1885

## INTRODUCTION

All the way through my studies in graphic design, music has taken an important part in my work. From the typographic visualisation of a jazz song in my first year in the Hague, to my internship at NLXL two years later and my introduction to VJ-ing.

As a teenager, I played in a band and tried to make music. The lack of success of my experiments pushed me to choose for design education as I felt my future in the music world didn't look too bright. I am very satisfied with my choice for image over music for my profession and along my studies I have discovered that the two fields actually have a lot in common. While discussing typographic composition for example, I found myself paying attention to *rhythm*, *harmony* between colors and *contrast*, which are concerns for musicians as well. With my graduation project I want to explore further how music and image complete and communicate with each other. How would a visual composition sound like? and how would I represent music visually?

This essay is the theoretical part of the project, an exploration of how visual arts and music have collaborated, influenced and changed each other through history. Far from an exhaustive report, these articles deal with media and artists that sparked a special interest in me as a graphic designer.

In this introduction, we will acknowledge first the development of artistic synesthesia, namely the ability to match the sounds that we hear with the colors and shapes that we see and the other way

around, then today's Visual Culture, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff. The body of this essay will focus on the relation between image and music, or the visualization of music, in the context of the capitalist and visual culture.

#### HARMONIA MUNDI

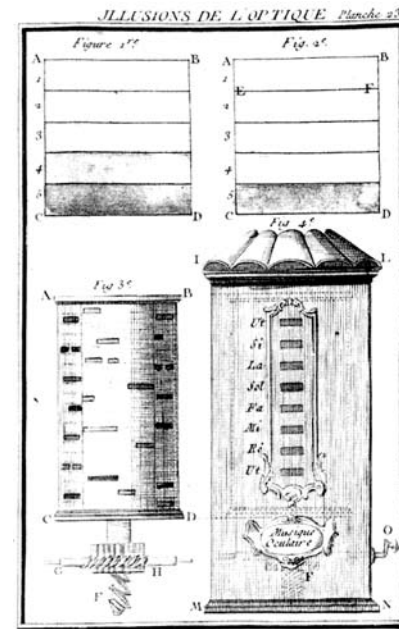
The concept of the *Music of the Spheres* was originated by the greek philosopher Pythagoras, and referred to the movements of the planets around the earth, created by God in the same proportions as found in pure musical intervals. This theory of a universal, cosmic harmony will often be taken a basis for artistic works that searched to achieve harmony between the musical and pictorial realms. Another greek philosopher, Aristotle, mentioned in his *On the Soul*, the existence of a 'sensus communis' a higher sense that would channel all perceptions of other senses into a shared harmony of mankind.

The romantic movement, originated in the late 18th century, was based on the search for a 'total' art form that would englobe all the senses and all human beings to move closer to 'cosmic consciousness', the harmony between colors, sounds and smells. Charles Fourier, in the early 19th century, set out to map the correspondances between the different 'realms of the universe', namely musical notes, colors, shapes and emotions.

Fourier considered the opera to be on the path to the unification of all senses, as it combines music, literature, and the visual setting of dance and the stage, creating a single experience englobing a wide spectrum of human perceptions.

Poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud in France were also concerned about 'corespondances' and expressed a feeling of 'profound unity' between the senses. In his poem *Voyelles*, Rimbaud matches colors, emotions and smells to the vowels, which are the sounding signs of our alphabet.

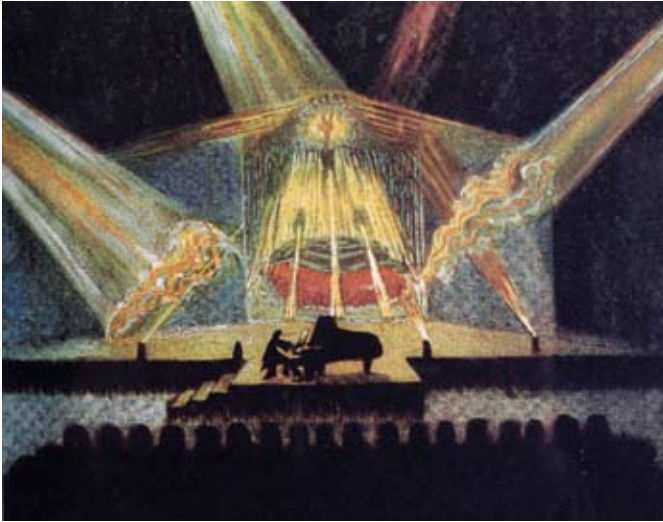
This Romantic feeling of a higher harmony, taking its roots in the *Music of the Spheres*, was envisioned as a democratic project for mankind. As the harmony between senses was achieved, humanity could move from the fragmentation of all things and beings to a cosmic unity. As Fourier declared in the introduction



Louis-Bertrand Castel  
*Musique Oculaire*  
1770

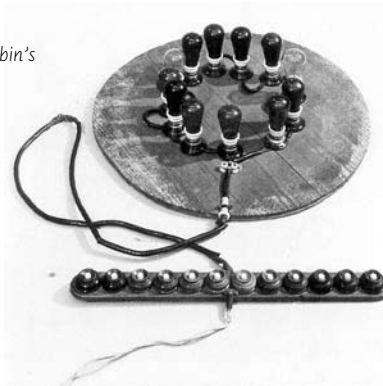
of his 'Theory of four movements' (1808) : 'All political, economical and moral theories must be thrown into fire, and we must prepare for the most stunning and fortunate event that can take place on this globe, and on all globes, the translation from social chaos to universal harmony'.

Wagner took a great part in this movement with his theories on 'absolute music' and 'the art form of the future'. Stating that 'Each faculty of mankind is limited, but all its faculties united, in tune with one another, helping each other, constitute the universal human faculty, infinite and self sufficient'. The need to break the distinction between the arts of space (painting, sculpture and architecture)



Alexander Lázsló  
*Color-musical performance*  
 (watercolor by Matthias Holl)  
 1925

A. Mosew  
*model of Color-piano used in Scriabin's*  
*Prometheus*



and the arts of time (music and poetry) flows from these theories and led, combined with the industrial revolution and the new technical means it brought into existence, to the birth of Color Music.

In order to make one with music, painting was to move from its static, fixed state. Therefore Color Music relied on colored light as a way to create a visual counterpart to a musical piece. The additive nature of light, as opposed to the subtractive way colors are mixed in painting, was suitable for creating chromatic 'chords'.

As early as 1720, the experiments of Louis Bertrand Castel were combining a piano keyboard with a system of colored fabrics illuminated by a flame, producing colored light every time a note was struck (see p. 11). This principle would inspire many attempts to create visual musical instruments, unleashed by the discovery of electricity. Among them were the Color Organs of Brainbridge Bishop in America (see p.8) and Wallace Rimington in England, using projections of colored light to visualize music as it was being played.

The Wagnerian influence is clear in the big sound and light performances that took place at the turn of the century.

*Prometheus - a poem of fire* by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, made use of a color keyboard in a display of synaesthetic utopia. Thomas Wilfred, who had patented his Clavilux in 1922, materialized the 'art form of the future' when he made use of such various facilities as recording and dance studios, chromotherapy clinic and a gigantic projection room for his piece *Lumia* that was to mark the opening in 1930 of the institute of Art and Light in New-York. Alexander Lazslo, whose sonochromatoscope performances were acclaimed in Germany, wrote in 1926 : 'Color-light music seeks to merge two previously separate art genres, art in notes with art in colors into a higher unity, a new art'. These experiments in colored light, movement and harmony along with the theory of Wagner were to find a strong echo in the modernist avant-gardes movements of the 20th century. The idea of crossing borders between art forms, and in particular, although not limited to, visual arts and music, was at the core of the futurist movement as well as the Bauhaus.

## MODERN SYNESTHESIA

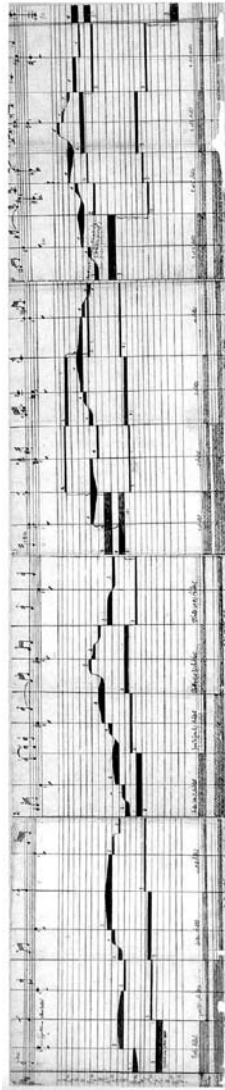
Even though the static nature of painting had led to the experiments with colored light as a mean to achieve a synthesis of both senses, the Wagnerian influence also pushed artists to emphasize synesthesia in their paintings. The symbolists were greatly under the Wagnerian 'cult' and held synesthesia as a central concern. The cubists fragmented space into a rhythmical composition and made constant references to Bach's polyphony both pictorially and literally by including the composer's name into their pieces, next to representations of musical instruments such as violins. The reference to synesthesia became clearer as painting drifted its focus from allegories and metaphorical representation to abstract, musical moods of form and color. Kandisky is maybe the artist where the reference to music is the most obvious. It was Wagner's music which, triggering intense synesthetic experiences, pushed Kandisky to become a painter. The piece *Lohengrin* touched the Russian artist especially, as it was for him the perfect musical description of a sunset over Moscow. He wrote: 'The violins, the deep bass tones, and especially the wind instruments embodied the entire force of the early evening hour for me back then. I saw all the colors in my mind, they appeared before my eyes. Wild, almost mad lines drew themselves in front of me. I did not dare to state in so many words that Wagner had painted "my hour" in music. But it became absolutely clear to me that art in general was much more powerful than I had thought, and that, on the other hand, painting was capable of developing powers akin to those of music'. Kandisky then set out to systemize the sounds of music into color, matching hues with different kind of instruments and tones. Another crucial influence for Kandisky's work and his dive into abstraction, was the music of Arnold Schoenberg and his atonal character, introducing the use of dissonance on an equal level with consonance. Kandisky realized at a concert of the composer, that total harmony was no longer to be the norm and that Schoenberg was revolutionizing music in the same way himself and his friends from the *Neue Künstlervereinigung* group wanted to revolutionize painting. Thrilled by the experience, Kandisky wrote in 1911, in a letter to the composer, 'I do believe that the harmony



Wassily Kandinsky  
*Fugue (controlled impression)*  
1914 | 129.5 \* 129.5 cm



Paul Klee  
*Fugue in Red*  
1921 | 24.3 \* 37.2 cm



Paul Klee  
*Transcription of the Adagio,  
6th Sonata for violin  
and harpsichord in G-Major,  
by Johann Sebastian Bach  
from the "Comments on the principles of  
Formal Design", Klee's first lecture series  
at the Weimar Bauhaus.*  
1922

of today is not to be found by the geometric approach (cubism), but by a decidedly anti-geometric, anti-logical one. And this approach is that of dissonances in art, that is, in painting to the same extent as in music'. The idea of dissonance and counterpoint became central to Kandinsky's work and was shared by his colleagues at the Bauhaus, such as Paul Klee.

Klee's sensibility to music was quite obvious, coming from a musician family and being one himself. In his *Fugue in Red* (see p.15), he describes pictorially the principle of the fugue. The same theme is taken at various pitches by different parts or voices. Klee represents this by using various shapes that change through space to give the sense of time. The shapes respond to each other in the same way the themes interact in a fugue. The kinetic way of displaying the evolution of the fugue that Klee uses in his painting clearly prefigures the experiments in film that were to follow, notably the work of Oskar Fischinger. At the Bauhaus Klee also made experiments in translating music visually in a literary, almost scientific way, by transposing a score of Bach graphically according to the pitch and duration of the notes. This attempt bumped against the limited space of the printed medium, Klee only transposed the two first bars of the piece, showing a principle that would have taken hundreds of meters of paper to complete.

In general, the musical and movement depictions of the futurists as well as the Bauhaus all hurtled themselves against the edges of the canvas. As artists were inventing ways to emphasize the time dimension in the painted medium, by means such as scrolls of paper and elongated formats, the development and the spreading of film brought the answer, by combining the moving and additive character of light seen in color music with the freedom in form and composition sought by the modern avant-gardes, opening new time-based possibilities in synesthetic art.

## VISUAL CULTURE

In his book, *Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff studies how our relation to the world has become essentially visual. From entertainment to science, we understand, communicate and exchange information by visual means. The visual 'does not replace discourse but makes it more comprehensible, quicker and more effective'. While this culture dominated by the image and its virtuality seems to many intellectuals to be 'second-rate' compared to the traditional textual knowledge, Mirzoeff points out that 'the inherent multiplicity of possible viewpoints available to interpret an image make it a potentially far more democratic medium than the written text'. In the context of a global culture and economy, this statement takes even more meaning, as images cross the border of language. This democratic quality of the image is also present in the fact that viewing is often a collective experience, for example in cinemas or on the internet.

The world-as-a-text has been replaced by a world-as-a-picture. As visual communication constantly tries to saturate the field of image we learn to process more information at once. This is seen clearly in the example of news broadcasts, which went from the single frontal shot of an anchor presenter, to a fragmentation of the screen where many sources of information, such as the stock market, sport-results and incoming headlines are displayed at the same time, while the news reports is confined to a smaller portion of the screen. The threshold of visual saturation is pushed further with every attempt to emphasize a specific message and our brains become more accustomed to dealing with larger amounts of visual information.

The visualization of information also occurs when that information is not in itself visual. Computer interfaces for example, propose a visual representation of something totally abstract. We have learned to use and interact with operating systems that have a visual interface, but the data in itself could as well be textual, as it was the case in early operating systems such as MS-DOS. The visual in that case is a more intuitive way to deal with the abstract nature of computation, and if programmers and professionals can deal with the data in textual way, by writing code,

the majority of computer users rely on the now standard 'point and click' interface.

This capacity to visualize thing that are not visual by nature brings us to our topic of interest, music. Hearing being the most immaterial of our senses, how is music represented in a visual way in order to exist in the visual culture ? We have seen that the abstract nature of music is a constant source of inspiration for visual artists to materialise the sense of harmony and rhythm. In a market economy, music doesn't escape the merchandization and becomes a commodity that is produced and sold and therefore needs a visual 'face' in order to be represented and recognized.

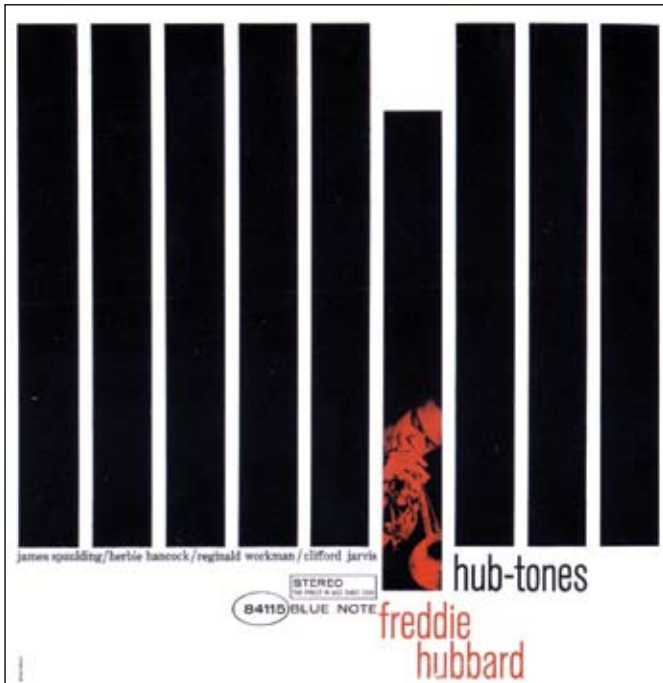
We will discuss in this essay the three main ways through which music takes up a visual form, the record cover, the music video, and the live performance, also known as VJ-ing. As a graphic designer, my interest will be on looking how the relation between image and music occurs in the context of a commercial assignment.

Freddie Hubbard  
Hub-Tones  
design : Reid Miles 1962

## BLUE-NOTE RECORDS & REID MILES' VISUAL BEBOP

Living in a 'visual culture' we judge books, and also records, by their covers. Music as a commodity is represented by its image, and that image is found on the records we buy. This is well demonstrated nowadays by the fact that music retail websites display images of records before worrying about audio samples, and when they do provide these samples, they are often so short that the image still plays the main part in identifying what we are buying. In this chapter, we will discuss an example of how the visual representation of music, taking its source in the music itself, can reflect its artistic qualities, and become as interesting for the eyes as music is for the ears. Blue-Note records has been one of the most successful and innovative jazz record labels, it revolutionized music but also graphic design, as the covers created by Reid Miles continue to influence designers working in the field of music and beyond.

In 1938, Alfred Lion, a German emigré in New-York, was highly inspired by an event that was to become a landmark in jazz music as the affirmation of the boogie-woogie style, the *from Spirituals to Swing* concerts in Carnegie Hall. A year later, he decided to record two of the pianists that had participated in the concerts, Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis, in a studio. At the end of 1939, Lion was joined by an old friend from Germany,



professional photographer Francis Wolff, and Blue-Note records was born. They shared a passion for jazz, its constant mutation and search for innovation. As the new bebop style was on the rise, Blue-Note was releasing its first series of 78rpm records. The recording sessions went on and the biggest names of bebop were present, gathered by Ike Quebec who was the 'talent hunter' of the label. In 1947, Thelonious Monk recorded what has been recognized as some of the most important bebop pieces. Tadd Dameron, Fats Navarro, Howard McGhee and Bud Powell followed, all driven by Lion and Wolff to give out their best. The two owners of Blue-Note had very high standards regarding the quality of what they were releasing and did not hesitate to shelf away tracks that were 'okay for release, but just not up to Blue-Note's standards'. This material was to be released 30 years later, after their retirement from the company.

The partners also had a very fair and respectful way with the musicians, often arranging the sessions in the late hours of the night, when the jazzmen were most in their element. The fact that they organized and paid for rehearsal time prior to recording underlines that their concern for artistic quality was always above commercial interests.

The spirit and foundations of the label which would bring the best and newest development of jazz onto vinyl were laid. As the inventors of bebop were now moving further, mixing blues and gospel into their music, creating the hard bop style, a new element came into place. Sound engineer Rudy van Gelder started recording the sessions from 1953 and brought to Blue-Note its distinctive sound. His engineering was, in a way, as important and as revolutionary as the music, he was to become one of the most sought after jazz technicians for the decades to come. The elements were now gathered for the true musical breakthrough of Blue-Note and new talents such as Milt Jackson and the Modern Jazz Quartet, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers or Clifford Brown were recording.

The next turn taken by the label was in part due to a technical improvement. Around the mid-50's a new format of record, the 12 inch, was brought to the market. It could hold up to 50 minutes of

music and was to be the standard until the era of the compact disc. In 1956, the first Blue-Note 12 inch was released, featuring organist Jimmy Smith, a newbie in the Blue-Note pool.

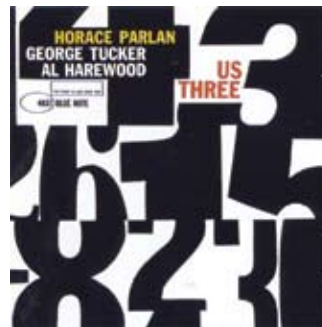
At the time, Blue-Note was a client of John Hermansader for the label's graphic design. Reid Miles, a young designer who had come to New-York after his studies at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los-Angeles, was hired by Hermansader and got involved in the design of 12 inch covers. Lion and Wolff were so enthusiastic about the design of Miles that he was asked to keep working for the label. The last ingredient of the Blue-Note 'recipe' had fallen into place. Mile's designs seemed to visualize perfectly the spirit and energy of the label. The covers often featured photographs taken by Wolff himself during the sessions, although in some cases they were illustrated by Miles. For two covers, the services of an illustrator were hired, quite unknown at the time, his name was Andy Warhol. The genuine experience of the sessions came through to the audience in original designs that proved, over 15 years and more than 500 releases, to have endless possibilities and variations. Each of the covers designed by Miles had an identity of its own, as each of the sessions was unique, while they clearly belonged to the same family when considered as a whole. This also reflects the human phenomenon of Blue-Note. While each musician of the label was clearly a single personality and talent, all of them collaborated, sometimes appearing on each other's records without necessarily being part of the same formation, creating a kind of family made of brilliant individuals.

The tight links between Reid Miles' designs and the people and the music he was working for is, in my sense, the reason why his record covers were so successful, and why they are as much part of Blue-Note as the music. They represent what happened at the time, on the artistic level as well as the human level, making Blue-Note a landmark in music history, and by doing so they made the label a landmark in graphic design history as well. Inspired by what he was witnessing, Miles took part in Blue-Note with design as his instrument, and took the whole experience to a visual level with the same straightforwardness and honesty as the musicians,

the sound-engineer and the label owners.

In many ways, Reid Miles' use of graphic elements and especially of typography relate to the characteristics of bebop and hard bop jazz. The most striking for me is that bebop musicians tended to condense things, to add nothing but the notes they felt were absolutely necessary. In my sense, the power of Miles' designs lies in their simplicity. Far from being neutral, they hold a balance between the photography, the colors and the type, achieving contrast and tension without ever saying too little or too much. By stripping things down to their very core, Miles made the elements explode on the page and left no space for discussion. His 'justness' in typography is striking in each and every one of his covers, always twisting what we expect to see just enough while never falling into over-decoration. Although his typographic palette was very wide, ranging from low contrast sans-serifs to high contrast, bold cursives, Miles always seems to bring things together in a natural way.

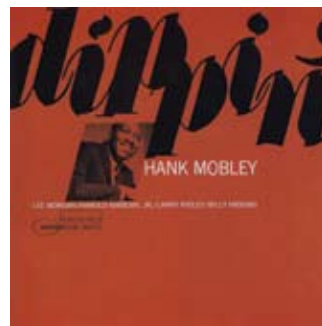
Another similarity between bebop and Miles' composition lies in the sense of rhythms. Compared to the highly structured and constructed beats of the swing era, bebop proposed much more fragmented and racing rhythm. The fast tempos of the bass lines and drums were a new experience for the audience. If we look at the cover designed by Reid Miles for Kenny Dorham's *Trompeta Toccata* as an example, we can clearly see this sense of fragmentation in the rhythm. Miles, by the simple mean of cutting up the letters, really paints the music typographically. We can also note how the small photograph and the line of black type, left uncut, come as a counterpoint to balance the composition. As this new type of rhythm was characteristic of bebop, and later hard bop, we can say that typographic rhythm is characteristic of Miles' design. The covers for Jackie Mc Lean's *it's Time*, Hank Mobley's *Dippin'* or Horace Parlan's *Us three*, show how the rhythm of hard bop comes out visually in a straightforward way. This is visible at every level of the design, even when type doesn't constitute the main focus of the cover. One of Reid Miles' most specific traits is that his typography is never totally aligned to the left on a single line, one line, or a group of lines, often breaks the alignment by being offset to the



Horace Parlan  
*Us Three*  
design : Reid Miles 1960



Kenny Dorham  
*Trompeta Toccata*  
design : Reid Miles 1964



Hank Mobley  
*Dippin'*  
design : Reid Miles 1965



Jackie Mc Lean  
*it's Time!*  
design : Reid Miles 1964



Sonny Clark  
Sonny Clark trio!  
design : Reid Miles 1957

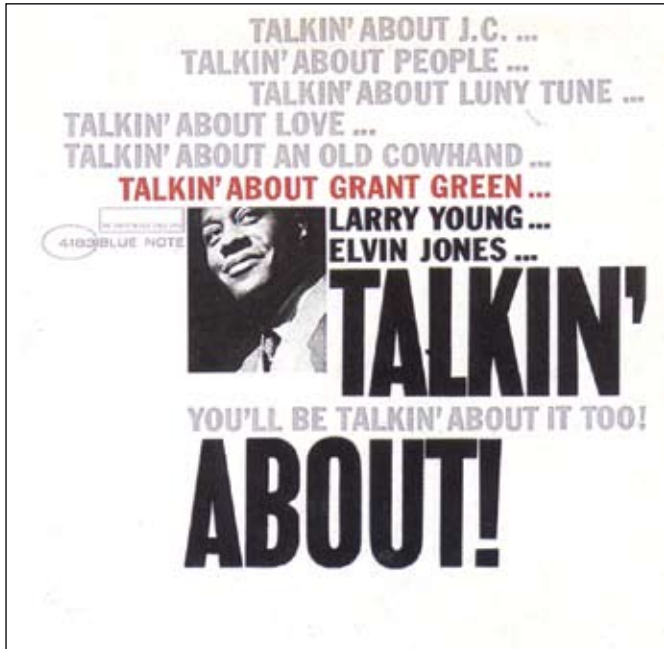
right or the left. That way, even when presenting text in a 'traditional' fashion the sense of rhythm comes through and the typography almost seems soundfull, reminding me of a trumpet's pistons in different positions. This way of aligning text can be considered one of Miles' biggest influences on graphic design, as many designers have used this trick since to reattach themselves with the universe of jazz music. Rhythm in Miles' work not only presents the elements in a way reminiscent of the music, but also enhances the content , hierarchy and readability of the cover, which is of course of first priority to the audience. The third important link between Reid Miles' work and bebop/

hardbop jazz is the new type of harmonies used by the musicians at the time. Bebop saw the introduction of upper chord tones (9ths 11ths and 13ths in musical scales). Artists such as Charlie Parker relied on these tones to give more 'color' to their music in a way that hadn't been seen in any previous jazz styles. As bebop developed, these chords became the fundamentals of a new harmonic of the style. This 'colorful' music comes out of the records and through the covers of Miles. By the use of strong, full tones, Miles transposed the harmonics onto paper, either with warm energetic reds, or by showing the 'blues' present in hard bop. The photography, often black and white, was combined with solid colors. To preserve the straightforwardness of the design, the color palette was often limited on one cover to a single tone or a strong contrast. Although examples like the *Sonny Clark trio* show Miles' ease in creating harmony with many color tones. Typography was also often colored in a way that served the hierarchy of the content by making some words shout out from the rest.

So the design elements in Miles' work tightly connect with the music it is representing on the shelves of record stores but do so in a way that respects the information and the communication about this music, making it both identified and readable. From the points we have seen, we can say that Reid Miles, if with a different instrument, was an integrate part of the Blue-Note 'revolution' and success. The music and the visuals achieved such a dialog that they became inseparable, influencing and revolutionizing their respective fields. It is right to say that if the music of that time provided a breakthrough that influences musicians to this day, Reid Miles invented a visual vocabulary for jazz music that had the same impact for graphic designers. The characteristic of his designs have become the visual face of jazz and have been referred to in countless creations, even beyond this particular field. As we still enjoy the music of Blue-Note records, the work of Reid Miles is still standing high in the history of graphic design, proving in the long term to seem even less 'dated' than covers that were created after Alfred Lion, Francis Wolff and

Miles had retired from the label, that was forced to take a more commercial turn.

In the end, the coming together of great musical talents and engineers, with Lion and Wolff as label owners and visionaries was completed by Reid Miles' playfulness and visual dexterity. This experience provided artistic output that continues to hold immense qualities to this day.



*Grant Green*  
*Talkin' about*  
*design : Reid Miles 1964*



Bjork  
*Hyperballad*  
directed by Michel Gondry  
1996

## MUSIC TELEVISION

If today's visual culture was a building, television would be its foundations. TV has brought the visualization of the world into our daily lives, and marked a new step in our societies' need to make every last bit of information visual. As Nicholas Mirzoeff underlines in his *Introduction to Visual Culture*, 'One of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the growing tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visual'. Although one could argue that music is in fact visual, as people have more or less synaesthetic abilities and we have seen that Kandisky actually saw colors when he was listening to music, we will focus here on the way television made music visual in a way that is more oriented towards mass media than synaesthetic experiences. The main format of this visualization is the music video. Like the record cover, it gives a face, an image, to the music we buy and listen to. The record cover has a straightforward function, being on the product, namely the recorded support itself, it acts as a label.

The music video belongs to another realm, broadcast. Even though radio seems at first like an appropriate broadcasting format for music, it is paradoxically the visual nature of TV that made it so appealing for musical acts, as a way to advertise themselves. We will first follow the development of the music video and then focus on a very singular director, Michel Gondry.

As we said, it is television that really gave birth to the music video we know, although many experiments with film and music preceded and set some of the visual vocabulary that the genre still uses today. One could argue that films like Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, in 1940, also influenced the genre. The *Soundies*, short one-song clips that were available in bars through the panoram visual jukebox also prefigured, before the second world war, what TV would bring to life later on. It is Tony Bennett that claims to have made the first music video, in 1956, when he was filmed walking in Hyde Park, London. The film was broadcast on US and UK TV stations while his recording of *Stranger in Paradise* was played. Television series such as the Monkees, from 1966 to 1968, started including short clips to accompany the songs in their program. One of the major bands that developed the genre of the music video was the Beatles. After their motion picture *A Hard Day's Night*, in 1964, the band set out to illustrate their songs with techniques borrowed from avant garde films. The films made for *Strawberry Fields* and *Penny Lane* proposed an alternative to the recorded performances that were dominant at the time. The animated film, *The Yellow Submarine* also unravelled new possibilities, at the height of the psychedelic period.

Soon many bands were making promotional clips as the trend became more and more widespread. Artists such as The Doors, Pink Floyd, ABBA and many others all had promotional clips for their songs. Whether it was their own artistic initiative or their record companies' idea for a better promotion remains hard to tell



the Beatles  
the Yellow Submarine  
directed by George Dunning  
1968

and depends on the cases. The Doors, for example, used the medium to carry a political statement about the Vietnam war in their film for *The Unknown Soldier*.

A key in the development of the music video was, apart from the growing audience of television stations, the invention of video recording and the new possibilities it brought about. New effects such as chroma-keying, where the subject is filmed on a blue screen to be included on another background, became part of the visual language of the genre, during the New-Wave era. The lower cost of video also encouraged artists to produce their videos, following the Do It Yourself ideal of the time.

As the music video was gaining more and more interest, TV shows that were entirely dedicated to it started to appear. In the UK, *Top of the Pops* gave even more importance to the clips, providing a competitive environment for the artists where the videos were listed according to the sales of the records. This strategy highly enhanced the power of videos on record sales. A good impression on the viewers could encourage them to buy the single in hope to see the video again the following week. The show had a very strict number of videos to display, therefore creating competition between the artists for who would come up with the best clip. Shows based on the same principle started to appear in other countries. Australia's Countdown for example had an enormous influence on the popularity of musical acts and held a monopoly by signing exclusivity contracts with artists such as Queen, Blondie, Meat-Loaf, Cyndi Lauper and Madonna.

In 1981, the music video saw its consecration in the creation of the Music Television channel, also known as MTV. The station was, and has been since its creation, dedicated to the broadcast of music videos, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Ironically, or maybe more as a statement of what was happening, the first video broadcast on the channel was a hit by The Buggles, *Video Killed the Radio Star*. Having found a place of their own in the audiovisual landscape, videos continued to thrive, and their central role in the marketing of music was confirmed. Artists such as Madonna produce videos to shape their public image and advertise themselves. Looking at the evolution of her image through the years and decades shows the

flexibility of the TV medium and its ability to idealize people and performances.

As MTV continues to be a self-proclaimed center for youth culture, we might wonder why TV has become so important for the music industry. It seems paradoxical that a medium where the priority is obviously given to the visual content could hold any interest for people making, or even selling, music. The simple fact that TV sets almost always have a mute button, but no function to turn off only the image reveals the contradiction. In fact, if we look at how the other products are sold in the visual culture, the relationship between TV and music might not seem so paradoxical after all. One notable evolution of our market economies is that, as households became more and more equipped with goods, the focus of commercials shifted from the product itself, to its brand image. While it is not necessary anymore to convince consumers that they need a washing machine in the first place, advertising now presents one product as better than the others through a certain image, be it eco-friendly, high-tech, easy-to-use, and so on. Nowadays, brands don't sell us products, they sell us an image, a lifestyle, a message. The production costs have been driven so low that most of the price of a product is paid for its image, and for the image of the brand selling it. This may as well be applied to music, and could explain why television is so important on the music market.

Music as a commodity sells itself through TV, and the focus has switched from artistic quality of the music itself to the image of the band or the artist. It is fascinating to watch how artists like Madonna are real chameleons in this visual world, changing their image from 'femme fatale', to mystical personality, to cowboy girl, to anti-American activist, whereas the music itself remains more or less similar. The image of the artist is there for the audience to identify with, holding the same confusion between having and being that is seen in advertising. Listening to, or liking an artist, becomes as much about the music than about the image we want to belong to. The censorship by music TV channels of the videos they judge too offensive or not proper to broadcast is also used for commercial purposes in the positioning of an artist. Having a video edited or censored by MTV can be a big promotion for a musical act wanting



50 Cent  
*P.I.M.P (remix version)*  
directed by Chris Robinson  
2003

to appear as 'rebellious' or against the system. In the same fashion, the 'Parental Advisory' label has become a must, for example on Hip-Hop albums, acting much more as a label of authenticity than a cultural safeguard. Especially in the case of a young, teenage audience, the positioning of musicians in the TV landscape, through music videos and their consequences, is a powerful marketing tool that has been used on countless occasions to appeal to the audience.

But the music video also fosters, in some cases, artistic talent and has become, much like TV commercials, a usual first step for film directors that move on to motion pictures after having gained some

experience. As the genre developed, the line between music video and short film became less clear. Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, released in 1984 and directed by John Landis, was a 13 minutes film with a story line, and a fountain of special effects. Another short film for Jackson's song *Bad* was directed by Martin Scorsese, showing the growing importance of the quality of the visual material. In december 1992, MTV started to include the director's name in the credits for music videos, letting singular talents emerge and be recognized. The growing number of videos called for differentiation, and therefore allowed directors to innovate within the format, blurring the line between the commercial nature of the medium and its artistic potential. Music videos compilations appeared on video tapes and on dvds, reflecting the interest in the way film makers interact with music. Although many videos remain on the level of the idealized performance, in Hip-Hop music for example, where the clips are more or less all the same and interchangeable featuring the artists in luscious displays of the 'pimp' attitude (call-girls, gold chains and expensive cars)(see p.35), others reflect an artistic concern of the director to work out more sophisticated images, by means of storytelling or visual 'moods', that take the music and its specificity as a starting point. The videos of Chris Cunningham for Aphex Twin, for example, twist the expectations of the audience towards the music video and reflect the weird universe of the music. Their nature is, of course, no less commercial than other music videos, but Cunningham goes beyond that purpose (and is obviously aware of it in a dark, ironical way) to propose his personal visual reaction to Aphex Twin's music. Given the commercial nature of the assignment, it is, in my sense, the personal involvement of the director that can make a difference and take the music video out of the prefabricated frame, by really connecting it to the music in creative ways.

One of the most impressive displays of what the music video can be, is, for me, the work of Michel Gondry. He has directed videos for artists such as Bjork, the White Stripes, the Chemical Brothers, Daft Punk and the Foo Fighters. In each of his videos, the combination of simple and powerful ideas with the inventivity

necessary to bring them to life creates a very singular visual language that always gives priority to the music over a personal 'style'. Gondry is, however, involved on a very personal, almost intimate level in his creations.

The fact that it was often him that contacted the artists whose music inspired him shows the first step of this involvement, the assignments, while remaining in the market of the music television, also have a personal meaning for Gondry, who says to have worked for most of his favorite musicians, except Michael Jackson. Starting with this special connection between him and his assignment, Gondry then imagines visual solutions that often relate to his intimate experiences, such as his dreams or childhood memories. The result is brought to the viewer through a variety of technical means, according to the effects needed to create the illusion, such as stop motion animation, computer 3-D images and other inventions. In his dexterity to create illusions, Michel Gondry reminds me of Georges Melies, a french magician who set up his own cinema studio in the very beginning of the 20th century and astonished the audience with films such as *the Trip to the Moon* in 1902. We could say Gondry is the Melies of the MTV era, only his stories are based on music. As we watch his videos, we are never exactly sure how he achieved such an illusion, as well as we don't always understand, or are able to measure the reasons why we enjoy a particular piece of music. By taking his inspiration in his subconscious and his memories, mixing up ideas into a parallel universe, Gondry somehow addresses visually the way music can make us feel.

The videos he realized for Bjork, especially *Human Behavior* and *Bachelorette* are a good example of the kind of universe Michel Gondry is able to create. Another example of his dexterity is the video for the Chemical Brothers' song *Star Guitar* (see p.38), in which Gondry addresses an experience common to all people that have ever been on a train, watching out the window while listening to music. The idea of having the landscape represent the music we are listening to is quite simple in appearance but requires a high level of inventivity to actually bring it to life. The trick was achieved by mixing film and computer graphics into a result so astonishing



*the Chemical Brothers*  
*Star Guitar*  
*directed by Michel Gondry*  
2002



*the White Stripes*  
*the Hardest Button to button*  
*directed by Michel Gondry*  
2003

to the viewer that the question 'how was this made ?' disappears to leave all the room to the pure enjoyment of watching music create a landscape.

Michel Gondry emphasizes the ideas, imagination and dreams that music can spark, rather than idealizing artists and their performances. His videos rarely feature the artists playing on their instrument except in the case of the White Stripes, on which we will come back later. The artists are often present in the videos but as part of the story, of the world and illusion imagined by Gondry, he says: 'It's funny all this technical stuff I did with singers. When they have to do something physical it's a relief because they don't have to worry about who they are and what they are doing and they can be completely natural. I get the performances when I do this because they are participating and they see they are achieving something that is not easy'. Musicians are, in general, very enthusiastic about their experience of working with Michel Gondry, and that is probably because while bringing his own personality and creativity, he includes them in the process, to create videos that really match their music visually and go beyond promoting them as super-humans belonging to one style or another. In fact, Gondry's videos emphasize the human side of music.

Being a drummer, and the fact that both his parents played music, gave Michel Gondry a sense of rhythm and a musical sensibility. We see through his videos in general, but particularly when he takes the rhythm of the song as basics for its visualization. We mentioned before the example of the Chemical Brothers and *Star Guitar*, where the rhythm is obviously at the center of the video, but there are other example that share this characteristic. The video made for the White Stripes and their song *The Hardest Button to Button* (see p.39) makes use of stop motion animation to simply display the rhythm. As we saw , it isn't in Gondry's habit to show the musicians performing, but after attending a White Stripes concert, he was blown away by the stage presence of the duo and decided to use them anyway. Of course the video doesn't only show the musicians playing but brings in an interesting twist. Using the budget of the video to buy 36 drum kits and guitar amplifiers, Gondry visualizes

the rhythm by creating geometrical pattern out of he music. For the drums, each element of the kit that is hit remains in place while Meg White moves forward to the next kit, creating that way a line of drum kits of what she played. The same thing happens for the guitar, that leaves an amplifier every time a chord is struck. As the music grows more intense, the patterns become more complex, and lines of drum kits and amplifiers are set in motion in the landscape. The rough quality of the image and the cut-up movement fit perfectly with the music of the duo while the animation illustrate perfectly the music, by simply making its rhythm visual. In this case, if Gondry decided to show the musicians performing it is not to emphasize their sexiness or how they are dressed, the priority is clearly on the music and the image is drawn from it. The visual result has, of course, qualities of its own, but it cannot be separated from the music, it completes the music instead of disturbing it.

Another video that takes the music's rhythm as basis for visualization, although in a totally different way than the White Stripes video, is Daft Punk's *Around the World* (see p.42). For this video, Michel Gondry set out to explore the possibilities of choreography, although it wasn't a field in which he felt comfortable, he says : 'I had never done a video with a dance number, because most of the time I hated them. It's always about energy and sex, and the choreography is cut in pieces to enhance the pacing of the editing. Everything I hate. [...] Choreography for me is not made for close-ups. When you go see a ballet, you don't see close-ups. All you see is groups of moving bodies. Geometric patterns are created in the space by bodies that seem entirely dedicated to this function'. Gondry set out to deconstruct Daft Punk's music, and assigned each of the five tracks to a group of characters. The bassline became athletes with small heads and big bodies because 'they move constantly and have no time to think'. The guitar and its 'itchy sound' was represented by skeletons. The vocoder sound called for robots. Disco girls embodied the 'feminine' sound of the synthesizer and the drum machine was assigned to mummies, for no apparent reason except a 'very meaning association between Michael Jackson (Gondry's hero)



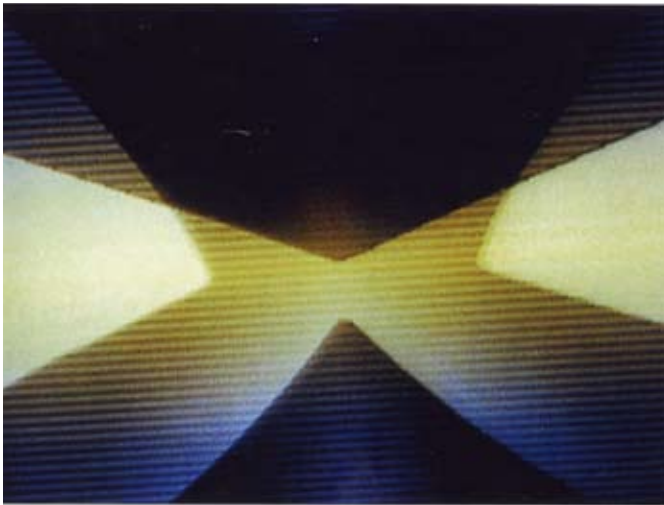
*Daft Punk  
Around the world  
directed by Michel Gondry  
1997*

and what he did to himself'. Once all these characters were chosen, Gondry imagined an architectural choreography based on what happened in the different tracks and their interaction. The set was to be composed around a circle, with stairs for the bass-athletes to run up and down, a rizer in the center for the drum-mummies and the robots would walk around the whole composition following the vocoder voice. A professional choreographer, Bianca Li put all the ideas of Gondry together and, adding her own touch created the choreography. This video shows the talent of Gondry in mixing the input from the music with his own world to create a movement that follows and suits the music.

We see here the same principle used by computer software, visualizing music track on a timeline, only the music isn't processed by a machine but by a human making creative associations between what he hears and the image. The result is a video with qualities tightly linked to those of the music. As with the White Stripes video, the image completes the music, and the two create a new experience. In the end this approach benefits also the commercial function of the video by creating more interest for the audience with genuine artistic qualities.

We have seen that the function of the music video is to represent music in today's visual culture, and the shift of focus from the quality and the singularity of the music towards the brand-image of the artists. Music videos are at the center of this shift, and one could argue that video really killed the radio star in the sense that musical talent isn't the only requirement to becoming a renowned musician. Actually, there is proof on television that musical talent is not required at all. As music videos have become a must for any artist to even exist on the 'mainstream' music scene, the power of the major record companies has grown proportionally, as they provide the budget for the marketing, including videos. In some cases however, music and image can influence each other in creative ways, even in a commercial context. We have seen with Michel Gondry that video can also be happily married to the radio star and that the combination can bring out artistic output that reach beyond the commodity and the advertising.

*Stephen Beck*  
*Video synthesizer*  
1964



## **VJ CULTURE : FROM OUR HOUSE TO MY CLUB**

In the last two decades of the 20th century, a new step was taken in the visualization of music, and in the interaction between music and image in the context of 'live' performances. The world around us is now 'conceived and grasped as a picture' (Heidegger 1977), on the other hand, the rise of electronic music has removed the visual representation of a band playing their instruments at a concert, and replaced it with artists using laptop computers, or turntables on stage. As our experience of the world was becoming more and more visual, the act of performing music had less and less to offer visually to the audience. This fact, combined with the technological developments of video, beamers, and the personal computer, led to a new kind of performance, to make up for the audience's need to be stimulated visually alongside with the music. These performances are referred to as VJ-ing. By projecting video, or images, the VJ adds a visual layer to a musical act. The fact that nowadays technology allows for these images to be edited and mixed 'live' makes the VJ an integrate part of the performance. Just as the music, the visuals are 'performed' on the spot, in the moment, even if they are prepared in advance. In this new setting, musicians and visual artists can establish a dialog with a higher level of corespondance between the sound and the image and propose a mutli-sensorial experience to their audience. The term VJ itself is not accepted by all live visual artists, and doesn't have a clear definition, as it varies according to the context,

and the digital era is blurring the borders between different kinds of media. The term, however, has the advantage to clearly state the relation and similarity between these visual performances and the DJ and sample culture in music. What the DJ does to music, mixing it, sometimes creating it and taking samples out of existing material, the VJ does to images. Although there are as many definitions of VJ-ing as there are VJs, we will try here to consider the implications of the visual performance as a general phenomenon, based on the research of Annet Dekker at the Montevideo media art institute in Amsterdam Netherlands.

The music video, as we have seen, consists in the visual representation of a song. The audio material, as well as the image, is recorded, edited and broadcasted. The creation takes place in studios, then the finished product is displayed an infinite number of times on television. What differs in VJ-ing is the 'real time' factor, the context of a performance, in a particular space, at a particular time. The essence of VJ-ing lies in the live context.

Which parts of the performance are left for live interpretation and which parts are prepared beforehand depends on the artists and their way of working, but they all have this in common that they play their visuals in a particular context. As for DJs, the element of live mixing is central to VJ-ing and allows for visual improvisation, to a certain extent, according to the music and the audience. The level of connection between image and sound varies for every artist and performance. It is not always clear to the viewer whether the images are composed live, or if they are recorded. In my opinion, the act of mixing or generating something live, on the spot, as an interaction with the surrounding is crucial to VJ-ing, but one could argue that playing a recorded tape in a certain context, with regards to space and presentation is also in the scope of VJ-ing. This shows how blurry the borders of this discipline are.

Perhaps this uncertainty and inability to define VJ-ing outside of specific contexts is also a central point in its definition. Being an art of presentation and performance, it morphs itself in every situation. The fast growth of processing power in laptops has opened new

possibilities for artists to modify and mix images in 'real time'. Although computers are now very widespread among VJs and a big number of live video software solutions are available, the use of a laptop is far from mandatory. Experiments with analog materials, such as slides or overhead projectors, can also provide 'live' possibilities. The work of Stephen Beck, for example, in the early days of video, shows live improvisation with a video synthesizer to follow the music of a jazz band (see p.42). It is right to say, however, that it is the technological developments in computers, beamers and video mixers that allowed VJ-ing to develop to the extent we know today.

In the context of the sample or remix culture, the similarities between image and music are striking. The process of providing either sound or visuals to an audience, being a DJ or a VJ, is more or less the same. That underlines also the blurring between medias and disciplines characteristic of the digital era. Loops are taken out of existing material to be modified, filtered and rearranged into a new creation. In the case of VJ-ing, some artists, such as Eboman, rely only on existing material. The mixing and treatment of the image then constitutes the work of the VJ, who creates a new, non linear kind of storyline. The change of context of the material can add a layer of meaning to the images, they don't only follow the music in their editing or form, but can convey a message of their own, political or not. In the combination of different samples, the VJ in a very post-modern way, creates his own language, according to the context and his own sensibility.



*Drifter TV  
VJ performance*



*Eboman  
VJ / sound performance*

The 'copy paste' culture is present in music as well. DJs play and mix records of others, and combine them into remix tracks where the voice from one song is pasted on the music of another. Digital technology created these processes and made them available to every Personal-Computer.

The 'live' characteristic brings us back to the sense of 'total' experience present in the romantic vision of *The Music of the Spheres*. As our culture grows more and more visual, the audience has the need and ability to process a large amount of visual information. Along with the music, the audience and the space, the visuals

participate in the creation of a unique experience that includes light, sound and image into a whole.

This notion of a harmonious combination of the senses, and of people as a community, was also central to the House movement in the 1980's. Even though the start of vj-ing is hard to point down, depending on what criteria one refers to, House music clearly stated the advent of the 'club vj'. House parties were based on a feeling of community, 'my house is your house, and your house is mine'.

As the electronic music had very little to offer visually, it seemed necessary to reflect the sense of unity of the experience by displaying visuals with the music. The harmony and interaction between image, music and people, along with the use of psychedelic drugs, created a sort of mystical, almost religious experience reminiscent of the *Sensus Communis* of Aristotle. A sense that would unify all others into a single harmony, beyond separations between colors, sounds and human beings. The House parties and their 'total' experience were, in a way, a political statement in themselves. They brought people, and medias, together with a strong political and cultural sense of community. This sense was to develop along with the information era, and internet, into a 'global House Nation movement'. The feeling of unity central to House pushed artists and vjs to envision performance as a whole, and to experiment not only in the visuals and music but also in their presentation in space. New settings were imagined with new technologies in a spirit of innovation and evolution in form.

Vj-ing then was as much about the visuals themselves than about the space and context in which they fitted as a part of a wider experience. As the technology became more widespread and more affordable, the clubs, driven by commercial and logistic concerns, started to invest in their own setups of projectors and screens. The vj phenomenon gained recognition and at the same time started to be taken out of the House and taken over by the clubs. The commercial context of the club cut many links with the original spirit, 'The idea of creating a new space was finished. There simply came to be a standard, and with it, Vjing was neatly channeled into the club concept' (Geert Mul). The equipment in clubs became fixed, a frame where vjs could make their performance, but no more

consider and shape the setting as a whole. The growing popularity of DJs brought more focus on the individuals than on the community which resulted in fragmentation of the performance. Clubs wanted to have VJs more as a gimmick than with a concern to provide the audience with a link, or unity between all senses.

With this standardization came also a deeper separation between DJ and VJ, and therefore the 'live' link between music and image was weakened. When VJs are mixing live, without knowing the DJ and his music, they become 'subordinated to the sound' (Danielle Kwaaital), having to follow the music but discovering it at the same time the audience does. The fact that clubs hire one VJ for a whole night also weakens the quality of the performances.

As the House parties feature short film or abstract experiments throughout the evening, the work of the VJ is now diluted in time and so is its quality. This leads to more repetitiveness where a sense of progression and improvisation should be. Whereas the first generation of VJs was very displeased with the commercial turn taken by the discipline, some of the newer generations have accepted it, which makes them also responsible for the consequences. But as some VJs go along with what is expected of them, others continue to search for ways to 'shake people awake' (Telco systems). As more styles of electronic music developed through the 1980's and 1990's, as many visual vocabularies appeared in VJ-ing. Video, film, found footage, graphic and computer generative are all part of the visual landscape of VJ-ing. The turn towards a more commercial approach of VJ-ing also opened the door for graphic designers to join this landscape, as the basis of their profession is to work from the input of a commercial assignment.

The eventual political, or cultural message of the VJ is confined to the borders provided by the club. If the receptiveness of an audience to such messages in the context of a dance floor is disputable, it was the belief of the first VJs that social changes were possible also through the club. VJ-ing seen as a live interaction between image and sound, crossed the borders between the different means of exhibition and found in theater, art galleries and happenings new ways to carry out what wasn't possible anymore in the club.

The audience is now confronted to the image - sound relation in various ways. Each situation offering a different way of interaction and communication. Although artists working outside the club context have usually an aversion for the term VJ, their practice still relates to the same concerns, and can be called media art, visual performance, or video art according to the circumstances. Another way VJ's found to counter attack the commercial recuperation of the movement and its setbacks, is the formation in the 1990's of artist collectives that bring together musicians, visual artists and other performing arts. Working in a group enabled them to restore the communication between the different medias on a longer term than the one-off VJ versus DJ format. Formations such as Drifter TV (finalist of the Visual Sensations contest in 2005) combine music and image into one single act, and therefore can achieve a unity and exchange between the two media that would be impossible otherwise. This idea of bringing together music and image into one single act is taken even further by artists such as Eboman (see p.48) who, with the help of motion detectors and elaborate software, is able to be both musician and VJ in the same performance. The sound comes from the image, which is modified in the same way that the sound is. The multiplication of festivals such as sonic-acts, in Amsterdam, also seeks a deeper image-sound interaction that what usually happens in clubs, and brings back the notion of a specific space. These are the means for the further exploration of the VJ culture and its possibilities, after the club has more or less frozen its development.

The concept of 'live' video performance is gaining new ground as technology develops and artists search for new possibilities and experiences. VJ-ing is now widely accepted and recognised, but is only at its best when it truly links to the music. It is in the hands of the VJs themselves to go beyond the 'powder to the eyes' of slick new technologies and work toward a full experience that takes account of the newest possibilities while retaining something of the House community ideal in order to create unique and groundbreaking experiences for their audience.



a frustration. The goal of my project is to use the skills I have learned in visual composition and typography and see how they can be translated into music. The realisation that in fact image and music can appeal to the same sort of creative process and composition is at the core of my project. As Wigger Bierma put it, 'good typography is like music'. and I will now set out to compose music through typography without any knowledge of music notation.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME

Annet Dekker

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