

Henry Balme and Stephanie Probst

Visual Music as Abstract Moving Image

An Interview

Stephanie Probst (SP) interviewed Henry Balme (HB) via a video call from Vienna to New Haven, CT, on May 3, 2022.

Stephanie Probst: Your dissertation is titled “Rethinking Visual Music: The Abstract Moving Image as a Transmedial Art Form.” What is the project that you are pursuing with it?

Henry Balme: One of the core things I’m trying to do with my dissertation is to define this term, “visual music.” That is necessary, because the term itself is becoming increasingly ambiguous as it grows in popularity. It’s been used in more and more academic publications, especially in the last ten years or so. The term’s expansion has caused competing understandings to proliferate. Some scholars use it to refer to the scientific correlation of color and sound. Others use it as a synonym for synesthesia. For others again, it refers to the translation of sounds into images. Currently, there exists no academic consensus on what “visual music” signifies, which, I think, has stalled productive conversation. My dissertation is an attempt to pin down this term and interrogate why we should keep using it. I do think it can be very useful, but only if used in a circumscribed and specific way.

SP: In your introduction, you highlight some of the tensions around defining the phenomenon of visual music. I was surprised that this work was indeed still needed, considering that some of the examples of visual music are very iconic and well known and studied.

HB: Yes, some people use the term broadly to describe any cross-pollination of music and the visual arts; and that is ok, of course. But for such a vast area of research I question whether we need a term at all; we could just call it “the cross-pollination of music and the visual arts,” and then we move on to discuss

different instances. I think it’s productive to return to a historically-informed and more precise understanding of the term “visual music”: how it was used by art critics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I point out that the discourse around abstraction in the visual arts is actually key for making sense of the concept.

This re-centering on abstraction allows us to describe a tradition of visual art-making that reaches back to the 18th century, with inventors contriving machines that could produce “music for the eyes,” such as Castel’s ocular harpsichord and David Brewster’s kaleidoscope. It also allows us to incorporate canonical films of the 20th century—from Walter Ruttmann to Mary Ellen Bute, Oskar Fischinger, and so on—and see them not as idiosyncrasies (as experimental filmmakers working at the fringes of the film industry), but rather as continuing a long tradition of producing abstract moving images. But visual music is not a purely historical phenomenon—the art form has considerable traction in contemporary popular culture as well. In the conclusion of my dissertation, I illustrate the contemporary relevance of visual music as an art form. I discuss several recent examples, ranging from the 1960s to the present and including feature-length abstract movies, installation art, computer software, and abstract music videos.

SP: Talking about today, it seems as though there is still a prosperous practice in different media that might be loosely associated with the tradition of visual music. Do you think that it is also this contemporaneous artistic output that inspires some of the scholarly interest?

HB: Yes. I think that projections at live pop music concerts, music visualization software on computers, music animations on video-streaming platforms such as YouTube, and other audiovisual art have become so commonplace today that scholars are increasingly

becoming interested in developing tools and approaches to study these phenomena.

SP: And what brought you to the topic?

HB: A popular film class I took at Yale called “Intermediality in Film,” co-taught by Brigitte Peucker and Regina Karl. There, I first saw Hans Richter’s film *Rhythm 21*. The question we discussed as a class was how this film related to other art forms. We discussed the film’s indebtedness to abstract painters (such as Mondrian); but what I felt remained unaddressed was its relation to music via film’s temporality. Like music, film was a medium that developed in time, and I thought this connection was really important and also highlighted by the musical title of the film. Richter also cited the music of J. S. Bach as important to him at the time. So to me, the film was both painterly and musical.

In a seminar paper, I dug a little deeper and discovered there to be an entire tradition of films inspired by music and visual art, some with sound, and some without; and that Richter’s film was an important inspiration for many filmmakers who came after him. In that context I also came across this term, “visual music,” for the first time. But to me it was not at all self-evident what exactly the “music” stood for. Were these filmmakers seeking to make sound visible? If so, what techniques did they use to achieve this effect? The more I looked into the question, the less self-evident the name became. Even film historians like William Moritz, who used the term again and again since the 1980s, were evasive when it came to pinning down its specific meaning. So this became my research question: How, if at all, do these films relate to music? And what can this relationship tell us more broadly about the cross-pollination between visual and auditory art forms in the 20th century?

SP: To go back to the issue of definitions: The term “visual music” seems omnipresent today, and also overused; but in your introduction you make it clear that you are talking about a quite specific phenomenon. What makes up your definition, and how did you arrive at it?

HB: I define visual music as denoting an abstract moving image. Let us take the second part of that definition first. The “moving image” is a term I borrow from film philosopher Noël Carroll. The term is useful, because it foregrounds the idea of motion, that is movement in time, which creates a crucial parallel with the temporal art form of music. The word “image,” on the other hand, distinguishes the art form from music: in other words, we are dealing with a visual art form, and such images can be realized by film, but also video, computer software, kaleidoscopes, the magic lantern, or any other media that can produce moving images. Put differently, we might say that the moving image is transmedial, which means that it can be realized by different media. Carroll believes that we should be talking about moving images rather than film, because film, like other media, has a life-span.

SP: So, to clarify: you choose the designation “moving image” rather than “film” in order to open up your discussion to different video formats and materialities?

HB: Yes, especially because film is increasingly becoming a more marginal medium; I think of film quite literally as celluloid, which has become increasingly displaced by digital media. And while most canonical works of visual music are on film, the history of visual music does not end with celluloid. The art form has mostly migrated to digital media today, and is now realized by software.

SP: What about the first part of your definition—the term “abstract”?

HB: I use the term “abstract” to mean two distinct but interrelated things. First, the non-objective, which effectively means “does not imitate nature” or does not represent things familiar to us from our visual world. Think of the later Kandinsky or Mondrian paintings, for instance, which are devoid of animals, trees, buildings, and so on. Instead, we just see abstract shapes, textures, colors.

The second component is non-narrative, which means “does not tell a story.” When we go to see a movie, we usually expect to be told a story of some

kind. This is the norm, even if the film has an unconventional or convoluted plot. But it is still different from what visual music films are doing: they don't unequivocally convey a narrative; and even if the creator had a story in mind, the interpretation of that narrative lies in the eye of the beholder. If you just see abstract forms moving in time and space, different viewers will likely have different recollections on what happened in that film. This ambiguity is similar to instrumental music, where listeners would not be able to say unequivocally what this or that piece was "about," even if it was inspired by a specific program.

This definition of abstraction covers most of the canonical films, from Richter, to Bute, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Fischinger, James Whitney, Jordan Belson, and so on. I bracket the question of sound and deal with that separately. It feels very slow to set out this definition in these steps, but I do believe that this work is important.

SP: Absolutely! And the terms you have chosen in your definition bring out the parallels with music in elegant ways: first the idea of temporality, as you described, and now the quality of abstraction, which, as you just mentioned, has been ascribed to some prominent forms of music, as an absolute art form, which is—in the view of many—abstract.

HB: Yes, this connects to ideas of 19th-century German philosophy and aesthetics—and many people still today hold that idea that music is essentially a non-representational (non-objective and non-narrative) art form; at least in the case of instrumental, non-texted music. So that's how we get back to the term "visual music," to ask why this is actually an adequate term for abstract films: they are musical, because they unfold in time, and also because they do not convey a narrative or imitate nature.

SP: Nice, and convincing! You also point out that your definition is a historical one. To what extent are these concepts historically contained?

HB: The term "visual music" entered aesthetic discourse in the 1890s, at essentially the same time as the discourse of abstraction emerged in the visual

arts. In Europe, the possibility of abstract painting was discussed already in the 1880s and 1890s by painters like Paul Gauguin and Maurice Denis. The narrative I trace is how a particular debate around form and content—which can be found in Eduard Hanslick's treatise on the *Musically Beautiful*—was imported into art criticism by people like Walter Pater and Ernest Fenollosa in the late 19th century. These critics wanted to describe a type of visual art where the form couldn't be distinguished from the content. That invariably led them down the path of abstraction.

Although many scholars credit Roger Fry as having coined the term "visual music" in 1912, Ernest Fenollosa actually employed it as early as 1894. Fenollosa was a curator of East Asian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He used the term in an exhibition catalog on Ancient Chinese Buddhist art to characterize the formal beauty of drapery in paintings he attributed to the twelfth-century Chinese painter Ririomin—also known as Li Lung-Mien—and his followers. So visual music is a product of the Western fascination with East Asian art at the end of the 19th century. It is quite possible that Roger Fry got the term from Arthur Wesley Dow, Fenollosa's acolyte, although I haven't yet been able to create a specific link between the three figures. More research is needed in that regard.

There is another interesting parallel between music and visual music: both are art forms that can take people outside of themselves, allowing them to enter into a spiritual dimension. That is already a quality we see ascribed to music by the German Romantics, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann. A mystical potential was also ascribed to the abstract visual arts by artists such as Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky. It's all about being put in touch with some reality that lies beyond everyday experience.

SP: What's interesting about this is how a philosophical tradition that is rooted in a rather conservative view on music and that sought to shield music from external projections is being transferred onto a quite modernist, and notably interartistic movement in the visual arts of the early 1900s.

HB: It's very surprising! Absolute music was certainly a conservative aesthetic position in the 19th century,

but it was given new license by dancers, painters, and filmmakers as a progressive aesthetic in the early 20th century. Mark Evan Bonds points this out in his book *Absolute Music: History of an Idea* (2014)—that it was visual artists and poets, rather than composers and musicians, who were attracted to absolute music due to its prestigious connotations. The word “absolute” became a key word that modernist artists rallied around in the 1910s. For example, European dance pioneers Mary Wigman and Rudolf von Laban coined the term “absolute dance” on the eve of the First World War to describe an ideal of “pure” dance consisting of bodily movement alone, without seeking recourse to other art forms such as music. It was a moment of differentiating the arts, classifying them according to their respective strengths. Music did not need to rely on other art forms for its effect, so why shouldn’t the other arts be able to do the same? That was the idea at least.

After the First World War, the term “absolute” became somewhat of a buzzword among avant-garde filmmakers active in Weimar Germany. I think that a lot of artists who were excited about the artistic possibilities of film were still self-conscious about its status as an art form. During the 1920s, film was still considered a low-brow, mass medium, an association that was hard to shake off. A common criticism at the time was that film was merely copying theater and novels. Music, on the other hand, was perceived to be an “absolute”—that is autonomous and self-sufficient—art form. Filmmakers wanted to accord film the same prestige and respectability. So they ran with it.

SP: In your analyses you show how some of the examples, and visual music more generally, have the potential to transgress certain boundaries, both within the arts, but also in the relationship between the arts and society. Can you tell us a little more about the seeming opposites that you observe to be bridged in this genre?

HB: Yes, I examine visual music as an art form that transgresses cultural binaries, although these binaries change from one cultural period to the next. In the context of Weimar Germany (during the 1920s), visual music was seen as a new art form that bridged the

chasm between the arts of space (e.g. painting, sculpture) and time (e.g. music, poetry). Later on, in the context of North America during 1930s and 1940s, visual music undermined the hierarchical taste distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow art, between what formalist art critic Clement Greenberg called “avant-garde” and “kitsch.” And in the post-war period, where visual music had a second blossoming on the West Coast of the United States, abstract moving images stood for the merging between the ego with nature, or the universe, a hallmark of what contemporary critics and philosophers dubbed the “mystical experience.” These are just three cultural perspectives on visual music, and how it reflects different concerns depending on the specific cultural context.

SP: What roles do new technological, or media-specific possibilities play in shaping the aesthetics of visual music? What overarching developments might be attributed to changing technological possibilities?

HB: One thing that surprised me in my research is that color was key to visual music even before the arrival of mass-produced color formats such as Kodachrome, Gasparcolor, or Technicolor. The earliest abstract film that survives, *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921), was hand-colored by its creator, Walter Ruttmann. Color is also a crucial ingredient in the abstract films of the Corradini brothers, Léopold Survage, and Hans Stoltenberg, important pioneers of visual music in film prior to World War I. We can even trace the appeal of color all the way back to C. Frances Jenkins’s phantoscope, a competitor to the Lumière brothers’ cinematograph. Jenkins believed that colors morphing and transforming over time had an enduring appeal. By contrast, black-and-white examples of visual music can be found throughout the decades, during the 1920s, but also much later, during the 1940s.

The other major technological innovation was the introduction of soundtrack technology, which happened gradually during the second half of the 1920s. This was a major development, allowing artists like Bute and Fischinger to precisely synchronize the movement of shapes to a pre-selected underlying music record. This gives the majority of their work a

choreographed quality. What I found surprising, however, was that despite the ubiquity of soundtracks from the 1930s onwards, silent visual music never completely faded away. Fischinger produced *Radio Dynamics* in 1942, and Belson created *Improvisation No. 1* in 1947, and both filmmakers intentionally left these films silent. I think they were trying to make a point—namely that abstract film didn't necessarily need music as a crutch, but that it could be self-sufficient. The autonomy argument again.

SP: Let's stay with this crucial aspect for a moment: As you point out, visual music does not necessarily involve sound and might in fact be silent. But in the case of there being a pairing of visual and sonic materials, a central issue will be the question of synchronization. What are some of the different ways that you encountered to engage creatively with this possibility?

HB: I think there has been a lot of confusion surrounding the relationship between abstract moving images and music. That is because the term "visual music" itself already seems to suggest some kind of pre-existing relationship of sounds and images. One helpful distinction Ralph Whyte made in his 2019 thesis on color organs is that between *music + light* versus *music as light*. Similarly to Whyte I've come across varying approaches to sound/image relations among the filmmakers I studied. To make sense of these different approaches I came up with a four-part typology that builds on Whyte's distinction and allows us to get a more nuanced picture.

Broadly speaking, I distinguish between four different types of visual music. Type 1 visual music is silent, and it makes no pretension of emulating musical structures or forms. Viking Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale* is a classic case. Belson's film *Improvisation No. 1* is likely another example, although the film itself doesn't survive. Wilfred's Lumia works from the early 1940s, discussed by Whyte, also fall into this category.

Type 2 are silent, but they do in fact evince some musical characteristics, such as having a regular beat, or even emulating more formal properties of music. Ruttmann's *Opus IV* has a musical pulse that is conveyed entirely visually. Hans Richter's *Rhythm 23*

even takes the form of a palindrome, by playing backwards from its midway point. These examples illustrate that not all visual music films need to necessarily include sound, but can incorporate musical characteristics.

Types 3 and 4 are both contingent on sound/music being heard in addition to seeing visuals. Type 3s work with direct mappings of sound onto images, most often through rhythm. The majority of works by Mary Ellen Bute and Oskar Fischinger fall into this category. This can give Type 3s a certain mickeymoused, or choreographed, quality. Type 4s take the opposite approach, wherein the sound and the image are only loosely, if at all, correlated. Most of Belson's and James Whitney's films take this approach. Belson even had a specific name for it—he called it "accidental synchronization," and he said he used it all the time.

SP: Are there any recent examples of visual music that you find particularly compelling?

HB: Definitely! Two contemporary artists I have been following with interest are Daniel Swan and Clayton McCracken. Swan animated A. G. Cook's song *Idyll* (2020). In that abstract music video, Swan has colorful circles whizzing around the frame, which reminds me of the circle-based imagery we find in Fischinger's classic film *An Optical Poem* (1937). Clayton McCracken, on the other hand, has produced abstract animations synchronized to three tracks on Charli XCX's CRASH 2022 tour—*Visions*, *Party 4 U*, and *New Shapes*. I saw the visuals live in Oakland, and they floored me. McCracken's abstract animations are just so perfectly matched to the music that they invariably enhance the music. Swan's and McCracken's abstract music animations show that the Fischinger aesthetic is still very much alive today, and I'm excited to see where they will take the art form in years to come.

Abstract

This interview offers an overview of Henry Balme's understanding of the term "visual music." It covers a new definition of visual music, offers fresh historical and cultural perspectives, and suggests analytical and theoretical approaches to studying the art form. His doctoral thesis on visual music will be completed at the Music Department of Yale University in 2023. It will be available on ProQuest.

Authors

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Stephanie Probst is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Her PhD-dissertation (Harvard University, 2018) traced theories of melody in the 1920, at the intersection of music theory, psychology, and the visual arts. A current project is dedicated to writing and reading with different technologies for musical inscription. She joined the editorial team of Kunsttexte.de in 2021.

Titel

Henry Balme and Stephanie Probst, *Visual Music as Abstract Moving Image, An Interview*, in: kunsttexte.de, Nr. 4, 2022 (6 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2022.4.91640>