

HYBRID ART FORMS: THE WAY OF SEEING MUSIC

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This paper will focus on relationship between music and visual arts through the idea of hybrid art forms. Within this interdisciplinary approach, it aims to consider scientific and technological developments and the way its effects on art and perception. In this context, examples by some of hybrid art forms will be analyzed and finally compared with recent multi-media works.

Throughout the Ancient times, from Aristotle to Schopenhauer, from Pythagoras to Newton, common aspects of vision and hearing have been taken account as an interesting research field. In his passage *De Sensu*, Aristotle remarked the correlation between sound and color by encompassing physical and perceptual matters: "We may regard all these colors (all those based on numerical ratios) as analogous to the sounds that enter into music, and suppose that those involving simple numerical ratios, like the concords in music." [1] However, the analogy in physical relations between sound and vision were grounded to the ideas of Pythagoras who had depicted the musical sensory qualities related to mathematical ratios.

At the end of 18th century, physical correlations of harmonics could have been displayed by the inventions of various tools. For example, Ernst Chladni had produced his patterns with a simple system that included scattered sand onto a square plate. Chladni's patterns were occurred when this plate was bowed in certain notes. [2] Within the 19th Century, the interest of these instruments had gradually increased. French mathematician Jules Lissajous used small fixed mirrors on the sideways of small steel instrument and Sir Charles Wheatstone reflected a light beam on his Kaleidophone to produce the shapes of harmonic vibrations. Among those inventions Harmonograph is one of the well-known device that create figures of harmonic movement of pendulums.

Beside these physical correspondences between visual and acoustic harmonies, there are also remarkable interpretations vary in different standpoints. Goethe's color theory and Newton's observations on physical similarity of musical scales and seven prismatic rays of light had invoked scientific and artistic researches. In one of the early inventions of color transmission instrument 'Clavecin Oculaire', Louis-Bertrand Castel (1688-1757) modified distribution of Newton's visible spectrum and implemented these colors in to his color schema. In the half of 19th Century, new theories and applications were adapted to the instruments, such as Frederick Kastner's invention called 'Pyrophone' which was a type of gas organ and Bainbridge Bishop's device with a small display placed on the top of a classical organ that sound and its related color could be played together. However, the very-best known color organ was Alexander Rimmington's instrument, which was performed in New York, at the premier of Scriabin's 'Prometheus, Poem of Fire' in 1915.

Synaesthesia generates another common state of visual art and music. From late 19th century till the end of second quarter of 1900's, visual artists and musicians got deeply involved with this phenomenon, which is basically defined as a transition of senses. It was practiced mostly seeing the music or hearing the color of sounds. It embodies subjectivity and evokes personal associations. Like Scriabin, his contemporary in visual art Kandinsky was also aspired by this inner sense.

Artistic interpretations

Mathematical nature of harmony in music has always great influence on other art forms, such as visual arts, poetry and even architecture, which could be discussed in a wide range of interdisciplinary perspective. First of all, the sense of order, disorder and the contrast between them alter our perceptual and psychological response. [3] In music, the pleasure of order is established by tonal properties and its analogy in visual arts is indicated by perspective, which represents the vision of nature in harmony. For instance, when the tonal system was broken down by the technique of Schoenberg's twelve-tone system, the harmonic hierarchy was dismissed. This could be seen analogous in the flattened pictorial plane of paintings. However, Donald Mitchell draw a parallel between Cubism and the new architecture, on the one hand, and Schoenberg's method on the other and claim that abandonment of tonality in music and subsequent development of the serial method is well nigh simultaneous with the abandonment of perspective. [4]

Intensive interrelations between music and visual arts began to form art by responding aesthetical needs of the 20th century's worldview. Painters like Kandinsky, Klee and Kupka devoted their art to become unified with the idea of music that has the power to give expression without help of representation. Abstractness, which is considered as an essential property of music became great achievement for visual arts. Latter on, it was also determined by Clement Greenberg, who believed in independence and the purity of modernist art. For Greenberg all arts can pursue the sensuous and physical property of music. [5] Thus, in relation to other arts, music became a model; but the significance is, it should be considered as a method rather than an effect.

Greenberg's modernism is based on distilling art forms and by referring to Lessing and Babbitt; he revealed a long running idea: 'medium specificity.' On the other hand it is interesting that contemporaneously there developed new art forms and innovative experiments based on synthesis of different mediums.

Medium syntheses previously had been seen in the stage compositions like musical dramas and operas and latter in modernist period it gained new inspirations. Like in the 'Yellow Sound' (1909-14), which was an experimental piece, Kandinsky embraced all perceptual effects and blended different art forms. He turned increasingly to music by working on experimental stage compositions with Thomas von Hartmann who used music, painting, dance and lighting in his stage works. At the same time his colleague Schoenberg intensified his painting practices and stated to work on small operas. His short drama 'Erwartung' (1909) and the opera 'Die Glückliche Hand' (1910-13) revealed the same synthetic manner. Contrary to Greenberg's discriminative sense, the synthetic relations of music and visual arts could be seen as influence by Wagner aesthetics: the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' where all arts united under the banner of music.

Although in Greenberg's exclusive sense of modernism or in Wagner's unified art form, music is seen as a paradigm, as a model to define aspired 'modern' art. As Simon Shaw-Miller has pointed out in his essay 'Modernist Music', the modernist conception, has two streams developing at the birth of modernism "which are generated from music." [6] This bilateral condition of modernism stated in on the one hand 'abstract formal techniques' and on the other in 'multi-sensory' or 'multidimensional model', they can be called 'formal modernism' and 'contextual modernism', 'pure' and 'hybrid'.

Within this time period, among these stage experimenters, Thomas Wilfred conditioned himself with an exceptional aesthetic notion. He suggested a new art form, Lumia, the Art of Light, which has only light

as an independent aesthetic medium. With his instrument named Clavilux, he performed silent compositions –which were also given opus numbers like in music - controlled by a keyboard. He stated the aesthetic concept of Lumia as “The use of light as an independent art-medium through the silent visual treatment of form, color and motion in dark space with the object of conveying an aesthetical experience to a spectator.” [7] In 1920’s, when Thomas Wilfred began his experiments with Clavilux, some other artists saw advantages of film as a medium to express their abstract context. Oskar Fischinger, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, they all became aware of potentials in forth dimension. Their formalist tendency in abstract experience has broadened the essential meaning of composition, rhythm, color and the form.

It is reasonable that not all art forms are pure. Jerrold Levinson defines hybrid art forms as “art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier (existing) art forms.” [8] Then he goes on to categorize hybrids as juxtapositional (additive), synthetic (fusional) and finally transformational in which visual music –in the form of abstract color film- is considered as. But for Levinson, because of the transformation of music (western classical music) into abstract film is not structurally and thematically possible therefore he claims visual music as a nonexistent art form. Nevertheless he mentions that these kind of nonexistent art forms could someday exist “by appeal to radically new means and media that technological advance will make available.” [9]

References and Notes:

1. Aristotle, “De Sensu,” <http://classics.mit.edu//Aristotle/sense.html> (accessed May 20, 2011).
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3. E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), 6.
4. Donald Mitchell, *The Language of Modern Music* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1966), 77.
5. Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 565 (Blackwell Publishing, 2002).
6. Simon Shaw Miller, “Modernist Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. P. Brooker, A. Gasiorek, D. Longworth and A. Thacker, 599-617 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
7. Thomas Wilfred, “Light and the Artist”, *The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 5, no.4 (1947), 252.
8. Jerrold Levinson, “Hybrid Art Forms,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 4 (1984): 6.
9. Jerrold Levinson, *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.