Visual Music

Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1

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Jeremy Strick

"Visual Music" traces an alternative history of abstract art of the past century. Rather than follow the progression of movements and styles by which modern and contemporary art have come to be defined, this exhibition and publication present successive explorations of an idea. Over the past century, those explorations have been advanced by artists working in recognized centers of avant-garde cultural production, whether Paris or New York, as well as in outposts as far-flung as Vilnius. The history traced by "Visual Music" includes paintings, photographs, color organs, films, light shows, installations, and digital media. Traditionally, each of these has been studied and exhibited separately, emphasizing their particular and independent history. "Visual Music" presents them instead as manifestations of the successive unfolding of an idea—indeed some of today's electronic installations may be seen to realize aspirations expressed by paintings made almost one hundred years ago.

Animating such physically, geographically, and chronologically disparate works is the idea of synaesthesia: the unity of the senses and, by extension, the arts. According to the principle of synaesthesia, sensory perception of one kind may manifest itself as sensory experience of another—one example being the phenomenon of seeing color when one hears certain sounds. Throughout the nineteenth century, synaesthesia proved a staple first of Romantic, then of Symbolist thought. Synaesthetic associations were thought to result from a heightened state of aesthetic awareness in the perceiving subject. Artists, writers, and musicians, in turn, sought to create works that would generate such associations for their audiences.

Literary evocations of synaesthesia gathered strength from metaphor, with unlikely linkages creating the most vivid imagery; so, too, the power of synaesthetic experience itself was thought to gain power from the interpenetration of normally unrelated experiences and associations. Inevitably, that sensual compounding transported one from ordinary experience to the realm of art and, most frequently, to music. While synaesthesia might mingle any or all of the five senses, music held a special place as the referent or inspiration for such heightened states. That holds true, for example, in one of the most famous literary evocations of the synaesthetic ideal, J. K. Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (Against nature). Published in Paris in 1884, *À rebours* details the hermetic existence of its aristocratic protagonist, Duke Jean des Esseintes, who creates within his chateau an environment dedicated to

opposite
Paul Klee
Detail of *Static-Dynamic Gradation*, 1923

1 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (*À rebours*), trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 45–46.

the most refined explorations of taste and sensation. In one passage, Huysmans describes a device he calls a "mouth organ," a collection of liqueurs each analogous to a musical note, which des Esseintes can play upon his palette as a musical instrument would play upon his ears:

> Indeed, each and every liqueur, in his opinion, corresponded in taste with the sound of a particular instrument. Dry curaçao, for instance, was like the clarinet with its piercing, velvety note; kümmel like the oboe with its sonorous, nasal timbre; crème de menthe and anisette like the flute, at once sweet and tart, soft and shrill. Then to complete the orchestra there was kirsch, blowing a wild trumpet blast; gin and whisky raising the roof of the mouth with the blare of their cornets and trombones; marc-brandy matching the tubas with its deafening din, while peals of thunder came from the cymbal and the bass drum, which arak and mastic were banging and beating with all their might.
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> He considered that this analogy could be pushed still further and that string quartets might play under the palatal arch, with the violin represented by an old brandy, choice and heady, biting and delicate; with the viola simulated by rum, which was stronger, heavier and quieter; with vespetro as poignant, drawn-out, sad and tender as a violoncello; and with the double-bass a fine old bitter, full-bodied, solid and dark. One might even form a quintet, if this were thought desireable, by adding a fifth instrument, the harp, imitated to near perfection by the vibrant savour, the clear, sharp, silvery note of dry cumin.[1]

The literary synaesthesia of Huysmans is, in a sense, precisely literal, comprising one-to-one associations in which a single sensation stands in for another—one taste with the sound of one musical instrument. And yet, a crucial aspect of music's attraction for partisans of synaesthesia involved claims made for its status as a pure or abstract art. This held true, above all, in the visual arts, where such pioneers of abstract painting as Wassily Kandinsky and František Kupka asserted that the formal abstract structures of musical composition pointed the way towards a new art, while music's direct and emotional appeal indicated a condition to which art should aspire.

In effect, the idea of synaesthesia served to mediate between music and visual art in the early twentieth century and proved essential to the development of abstraction. Emphasizing the perceiving subject, the theory of synaesthesia tended to break down sense perception into discrete units, whereby one sensation found its equivalent in another; music, with its notes and phrases, harmony and dissonance, compositional structures and abstract notational system, lent itself most readily to such analogy. For art that aspired to the condition of music, that sought synaesthetically to call forth musical associations, the key pairing was with color.

Organized according to a relative scale that bears direct comparison to that of music, color is a core element of sensory perception. Immediately apprehended without much effort from the subject, color requires no interpretation or decoding, yet can act directly upon the emotions, like a musical note. Through melding and juxtaposition, compositions of varying complexity can be developed that may call forth musical associations. This visual music formed the foundation for most early abstraction and provided the basis for the succession of ideas evident in this exhibition and publication.

It should be noted, however, that neither "color music" nor "visual music" describes the entire relationship between music and the visual arts over the past century. That relationship is considerably larger and more complex than the singular tradition explored in this exhibition. Music, musical instruments, and musical notation have proven durable subjects for artists from Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Henri Matisse to Jannis Kounellis, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Christian Marclay. These more-or-less literal depictions do not rely on the poetics of synaesthesia. Few artists were more engaged with musical ideas than Piet Mondrian. Taking an entirely different approach to the relationship between art and music, Mondrian engaged with the compositional structures of jazz and bebop rather than with the affective power of color. Similarly, the aleatory ideas of John Cage proved enormously influential for visual artists in the second half of the twentieth century, but those ideas bore little relation to the tradition of synaesthesia.

Even if visual music is not the single mode through which music and the visual arts have interacted over the past century, it is certainly the most consistent. Indeed, the tradition of visual music might be said to be among the most tenacious stylistic strains of the past one hundred years, continuing to find new arenas for aesthetic exploration even as other, more famous movements and styles eventually faltered. Its longevity can be explained above all by the fact that it required technology for its fulfillment.

"Visual Music" traces an idea as it moves across several technological platforms. Painting, of course, came first, as artists from Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and Paul Klee to Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe made works that suggested their relation to musical forms through titles such as *Sonata No. 6 (Sonata of the Stars). Andante* (1908, Čiurlionis) and *Blue and Green Music* (1921, O'Keeffe) and through their abstract compositions. The works of these painters are often remarkable: radical in their break with figuration and breathtaking in their formal beauty and audacity. Yet, as expressions of musical analogy, these paintings always

fall short in one important respect. Music is, of course, a time-based medium. Musical compositions unfold through time: even the character of a single note is partly defined by duration. In some respects, a complex painted composition is closer to a single musical chord than it is to even a relatively simple musical composition. And while it is true that a viewer might take considerable time to apprehend fully a complex painting, the painter still has little or no control over the sequence or order in which the viewer's observations are made.

Abstract film developed as if in direct response to this shortcoming. Working in black and white, the originators of this medium—such extraordinary artists as Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling—elaborated sequences of geometric forms that moved across the screen and through time, as would a sequence of sounds. As the technologies of color film and soundtracks developed, artists like Oskar Fischinger, Harry Smith, and the Whitney brothers, among others, brought color, form, and sound together to create extended compositions that bore occasional resemblance to the work of the earlier generation of abstract painters while taking full advantage of the crucial element of time and incorporating sound and music to create a fully synaesthetic experience.

In fact, abstract cinema itself was anticipated by experiments with so-called color organs. These devices, invented by such artists as Thomas Wilfred and Daniel Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, allowed projected light to be "played" in conjunction with recorded or performed music. The development of these color organs would in itself make a fascinating chapter in the history of visual music.

A further step in uniting visual and auditory experience has been developed in recent years through the medium of installation art. A characteristic of sound is that it is perceived as ambient, existing in and moving through space. While sound may be directional in origin, it can be perceived no matter what direction the listener faces; though the listener's movement through space can affect the quality and character of sound. By contrast, a painting requires a more-or-less fixed gaze to be perceived, as does a film. Installations activate both the space they occupy and the viewer. The physical quality of sound (loud enough, sound can be felt) is both approximated and augmented by the totalizing character of the installation space.

If synaesthesia represents the unity of the senses, the dream of synaesthesia is the unification of the arts. Over the past century, artists have found ever more powerful means of evoking and provoking the state of synaesthesia, linking color, form, and sound in extraordinary fashion. Recent explorations employing digital media represent both a fulfillment of the tradition and a fundamental departure from

the central tenets of visual music. Sensual compounding was attempted first in abstract paintings that suggested musical elements and structures, then in color organs, abstract cinema, projected light shows, and installations. These media all treat music and visual art as separate but related entities, brought together for the listener/viewer. The synaesthetic experience, as noted above, inheres to the experiencing subject.

In digital media, by contrast, music and visual art truly are united, not only by the experiencing subject, the listener/viewer, but by the artist. They are created out of the same stuff, bits of electronic information, infinitely interchangeable. Digitally generated visual music may now lack the romance of Huysmans's wonderfully evocative metaphor, but the aspiration to novel experience created by the compounding of sensation and association has never been more possible.