

1-1-2013

Reflections on the construction of meaning through immanent visual association

Samuel P. Gillies
Edith Cowan University

Lindsay R. Vickery
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2013>



Part of the [Music Performance Commons](#)

Gillies, S. P., & Vickery, L. R. (2013). Reflections on the construction of meaning through immanent visual association. In Sound scripts : proceedings of the 2011 Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference. / Volume 4. (pp. 71-77). Grosvenor Place, Australia: Australian Music Centre. Available [here](#).
This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2013/272>

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING THROUGH IMMANENT VISUAL ASSOCIATION:

WORKS BY EDGARD VARÈSE, BILL VIOLA, ALVA NOTO, CURTIS ROADS AND BRIAN O'REILLY

SAMUEL GILLIES AND LINDSAY VICKERY

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS, EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY, PERTH

ABSTRACT

Since the advent of digital video editing and projection, multimedia presentation in the concert space is no longer exclusive to the music of stadium-sized popular music events. Increasingly, many in the field of new music are incorporating elements of mixed media presentation. Examples of this trend include performances across the spectrum of new music such as Sensorband, Nico Muhly, Leafcutter John, and more. This paper discusses the artistic and thematic accomplishments of four different approaches to audio-visual association before discussing the influences of these approaches, their incorporation or rejection, into my own work *Red River*. (Gillies, 2011)

INTRODUCTION

With the increased availability and decreased expense of digital video and projection, it has never been easier for artists who work with multimedia to create new and groundbreaking work that engages an audience on a number of levels. This paper is primarily concerned with discussing the approaches to audio-visual interactivity by Alva Noto, Edgard Varèse, Bill Viola and Curtis Roads/Brian O'Reilly as a contextual understanding with which to discuss the audio-visual interaction at play in my original

work *Red River* (Gillies, 2011). The focus of this paper is intentionally focused on works that utilise visual materials to attribute meaning or effect to music. This should be considered separate to the work of experimental filmmakers that utilise experimental soundtracks. It is similarly important to point out that this paper is not intended to engage in a debate on the pros and cons of multimedia work per se.

WHY?

As human beings we are unable to escape the visual. We are always watching and, as much as we might fight it, 'all sound performance entails some form of visual listening as audiences construct relationships between what they see and what they hear'. (Maloney, 2005, p.2). While for some the physicality of the performers on stage is enough, the use of extra-musical material can be an important way for the artist to sculpt the audience's perception and interpretation of a musical work. A central concept that underpins the development of much music is the transition between periods of tension and periods of comparative relaxation to generate a feeling of musical movement, narrative and structure. By introducing a visual element to a performance the artist has an extra language with which to utilise these elements of tension and release.

Kathleen Maloney explains that all audiences experience a relationship between sound and image, and that this relationship is largely built from their own preconceived associations – an audiovisual illusion.

Audiences accept the idea of the audiovisual illusion and therefore approach their listening with the idea that there is a purposeful, or even real, link between sound and image. It is as if this audiovisual illusion precedes any relationship between sound and image in the sense that audiences assume or accept the illusion that what they see on screen relates to what they hear. (Maloney, 2005, p.4.)

The key element that unites the practice of all audio-visual artists is this exploration of the relationship between what is seen and what is heard, a relationship that exists regardless. For some, the physicality of being on stage creates enough meaning. For others, the use of lighting and spatialisation will construct appropriate meaning. These are all valid uses of audio-visual association. However, another approach is demonstrated by musicians and artists who utilise film and imagery, usually projected on or around them, to play with the audience's perception of the relationship between sight and sound. These artists and their various approaches to this practice is what I will go on to investigate.

VISUALS IN REACTION – ALVA NOTO

Perhaps the most common method of utilising visuals to accompany music is the use of visual material that has a clear and obvious relationship to sound and music – visuals in reaction. While it would have always been possible to synchronise sound and music, in the last 30 years technology has grown to the extent that these relationships are now much easier to realise. The accessibility of live video in the 1980s liberated practitioners from the restrictions of film stock, and the development of video synthesis helped to break distinctions between sound and image even further. (Priest, 2009, p.202)

By the late 1990s, complex vision mixing (and generating) techniques, which previously required bulky and expensive equipment, were becoming achievable through the use of laptops and object-based programming software such as Max/MSP, Nto, Jitter and Pure Data. (Priest 2009, p.202)

Because of the relative ease with which these results can be attained, the use of visuals to respond to auditory stimulus is perhaps the most common form of audio-visual association, being utilised everywhere from popular music performances by bands such as Nine Inch Nails to sound and visual art performances such as those of Scott Arford (Maloney, 2005, p.18). The implementation of this extra-musical association creates a highly immersive environment for perceiving sound and creating association. While the use of visuals that react to sound is comparatively widespread, it is the work of Alva Noto which, I find, exemplifies this approach in constructing a relationship between sight and sound.

Carsten Nicolai is an audio-visual artist, better known as his performance alias Alva Noto, who:

... seeks to overcome the separation of the art forms and genres by trying to endeavor a holistic artistic approach. Thus he seeks to overcome the separation of the sensual perceptions of man ... by making sound and light frequencies perceivable for both eyes and ears to sensitise the viewer to the connection of different sensory levels. (Nicolai, 2011)

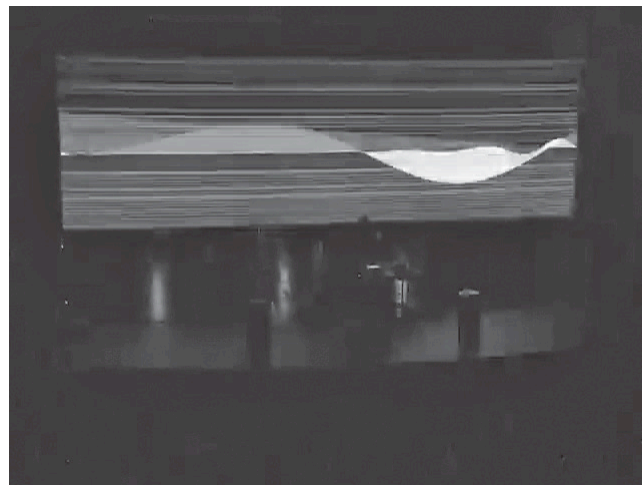


Figure 1. Alva Noto performs *unitxt* (2008).

To this end, Noto's music performances rely upon highly synchronised and reactive visual elements. Of his output, Noto's *unitxt* (2008) release stands out to be the most obvious in the live relationship between visuals and sound. Noto's *unitxt* is a project that is more preoccupied with dense, complicated glitch beats than Noto's other releases, which makes it perhaps the easiest to understand the relationship between sight and sound. Live, the visual representation of sound was a collaborative effort between Noto and the software company Derivative, based on Noto's original visual

experimentations. The entire *unitxt* project is built upon the use of raw digital data as audio and visual material, to which Derivative's involvement takes this visualisation one step further:

The resulting visuals reveal and present the underlying compository structures of the original live-visualisation that is based on the visualisation of data as represented through audio waveforms. The visuals are a literal translation of sonic data boldly and graphically rendered through line, waves, and colour that expand on the spectrum of audio-reactive visuals by explaining their creation through touch designer's uniquely designed user interface. (Rousset, 2009)

The use of visuals in reaction to music results in a completely immersive concert experience where sight and sound are a singular entity. The tension and release of the music is created in conjunction with both audio and visual elements and as such, are heightened by their entwined relationship.

VISUALS IN OPPOSITION – EDGARD VARÈSE

Perhaps less common is the practice of using visual material that opposes the music. In this case, instead of creating an immersive environment for experiencing music, contrary stimuli constantly challenges the audience, and this conflict continually reminds them that they are watching a performance. This is often not a desirable outcome for modern electronic musicians who utilise extra-musical elements to help engage their audience with their music. However, several composers have championed the use of visual material that works in opposition to the music, perhaps the most notable being Edgard Varèse who outlined his ideas of audio-visual relationships in relation to his planned multimedia work *Deserts* (1950-54).

Deserts is a landmark musical work. Its combination of orchestral instruments and electronic tape manipulations was groundbreaking for the time. However, the piece was intended to be accompanied by a film component, and it is Varèse's philosophy as to how the interplay between music and film functions that makes *Deserts* an interesting piece to consider from an audio-visual perspective. In describing the piece in 1954, Varèse said:

Visual image and organised sound will not duplicate each other. For the most part light and sound will work in opposition in such a

way as to give the maximum emotional reaction. Sometimes they will join for dramatic effect and in order to create a feeling of unity. Such contrasts achieved through the synchronisation of simultaneous, unrelated elements would create a dissociation of ideas which would excite the imagination and stimulate the emotions. (Mattis 1992, p.210)

While the broad use of opposing elements of sight and sound, as well as the specific synchronised use of unrelated sound and image, may be jarring to an audience, this conflict creates a sense of immediacy in the work, and gives the composer a new method of creating a sense of conflict and resolution in the music.

VIDEO AS MEANING – BILL VIOLA

Bill Viola is first and foremost a video artist. Working primarily with video as a contemporary art practice, Viola's works are installed internationally and create 'total environments that envelop the viewer in image and sound'. (Viola, 2002) While often using sound design over a soundtrack to his films, his solo works have a certain musicality to them. Viola's films have a certain rhythmicity, and his collaborative works with musicians range from David Tudor to Ensemble Modern to Nine Inch Nails. (Viola, 2002) While the use of sound in Viola's video works is worthy of a paper on its own, here I shall discuss the application of Viola's practice in creating video projections for rock band Nine Inch Nails.

Sound is an essential element for the creation of meaning in Viola's video art. As Rhys Davies states, in the context of Viola's work:

Sound is not confined to the visual frame and therefore enjoys a greater freedom of expression, particularly when it is contextualised by diegetic element. (Davies 2004, p.144)

While Viola often uses familiar sounds to create meaning or effect in his video works, his approach for creating video for predetermined music extends this practice to another level. For Nine Inch Nail's *Fragility 2.0* tour in 2000, Trent Reznor approached Bill Viola to create a visual counterpoint for the music during the middle section of the concert. Viola created video pieces for three songs, which comprised the quieter, more lyrical section of the concert. (Viola, 2002)

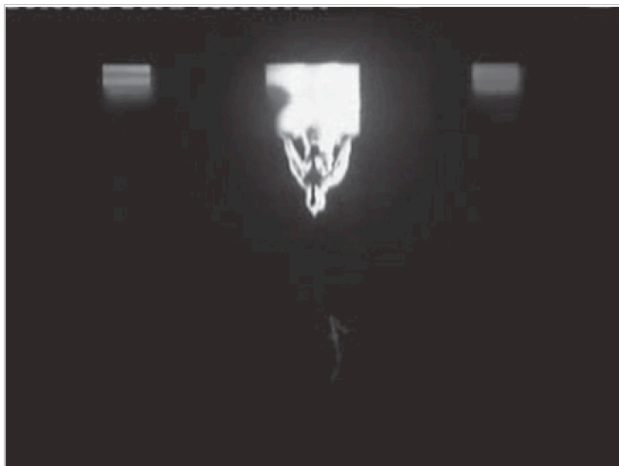


Figure 2. Still from Bill Viola's visual accompaniment to Nine Inch Nail's *The Great Below* (1999). (Viola, 2002)

Viola's work (in the context of this paper) for Nine Inch Nails occupies a similar role as that of Alva Noto, in that elements of synchronisation are key in constructing the relationship between sight and sound. However, there are differences that warrant a separate study of Viola's approach. Inherently, the Alva Noto use of projection is a literal visual embodiment of the sound at play. The images flicker and change according to rhythmic motifs or harmonic devices. In addition, the visual elements are often generated live and within the sphere of electronic improvisation, which can potentially result in different visuals depending on the performance. Viola's work is very much indebted to a history of film making and, while certain film events are synchronised with events in the music for effect, the final product is closer to being a short film that accentuates elements of the music while adding meaning to the work in Viola's own visual language.

I wanted to let the images ... provide a base for the music. I'm really not interested in illustrating music and certainly not in cutting on the beat or throwing in every little movement in the song. I think images can function, in contrast to a lot of music videos ... as a kind of steady base or a steady state that allows the music to flow and ebb and crest over the top of it without having to be too finely detailed and too illustrative of the form of the music. (Viola, 2002)

As we can see here, Viola is occupied with video serving the music, in using video to orientate the audience to approach the music from a different perspective than is achieved purely through

works, ascension, transformation, transcendence, redemption and so on, can be seen in Viola's work for Reznor. During the Nine Inch Nails track *The Great Below* (1999) the audience witnesses a man floating in an undefined space. Here, lyrically the song is referring to a descent from grace and, as the song reaches its climax, the audience realises that they have been watching, not a man floating in space, but a man falling. However, the video is inverted so that it appears that the man is 'falling upwards'. At the climax of the song the man falls into a pool of water and the surface of the water is disrupted, in a veritable explosion of water.

What we're really talking about here, what I was connecting with very strongly, was in fact this is actually an ascension, it's an image of ascension, of transformation. Into another world, into another state, and so the world as we know it is turned upside down and the way out is not down, the way out is up. (Viola, 2002)

In this brief example we are able to see how the use of a non-variable, film approach to visual accompaniment is able to create an extra element of meaning in the music. The use of water, of bodies falling or being dislocated in space are common images to Viola's lexicon, images that appear in a number of his own works. However, here in the context of the music they are given room to create a comparative meaning, just as the music is inherently affected by their presence. Here a song that is about despair and alienation is transformed ambiguously into something else. On one hand there is still this release, and yet because of the transformative imagery of the visuals there is almost a kind of hope created that runs contrary to the lyrics and makes the mood of the music now ambiguous.

TEXTURE AS NARRATIVE – CURTIS ROADS/ BRIAN O'REILLY

In 2005, Curtis Roads released *Point Line Cloud*, a collection of granular synthesis works that were accompanied by visualisation by Brian O'Reilly. In an interview with vbs.tv, Curtis Roads described the role of narrative in his music:

For me, composing is about telling a story. The sounds are born, they live, they change, they meet other sounds, they collide, one sound destroys another, they merge together, they get married, they get divorced, they get unstable, they change

identity, they mutate and then they die. So it's all about a narrative, it's a narrative about sounds. (Stulberg, 2009)

O'Reilly's visual accompaniment for *Point Line Cloud* appears to draw from Roads's own microsound explorations. Utilising a vast range of techniques and materials (from video feedback, analogue video synthesis, software manipulation and more), O'Reilly manipulates blurred and distorted images, a mixture of video and synthetic visual creations, and in doing so is able to give Roads's microsonic narratives a visual representation that helps make the trajectory of the sound clearer.

Half Life: Sonal Atoms (Roads, 2005) utilises perhaps the most obvious visual material. Here, minimal visual material (a few seconds of video footage) is manipulated to create a winding, turning vision with a narrative function of its own. Stefanie Ku describes this vision:

... rhythm and texture seem to be the two primary associations between image and sound. Roads's meticulously edited pulsar trains and their granular filtrations propel the audience through a visceral sonic vortex while O'Reilly's incorporation of video feedback techniques intensifies the velocity at which the audience is accelerated through the manipulated footage of a tunnel. (Ku, 2007, p.7)

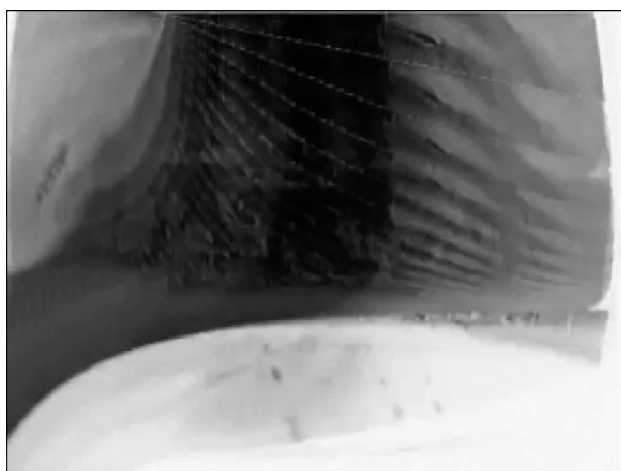


Figure 3. Video still from Brian O'Reilly's video accompaniment for Curtis Roads's *Half Life: Sonal Atoms* (2005).

This description probably best describes the movement captured in the audio-visual association on a macroscopic level. Beyond this overall sense of momentum is a complex array of associative visual and audio elements. There is repetition in both the audio and video that the audience is exposed to, however often the transition between elements is so quick that it can be difficult to determine what these relationships are. However, it is clear that there must be one. As elements are repeated, some synchronised with a particular sound or range of sounds, others floating loosely and alternating freely, a narrative is exposed. There is momentum, a continuance, created between the visuals and music. The use of distorted, textural visuals allows for a unique relationship to be created between sound and visuals. Here there is no predetermined relationship between what is being seen and its relationship to the audio, rather due to the obtuse nature of the material the audience is able to draw its own conclusion as to how the textures relate in meaning to audio. In this way, the use of visual textures create an open-ended narrative, one with which the audience is able to draw their own, unique meanings from.

VISUALS AS ORIENTATION – RED RIVER

Red River (Gillies, 2011) is a piece I wrote in 2011 for bass drum, cymbal and laptop processing that utilises video projection. I wanted to draw upon elements of different approaches in audio-visual works to create an immersive environment for the audience and to position the listener in such a way that they would be encouraged to think about the function and meaning of the music. Thematically, *Red River* was inspired by the big themes of Bill Viola's video work. In this way I wanted to create a piece that concerned itself with the dynamic between the individual, and the individual's perception, and the rest of existence, or the universe as a whole. In the piece, a score for bass drum and cymbal is performed and over time recorded audio is manipulated by the computer processing, which increases in complexity and activity over *Red River's* eight-minute duration.

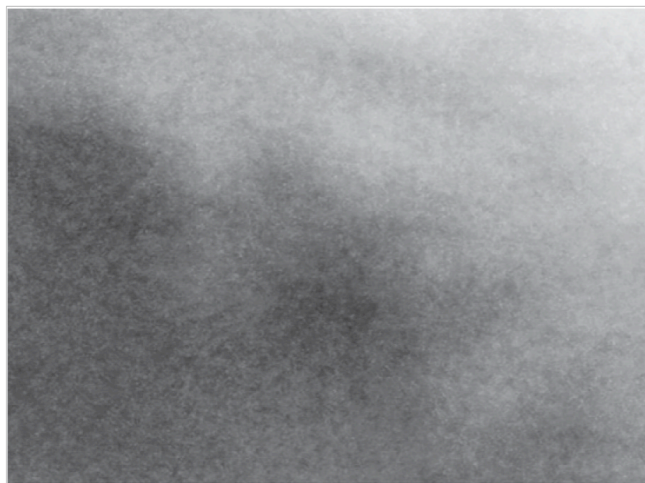


Figure 4. Video still from the video accompaniment for *Red River* (Gillies, 2011).

The visual projection used was influenced by Bill Viola's use of static film, and by Brian O'Reilly's use of texture and manipulation of images. The thematic emphasis of the piece did not necessitate something that was inherently reactive in building a relationship between the visual and musical material. There are some situations where the film is synchronised to direct hits, but in general much of the film was constructed in line with Varèse's notion of utilising visuals in opposition to sound. In this way, the moments of calm in the visuals have a certain menace to them, while the jagged editing in other sections can either provide a stronger association of violence to the music, or, in more relaxed music passages, create a sense of tension.

The film acts to orientate the audience into a specific way of interpreting the sound. The visuals are abstract and seem to suggest a site and location for the music that is unfamiliar. The gradient between black, white and grey is another element that helps to make the visual objects unfamiliar to the audience. The use of the word 'red' in the title was intended to be provocative, as there is no colour in the film itself. The film is projected above the performer, who performs in darkness. The coupling of the physicality of the individual and the strangeness of an enforced film image helps to orientate the audience to perceive a relationship between the two, the performer and image, and the acoustic and electronic sound.

As the piece progresses the acoustic and electronic sound becomes more meshed as the spectral processing confuses the two and the darkness hides the performer's exact actions. The film however continues on its own pace. The overall desired effect was to orientate the audience to perceive the music with a sense of scope. Scope between the role of the individual in a huge, expanding universe is reflected in the interaction between acoustic and electronic instruments, and the interaction of abstract visual objects with a darkened solo performer, thereby revealing the strangeness, violence and beauty inherent in the dichotomy of our existence and the universe.

CONCLUSION

The visual element of performance is inescapable; performance is inherently tied to our ability to see someone as a site for making music, and from that site we construct meaning. Since this visual perception is always present, one could put forward the argument that if we ignore this, we are losing a key element that allows the audience to construct meaning from our work. While the use of extra-musical elements can help create a more immersive environment or clearly outline abstract musical structures, it can also provide meaning or open the sound to a more abstract way of listening to the music than simply: 'does it sound good'. The use of extra-musical elements can provide a sense of narrative or facilitate an extra layer of meaning that can provide a number of different ways for the audience to experience the music and to obtain meaning from the work, relationships that are continuously constructed in the moment. This is what I sought to attempt in creating my original work *Red River*, a process that was influenced by an understanding of the works and approaches to audio-visual interaction by Alva Noto, Edgard Varèse, Bill Viola and Curtis Roads/Brian O'Reilly.

REFERENCES

Books

- Davies, R. 2004, "The Frequency of Existence: Bill Viola's Archetypal Sound" in *The Art Of Bill Viola* [ed. Chris Townsend] Thames and Hudson Inc., New York.
- Ku, S. 2007, *Lambent Chondrule Mimesis: A Composition of Sound and Moving Image*. University of California, San Francisco.
- Maloney, K. 2005, "Sounding images and imaging sounds – audiovisual interactivity in performance" *Sightlines*, California College of the Arts, pp. 2, 4, 18.
- Mattis, O. 1992, *Edgard Varèse and the visual arts*. PhD, Stanford University, California.
- Priest, G. 2009, "Sounding Sight, space and bodies: A survey of mixed media explorations" in *Experimental music: Audio explorations in Australia* [ed. Gail Priest] UNSW Press, Australia.

Video

- Viola, B. (Writer/Director) 2002, "Bill Viola about his work for Nine Inch Nails Part 1" [Online] Youtube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7a8R8Oynj4> (accessed September 9, 2011)
- Stulberg, R. (Producer) 2009, "Curtis Roads Part 1: The Breakdown" [Online] Youtube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Xy0szkt7ao (accessed September 9, 2011)

Websites

- Nicolai, C. N/A. "Carsten Nicolai" <http://www.carstennicolai.com/?c=biography> (accessed September 5, 2011)
- Rousset, I. 2009, "Derivative TouchDesigner 007" <http://www.derivative.ca/Events/RasterNoton/> (accessed September 6, 2011)
- Viola, B. N/A. "Biography" <http://www.billviola.com/biograph.htm> (accessed September 7, 2011)

Recordings

- Noto, A. 2008, *Unitxt* [LP] Germany: Raster-norton
- Reznor, T. 2002, *...and all that could have been* [DVD] US: Nothing Records
- Roads, C. 2005, *Point Line Cloud* [CD/DVD] US: Asphodel