The Visual Music Film

Aimee Mollaghan

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The Visual Music Film

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For L.W.H.

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Introduction

From the Pythagorean fascination with the music of the moving celestial bodies to the lively moving images of Oskar Fischinger's abstract animation, there has been an enduring fascination with the representation of music in a visual form; a music for the eye, a *visual* music. Gothic architects constructed their cathedrals according to ratios of musical consonance.[1] Painter Paul Klee employed the musical principle of polyphony to *arrange* the visual elements of his paintings. Inventors such as French Jesuit Monk, Louis Bertrand Castel and English composer Alexander Wallace Rimington (to name but three of many) have created colour and light organs to play visuals as one would play notes on a musical instrument. Choreographers such as George Balanchine have attempted to use the dancer's body within their ballets such as *Concerto Barocco* (1941) to visually express musical scores. One of the most intriguing aspects of visual music is not only the endurance of the idea in its myriad forms but also why this idea persisted for so long. The list of visual music in all of manifest permutations is wide and varied. Given this lasting fascination with visual music, it seems incongruous that there is a relative paucity of scholarship appraising the musical aspects of this lively form as a distinct entity, particularly in relation to its moving image incarnation.

Despite, or perhaps due to, the all-encompassing nature of the term, this book explores the concept and expression of musicality in the visual music film, in which visual presentations are given musical attributes such as rhythmical form, structure and harmony. The visual music film remains underexplored in scholarly writing as a distinctive entity and, if discussed, it has been examined predominantly from the academic vantage points of art and avant-garde film theory. Further to this, however, the role of music has, in general, been neglected when analysing

visual music textually. To adequately scrutinise these texts I consider it essential to look at them not only in terms of their existence as moving pictures, but also to give weight to their aural aspect and to consider them in terms of specifically musical parameters. This book, therefore, seeks to redress previous imbalances by undertaking a close analysis of the expressly musical qualities of these texts.

Drawing on the seemingly disparate areas of film theory, art history, music theory and philosophy, it takes an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the measurable influence that wider contextual, philosophical and, to a certain extent, historical developments and debates in these areas bore on the aesthetics of specific visual music films, analysing these filmic texts not only from a musicological perspective but also discussing them in theoretical, philosophical and historical terms. It will, in addition, provide close detailed readings of a selection of films in order to illustrate the central thesis of the book.

This is not the first academic inquiry into the relationship between music and image in the visual music film or of music in the visual arts. Authors such as Peter Vergo, Simon Shaw-Miller and Edward Lockspeiser have undertaken studies into the correlation between music and the plastic arts. William Moritz has been the main authority on the history of the visual music film and his writing has been an invaluable source of information for highlighting the work of visual music filmmakers, in particular Oskar Fischinger. In the field of experimental film, writers such as Malcolm Le Grice, David Curtis, A. L. Rees and Standish Lawder have written about these musically grounded moving image texts.

Although surveys exist in relation to the visual music film to a certain extent, there is a need for a more critical survey of these texts and more importantly there is a need to formally address the musical qualities of the films. My study differs from the aforementioned studies in several respects. These investigations, with the exception of Shaw-Miller in relation to painting and music, have predominantly dealt with the visual qualities of visual music, skirting the issue of music and sound. I am interested in looking at the particularly musical qualities of the visual music films with the aim of placing these qualities on an equal footing with image.

The visual music film has remained relatively underexplored in the areas of both screen studies and musicology. Film sound and music has typically received less attention than other aspects of film and animation, so perhaps it is unsurprising that while there have been some notable biographies on individual visual music filmmakers such as Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye and Norman McLaren, there have, accordingly,

been no notable scholarly interventions on the visual music film as a distinct entity with inherent musical qualities. There have recently been attempts by some scholars to address this to some extent. In his book *Synch: Stylistics of Hieroglyphic Time* (2010), James Tobias includes a chapter on the work of Oskar Fischinger in order to elucidate his wider examination of musicality in cinema and media art. Likewise, Andy Birtwistle discusses sound synthesis in relation to the early films of John and James Whitney in his book *Cinesonica: Sounding Film and Video* (2012), albeit briefly, while Holly Rogers addresses the work of the canonical visual music filmmakers in order to elucidate the 'audio-visual history of video art'[2] in *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (2013). Despite this growing interest in *musicality* within expanded screen studies, this book will still serve as an interdisciplinary exploration of this hybrid form by focusing on *abstract* visual music films. Furthermore, this study is also as much about looking at the contextual, historical and philosophical basis of the visual music film as the texts themselves, and will demonstrate that the films have changed and evolved in response to changing trends in art, music, technology and society.

Although this book is predominantly concerned with *musicality* in the visual music film, this is always considered as part of the audio-visual structure, the intention being to redress the imbalance between sound and image in animation and film studies research. This emphasis on the musical qualities of the films does not mean that this inquiry is explicitly aimed at the musicologist. It is walking a tightrope somewhere between the disciplines of film studies and musicology and functioning as a conduit between the two fields. Musical analysis in particular can take many forms. Some approaches, such as Schenkerian analysis, developed by Austrian musicologist Heinrich Schenker, look at the formal structure of music, other forms such as that developed by Donald Francis Tovey are dictated in prose and focus on the stylistic elements of music, while more still are predicated on philosophical and figurative description.

Tovey's prose commentary began as programme notes in 1917 to a series of concerts that he conducted in Edinburgh and were intended for a general rather than the specialist audience that enjoyed Schenker's approach. In his book *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, musicologist Nicholas Cook states that Tovey's 'straight-forward, non-technical description of music'[3] using literary devices like metaphor make an 'excellent starting point for a more technical analysis'[4] and, as Cook later writes, the important thing is not to invent new techniques for analysis but rather

make the fullest *use* of the ones that already exist, employing them in combination.[5] This is what I am endeavouring to do when attempting to formulate an interdisciplinary approach that merges film, music, philosophy and cultural studies in order to find a way of looking at films that, due to their hybrid nature, can never be adequately scrutinised using methodologies drawn from only one discipline. This book will therefore undertake an analysis of the musicality of the visual music film from not only a musicological perspective, but will also employ an interdisciplinary approach to negotiate this body of work in theoretical, philosophical and historical terms, providing close detailed readings of a selection of core films.

Due to the concept of *visual music* encompassing so many disciplines, it would be difficult to adequately discuss them all within a single book and therefore I have chosen to discuss films that I would consider to have particularly musical qualities to them. As Immanual Kant observed, 'the aesthetics of one art is that of the other only the material is different'.[6] Film, by virtue of its innate temporality and rhythm, shares a commonality with music. Simon Shaw-Miller contends that the boundaries between arts are the result of historical or ideological conventions and 'it is useful to consider the difference between music and the visual arts as a manner of *degree*, not of *kin*'. Extending this idea to the moving image, K. J. Donnelly in *Occult Aesthetics* similarly does not contend that there are no differences between film and music, merely that due to their temporal natures, film and music, although maintaining many differences, also share many attributes. As he asserts:

> Isomorphic structures on large and small scales, and patterns of build-up, tension, and release are most evident in both, as are strong conventional concepts of 'what fits with what' and dynamic patterns of presentation, re-presentation development of material, plane so foreground and background, withholding closures and marking minor as well as final conclusions to the musical piece or film.[7]

Mindful of these shared collective attributes, I am predominantly interested in films such as those by Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren that enjoy a strong relationship with music and, for the most part, are attempting to represent music pictorially in some way, shape or form. This need not necessarily be predicated on an inter-sensory level or as a direct representation of music. For example, films such as those of Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and John Whitney that appropriate the structure or form of music by drawing on musical devices such as

counterpoint are also of vital importance to this investigation. The same can be said for films by, for example, Jordan Belson and James Whitney, who compose visual music films predicated on more philosophical concerns.

I have chosen to focus on one aspect of visual music film that I consider to have been under-represented in literature: the *absolute* visual music film. The terms *absolute*, *graphic* and *abstract* have all been used in relation to several of the films that I have chosen to include. Although used somewhat interchangeably, there are subtle differences in meaning between the terms. P. Adams Sitney uses the term *graphic cinema* in relation to many of the films that I am discussing as examples of visual music.[8] Like theorists such as Malcolm Turvey and Thomas Elsaesser, he views the early black-and-white films of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling as belonging in a lineage of formal cubist and neo-plastic art.[9] Sitney's categorisation of film under the moniker *graphic film* does not necessarily mean that all of these films can necessarily be classed as *musical*. Likewise my inclusion of a number of films that Sitney has classified as *graphic* does not necessarily mean that this study focuses only on films using only geometric shapes or traditional modes of animation. Many of the filmmakers discussed in this book use unconventional creative processes and some, such as Jordan Belson, at times employ abstract images created through filmic processes rather than purely animated ones. Although all the films under discussion in this book are abstract in nature, this is also not a guarantee of their musicality. The term *absolute* is potentially the most appropriate to illustrate my hypothesis.

The term *absolute* has been applied to the abstract visual music film from its inception, reinforcing the connection of this body of work to music. In 1925 the *Novembergruppe* supported by Ufa, the German motion picture company founded in 1917, organised a film programme in Berlin entitled *Der absolute Film*. It included Viking Eggeling's film *Symphonie Diagonale*, *Lichtspiel Opus 2, 3* and *4* by Ruttmann and *Film ist Rhythm*, a work in progress by Hans Richter.[10] The programme also included 'Dreiteilige Farbesonatine', a live performance of abstract moving colour projections by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, in addition to *Images Mobiles* (1924) by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy and *Entr'acte* (1924) by René Clair.[11] Perhaps most importantly, Oskar Fischinger, arguably one of the most important figures in visual music, specifically used the term in relation to his visual music films.[12]

Furthermore, animation theorist William Moritz has also written an article referring to many of the visual music films that I am discussing in this book as absolute film; however, he uses the term to make a

connection between the non-representational nature of these films and the abstract intangible qualities of music rather than engaging with the actual musical properties, abstract or not, of these films.[13] While I intend to draw on these ideas, I also seek to exploit the explicitly musical qualities of absolute music.

The term *absolute* in relation to the visual music film is drawn from the concept of absolute music. Although the idea of absolute music as both a universal and conceptual framework for the abstract visual music film is explored in detail in chapters 2 and 3 of this book, it is worth providing, at this point in time, providing a brief description of the term. Drawing on terms set out by German musicologist Eduard Hanslick in his influential 1891 treatise *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*,[14] the phrase absolute music refers to music that is free from extra-musical considerations. In other words it is music that is abstract in nature; music that does not have an overt programme; music that is not explicitly about anything; music for music's sake. Therefore, by virtue of drawing on this definition of absolute music, the films under consideration in this survey will be films that are abstract, graphic and non-figurative in nature and without overt programme or narrative.

The term *visual music* also announces its inherent hybrid nature by virtue of conjoining the senses of vision and hearing within its constituent words. This intimates that it requires the characteristics of at least two disciplines, one of which must be musical in nature and one that is primarily visual in order to be classified as visual music. This hybridity and ambiguity gives rise to problems of categorisation. Many visual music texts carry alternative labels and have been classified as visual music retrospectively. This does not necessarily mean that they no longer function as exemplars of these other categories; it merely suggests that can also function in another context simultaneously. For example, *Symphonie Diagonale* by Viking Eggeling, which is considered to be a canonical visual music film, has also been considered within the context of Dada Cinema. These texts often did not fit neatly into existing categories and required a more porous one to take account of their unique hybrid qualities. Although the category of visual music was not necessarily in common usage during the creation of many of the visual music works included in this study, most of the visual music filmmakers were unequivocal in their use of music as a governing force in their work. In spite of the fact that I have made explicit the hybrid nature of the visual music text, for the purposes of this book I am treating it, at least in part, as a distinct entity, in and of itself.

In addition to my concern with formal textual analysis, this book is structured chronologically as much as possible. This is in order to explore debates in music, art and film and demonstrate how changing aesthetics and philosophies in these areas are manifested in the visual music film. There are deviations from this form as some filmmakers, particularly those such as Guy Sherwin and Norman McLaren, are not formally aligned to any particular movements of visual music that I have identified in the course of this thesis, such as the West Coast visual music film makers, Jordan Belson and John and James Whitney. In these cases they have been loosely aligned with the aesthetics and philosophies of particular periods in order to further illuminate my argument.

By drawing on the analogy of the absolute in music to demonstrate how musical concepts can function across the disciplinary boundaries of music and film, the first half of this book illustrates how musical ideas can be applied both formally and conceptually to the moving image in order to elucidate the musical characteristics of the text. Using this notion of the absolute as a conceptual framework allows for a thorough overview of changing trends and aesthetics in music, film and art and the visual music film. This centrality of the *absolute* as a lens through which to examine the visual music film is demonstrated through close analysis of films by Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Norman McLaren, James Whitney and Jordan Belson.

The second part of this book concentrates less on the philosophical vestiges carried over from musical thought to the visual music film, instead focusing on the variety of techniques and technological developments that evolved in tandem with the visual music film, each simultaneously exerting an influence on one another. It explores the effect that colour had on not only the visual, but also the overall audio-visual, structure of the visual music film through a textual analysis of *Kreise* (1933–34) by Oskar Fischinger. It also investigates how particular styles of musical composition dictated the development of specific technical processes such as painting directly onto the celluloid strip, in order to capture the syncopated and frenetic musicality of jazz music. The case studies here are *Begone Dull Care* (1949) by Norman McLaren and *A Colour Box* (1935) by Len Lye. Further to this, it examines how the technical processes of animated sound emerged in the search for a greater correlation between the visual and sound tracks of the visual music film by paying close attention to *Synchromy* (1971) by Norman McLaren and a selection of optical sound films completed by filmmaker Guy Sherwin in the 1970s.

Finally, this book marries the inquiry into technological innovation contained within the second part with the historical, aesthetic and philosophical concerns of earlier chapters by considering the work of visual music pioneer John Whitney. Focusing on his digitally produced visual music films, the book explores Whitney's enduring concern with the unification of sound and image through the shared foundation of mathematical harmony.

1
Questions of Attribution and Contribution: What Constitutes a Visual Music Film?

Unlike some other forms of avant-garde film, on which one can consult volumes, the subject of visual music in experimental cinema has been under-represented in film history as a distinct category. As visual music draws on two distinct disciplines, film and music, it is intrinsically hybrid in nature. Its historical antecedence as a hybrid art form has therefore given rise to ambiguity surrounding it taxonomy. This is not unlike the problems of 'attribution'[15] and 'contribution'[16] that Thomas Elsaesser points out in relation to research on Dada cinema. Elsaesser asserts that the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a Dada film is problematic, because the makers of Dada films often aligned themselves with movements other than Dada. For example, Fernand Léger was generally considered to be a Cubist painter, yet his film *Ballet Méchanique* (1924) was considered to be inherently Dadaist by Hans Richter.[17] In the same fashion, *Anémic Cinema* (1926) by Marcel Duchamp is also referred to as a Dada film in spite of Duchamp's protestations that it was not a film at all but an element of his motorised sculptures that he referred to as 'precision optics'.[18]

Another problem that arose for those attempting to create a cohesive theory of Dada cinema was the sheer diversity in visual aesthetics and, to a certain extent, ideological concerns within the body of films. Hans Richter's series of *Rhythmus* films, with their hard-edged abstract images, are clearly very different to René Clair's notionally Dadaist film *Entr'acte* (1923), which subverts traditional notions of narrative cinema by virtue of parodying *bourgeois* concerns such as the high art form of ballet or the solemnity of the funeral. Yet authors such as Malcolm Turvey have made a convincing case as to why both of these films have equally valid claims to the title of Dada.[19] While I do not wish to focus on Dadaism per se, the discourse surrounding what exactly comprises a Dada cinema

is a useful point of departure for the problems of defining *visual music* as a distinct body of work.

The visual music film shares many of the same problems of *attribution* and *contribution* suffered by Dada films. Should one resist calling *Rhythmus 21* (1921–24) by Richter a visual music film because Turvey and indeed Richter himself have made a case for it as an exemplar of Dada, or can it be appropriated as a work of visual music film by virtue of its musicality? The boundaries between different types of experimental cinema, whether they be absolute, Dadaist, poetic, structuralist or post-structuralist, are salient but not immovable. Cinematic work can diffuse across the semi-permeable membranes of classification to be consumed by another cell of the avant-garde ripe for reclassification. Perhaps an apt metaphor for what I am attempting to do with this book is provided by the concept of endocytosis, with the category of visual music functioning as a roving cell absorbing works from other disciplines by engulfing them in order to create a new, discrete form of film replete with hybrid characteristics.

Bearing in mind this problem of contribution and attribution that exists in relation to the visual music film and the problems relating to its existence as a hybrid entity, at its most basic level formed from music and the moving image, it is not surprising that visual music like, for example, film noir has, as a distinct category, developed retrospectively. The majority of the films that I am examining as works of visual music were not necessarily conceived as such or as part of a formal movement, even though the desire to represent or capture the essence of music may have been the driving force behind the work. Apart from the recent references to the films often described as *visual music* in the wake of a renewed vogue for *synaesthesia*, a neurological condition in which senses are cross-modally stimulated, in the arts visual music films have generally turned up in histories of avant-garde cinema, experimental or abstract film by authors such as A. L. Rees, David Curtis, P. Adams Sitney and Malcolm Le Grice. The focus of these accounts tends to sever the examples from their musical connections and to appropriate them as the roots of a tradition of either graphic or structuralist cinema.

Bearing this in mind, this chapter will provide an overview of the work and debates primary to the interdisciplinary methodology of this book and establish a framework for examining the aesthetics of the visual music film by means of a musical paradigm. Due to the hybrid nature of the body of work under consideration, rather than surveying the key literature by discipline (for example, art history, film theory, musicology or philosophy) or even chronologically, I have organised

the discourse surrounding the visual music film according to key concepts that I have identified as prominent across the existing body of relevant literature. I am therefore drawing on related material from various disciplines in order to conduct a comparative study of discussions of the visual music film that identifies productive convergences and divergences in the existing literature.

The first area of debate that I will address is the discourse around the idea of the *musical analogy* that underpins the visual music film. This section will pay special attention to particular ways in which the analogy has been adapted to create models of visual music rooted in the concepts of *synaesthesia* and *hybridity*. The second significant issue that I will examine in this chapter is the historical positioning of visual music as an extension of painting. This idea, espoused in literature by authors such as Standish Lawder, Le Grice, P. Sitney, Robert Bruce Rodgers and Lorettann Gasgard Devlin, grounds the visual music film as a *motion painting*. It is here that I will examine both the validity and limitations of this approach that, in general, severs the visual of the visual music text from its musical origins. Finally, I will draw on the issues raised during my investigation into the musical analogy and assert the need for a comprehensive study of the formal aspects of the visual music film's unique synthesis of film, art and music through textual analysis. To reinforce this need for a new reading of these films, I will provide a close reading of *Symphonie Diagonale* by Viking Eggeling as an example of the type of analysis that I consider to be lacking in existing discussions of the visual music film.

The musical analogy

The words *visual* and *music* in the title of this book alert its audience to its musical foundation from the outset. It is no surprise, therefore, that the musical analogy has served as an entry point for those who wish to discuss or understand this body of work. This analogy is not unique to the visual music film. Two dominant models can be discerned in relation to the musical analogy in the visual music film and, by extension, the arts. The first is predicated on the idea of inter-sensory correspondences, or synaesthesia, and the other is based on the idea of visual music as a hybrid art form but both have, at their roots, the idea of a *musical analogy*.

It is difficult to engage with the concept of visual music without considering the debates around the psychological phenomenon of synaesthesia. One rarely reads contemporary texts about visual music

without mention of the term. Psychologists John E. Harrison and Simon Baron-Cohen state:

> We, along with others (Vernon 1930; Marks 1975; Cytowic 1989, 1993; Motluk 1994), define synaesthesia as occurring when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically triggers a perception in a second modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation to this second modality.[20]

In *Synaesthesia: An Introduction*, they identify and place in categories various types of synaesthesia. They demarcate developmental synaesthesia as idiopathic, or arising from an unknown cause, in order to distinguish it from acquired synaesthesia and pseudosynaesthesia. The main characteristics that they set out are that it has a childhood onset, it is unrelated to hallucination or psychotic visions, it differs from images constructed in the imagination, it cannot be attributed to drug use and it is not something that is learned by the sufferer.[21] Another form of synaesthesia marked out by Harrison and Baron-Cohen and also Laurence Marks is synaesthesia induced through hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD, mescaline or magic mushrooms. This drug-induced confusion between sensory modes bears some resemblance to the imagery intrinsic in the visual music films of West Coast filmmaker Jordan Belson, specifically in the nebulous colour diffusions that seem to reach out beyond the screen and wrap themselves around the most primitive areas of our consciousness.

Pseudosynaesthesia by association is the third form to which they draw attention. This is a form of acquired synaesthesia in which individuals have learned to make associations between words or letters with colours. They speculate that this form can be attributed to the way that children learn to read from alphabet books in which each letter is assigned a specific colour. The final and most significant form of synaesthesia pertaining to my discussion of the visual music film is that of metaphor as pseudosynaesthesia. In many of the visual music films under consideration in this book, such as those by Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren, the audiovisual relationship is functioning not as direct translation of sound into image but as an allegory or correspondence. For example, in his notes for *Synchromy* (1971), McLaren, who was a purported synaesthete,[22] notes that the colour–sound associations he uses are pseudo-/culturally synaesthetic associations. The pianissimo (very quiet) notes are represented by soft muted hues while the loud fortissimo notes are represented in vibrant, contrasting shades

of colour.[23] The term *synaesthesia* has therefore become something of a popular malapropism in relation to the visual music film.

Simon Shaw-Miller, nonetheless, posits that he finds the concept of synaesthesia to be helpful when considering the relationship between image and sound as it draws attention to the, often involuntary, relationship that these senses enjoy. He predominantly draws on the idea of synaesthesia in order to create a link between the senses of sight and sound. Just as Shaw-Miller makes clear his decision to use the idea of pseudosynaesthesia 'without qualification'[24] in his book *Eye hEar the Visual in Music*, I too wish to appropriate Harrison and Baron-Cohen's concept when approaching the visual music film.

The model of visual music as a hybrid art form is the second dominant model under which the musical analogy has been exploited by the visual music film. Although I asserted that two dominant models exist in relation to the visual music film, synaesthesia and hybrid, these models are not mutually exclusive, and indeed boundaries between both categories are mutable. Central to this idea of visual music as a hybrid form is the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk* or *the total artwork*. Although widely attributed to German composer Richard Wagner, the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk* was not actually his. In fact, the initial concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* had little to do with musical theatre. *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its initial formulation was one of total unified artwork, a complete synthesis of art. Under Wagner's dispersal of the idea, specifically in relation to the music-drama of opera, it came to symbolise a mutual interaction between art forms. The arts were *combined* rather than fused to enhance the power of the overarching work.

As Shaw-Miller points out, Wagner's concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk* is commonly referred to as the 'end of art'. By this, Wagner meant that the arts have essentially reached their individual limits of development. This means that in isolation they cannot reach their potential and must resort to unification in order to reach maturity. Shaw-Miller also contends that it is not sufficient to merely compare the media that constitute a hybrid work. As I make reference to in relation to the work of Sergei Eisenstein and Michel Chion later in this chapter, he holds that any fashion of hybridity that is the result of two or more areas of practice coming together needs to be recognised as producing something that is 'often more than the sum of its parts'.[25]

Jerrold Levinson, like Shaw-Miller, also contends that hybrid status is primarily a historical construct. It is not enough to merely append two or more media together to form a hybrid. He instead asserts, 'In short, *hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the actual combination*

or interpenetration of earlier art forms.'[26] If works are therefore to be understood as true hybrids, they must 'be understood in terms of and in light of their components'.[27] He advocates that these works be subject to a historically informed analysis rather than one grounded in individual material, which is broadly the approach that this book takes in its consideration of the visual music film. As he posits,

> In synthesis or fusion the objects or products of two (or more) arts are brought together in such a way that the individual components to some extent lose their original identities and are present in the hybrid in a form significantly different from that assumed in the pure state.[28]

Not all theorists are positive about an audiovisual culture that attempts to fuse or marry imagery to music. Drawing on composer Pierre Schaeffer's controversial argument from the late 1940s intimating that records and radio can subvert the dominance of vision by allowing us to experience sound as an ontological and aesthetic entity in its own right, Christoph Cox notes that in recent times a new culture has materialised that re-evaluates 'the senses and their traditional hierarchy',[29] particularly the dominant privileging of the visual over the auditory. While it is this new culture that has presumably led to the reassessment of the visual music film as a distinct body of work, Cox argues that by combining the visual and aural, artists/musicians/filmmakers are offering 'an aesthetic appropriation [of] synaesthesia'[30] that diminishes the value of sound as an independent entity. He perceives this as a strategy for retaining sound's dependence on vision, an artistic choice that he finds detrimental to the pursuit of a true art of sound. Despite the fact that this book does not focus on the investigation of an independent sound art per se and Cox is expressly referring to a contemporary culture, his argument still holds true for the evaluation of the early visual music films emerging in a period so bound up in ideas of medium specificity by modern artists such as Piet Mondrian and art critics such as Clement Greenberg. Cox's discussion of the dominance of the visual in synaesthetic art is, therefore, a useful starting point when attempting to discuss visual music as hybrid audiovisual form.

As Cox points out, Friedrich Nietzsche was insistent that sound and vision should be confined to separate distinct realms with the relationship between them being considered only through the discourse of metaphor or translation and not as a literal representation. Nietzsche and Cox are therefore advocating an audiovisual translation of music