

## **From ‘concert’ to ‘screening’: visual anecdotes in Electroacoustic Music presentations**

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### **Abstract**

In line with the spectro-morphological tradition of much of the electroacoustic repertoire, video works produced by artists of electroacoustic provenance are predominantly abstract, especially in terms of the featured imagery. Nonetheless, despite the ensuing non-representational idiom that typifies much of the electroacoustic-video repertoire, composers enjoy the riveting compositional opportunities offered by materials, both audio and video, which possess clear *mimetic* potential, intended here as the ability to imitate nature or refer to it, more or less faithfully and literally (Emmerson, 1986, p. 17).

In the age of ubiquitous digital media, composers still enjoy the process of ‘capturing’ events from the real world and use them, with various strategies, as building blocks for their work. Therefore, before making their way into the darkness of their computer-based audio and video editing laboratory, they still use microphones and video-cameras to harvest sounds, images, ideas, fragments, anecdotes which will then be thrown into the prolific cauldron of a compositional ‘kitchen-studio’. There, a complex and often painstakingly long process of evaluation, manipulation and re-contextualisation can result in audio-visual *mise-en-scènes* that, despite the recognisable causal origin of the materials, can be wonderfully ambiguous. Drawing from my compositional endeavours in the audio-visual medium, I will posit that such radical departure from the points of origin emerges as a result of digital manipulation, as much as it is a consequence of audio-visual montage. Mimetic discourse in the Electroacoustic works of Trevor Wishart, Luc Ferrari and Francis Dhomont encourages the listener to (re)create mental images from a complex web of personal and cultural references the music taps into. I call ‘Mimetic Visual Music’ the artistic practice of audio-video design in which a very similar process of reconstruction is encouraged, with the added facet that the data for such inference is now both aural and visible.

Mimetic Visual Music poses significant idiomatic challenges and fascinating creative opportunities for the audio-visual composers, both those with a background in Electroacoustic Music and those coming from visual arts and experimental cinema. The practices of Visual Music production often intersect those of Electroacoustic Music composition, while analysis of Mimetic Visual Music must inevitably be drawn from sources beyond the Schaefferian methodologies and can easily cross-fade (!) into film theory. An audio-visual language disenthralled from the gravitational pull of narrativity, inevitably flirts with poetry and with its shifts from the *tale*, to more obscure meta-narratives. Reduced listening (Schaeffer, 1966, pp. 270-272) and visual suspension (Hyde, 2012, p. 170) are important methodologies when

coding and decoding the message in much Visual Music, but for the subset of repertoire presented in this paper a ‘genetic’, i.e. related to the genesis of the work (Zattra, 2005, p. 5), interdisciplinary approach, from a composer’s perspective, is more suited.

Mimetic Visual Music can be traced back as a further development of experimental cinema strands and can find its aesthetic and historical locus in the advancement of those experiences, developing its language, integrating strategies that are commonplace in Electroacoustic culture, and putting *sound* at the very core of its aesthetic and technical credo.

In this paper, the discussion will stem from my particular perspective of an audio-visual composer of acousmatic origin; hence, a brief excursus on the use of mimesis in the Electroacoustic Music, will lead to the exploration of a few important aspects of Visual Music composition. The paper discusses more (and less) probable links and parallels between Electroacoustic Audiovisual presentations and older aesthetic cousins forgotten, or never fully known, in the dusty, upper shelves of western cinematography. The question for the audience is whether a hybridisation between sonic and visual idioms is possible, and indeed desirable, and whether blurring the boundaries between ‘concert’ and ‘screening’ presentations can provide an opportunity to (re?)vitalise the Electroacoustic paradigms and rituals.

## Introduction

In line with the spectro-morphological tradition of much of the acousmatic repertoire, Electroacoustic Video works produced by artists of sonic arts provenance, are predominantly abstract, especially in terms of the imagery they resort to. Nonetheless, riveting creative opportunities are offered by materials, both audio and video, which possess clear *mimetic* potential (Emmerson, 1986, p. 17), intended here as the ability to imitate nature or refer to it, more or less faithfully and literally.

Events captured from the real world can be used, with various strategies, as building blocks for time-based compositions. Before they head into the darkness of computer-based studios, composers may wish to use microphones and video-cameras to harvest sounds, images, ideas, fragments, anecdotes to be thrown into the prolific cauldron of a compositional kitchen-laboratory-studio. There, materials are often manipulated, re-contextualised and re-arranged. The causal origin of the materials is more, or less, recognisable, yet their original *mise-en-scène* is often profoundly altered. Such radical alteration is both the result of the manipulation on the materials’ digitised version, as much as it is a consequence of audio-visual montage. The artistic challenges and opportunities offered by the combination of Electroacoustic sounds and the moving image are significant and intriguing, as are the intersections (or parallelisms, depending on the viewpoint) between the language of Electroacoustic Music and the audio-visual idiom that emerges from my compositional practices, and indeed the practices of many other composers in this media.

## The narrativic pull of mimesis in Electroacoustic Videos

Mimetic discourse in EA Music encourages the listener to (re)create mental images from a complex web of sonically recognisable personal and cultural references the music taps into. I call *mimetic electroacoustic video* the artistic practice of audio-visual design in which a very similar process of reconstruction is encouraged, with the added facet that the data for such

inference is now both audible and visible. My latest video works, for example *Dammtor* (Garro, 2013), departed from a mainly aural/ocular discourse<sup>1</sup> and engaged, instead, with mimetic discourse. The use of recognisable sound and, especially, images captured from reality, through camera filming and microphone recording, inevitably shifts the artefact towards much more powerful and ubiquitous media, such as cinematography, drama, documentary and videogames. The force field created by these attractors is nearly impossible to elude as they are indwelt in our mediated (filtered through the media) experience of the world. Narrative, here intended in the literal story-telling sense of the word, is the inescapable source of this attraction. Indeed, when we see any video-camera footage on a television set, computer display, portable device or large cinema screen, our first and foremost reaction will be the search of narrative validity: why are those objects, people, landscape being shown? Where do they come from? Where are they going next? What is their story? Who/what is this tale about?

## **Compositional techniques in mimetic electroacoustic video**

We can take advantage of modern digital techniques to manipulate audio and video, away from immediate recognisability, to resist the attractive pull of cinematographic narrativity. As sound designers know too well, materials' real-life associations can be very hard to disguise; however, regardless of how successful our attempts might be, invasive manipulations do tend to produce detectable stylistic hallmarks: they give the viewer unambiguous clues to the fact that the work being watched is not a film, in the traditional sense of the word, but rather an audio-visual composition which happens to utilise materials (camera footage, microphone recordings) that may, or may not, be commonly found in cinematography. We will next turn our attention to three such techniques.

### **Slow motion**

Whereas slowed-down footage equates to visual poetry, decelerated mimetic sounds, with the ensuing downward-transposed spectrum, often acquire comical connotations. Furthermore, time-stretched real-life audio, whereby deceleration is carried out while preserving the original pitch, often comes across as archetypical electroacoustic trickery. These different interpretations of audio and visual slow motion usually inform audio-visual composers' practice. Thence, the original audio captured during filming is rarely used in combination with the corresponding slowed down footage. In most situations, instead, slow motion is montaged with sonic and/or musical assemblages that facilitate the type of sub-textual reflection implied by the images.

Slow motion can shift real-life footage above (or aside) the strictly anecdotal, into a meta-narrative state typical of poetic expression. Such shift may well be caused by our culturally acquired response to cinema and television, where slow motion, accompanied with suitable atmospheric music, is often used to stress the dramatic and emotive intensity of a certain scene. Slow motion of an athlete's effort, accompanied by an epic or mournful soundtrack, for example, implies a reflective commentary on what the athlete's action is about, or even a transcendental view on a higher purpose (religious, patriotic) motivating the athlete's

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<sup>1</sup> Aural/ocular discourse indicates the extension of aural Electroacoustic discourse to the combined audio/video media.

achievement. In audio-visual composition we can exploit this acquired response to disentangle real-life footage from representation and narrative.

### Enhanced pictorial quality

Enhancing the pictorial quality of the images is equivalent to common Electroacoustic practices, for instance emphasis on the dynamic range and/or on the spectral qualities of certain sonic streams, often adopted by composers to encourage reduced listening modes (Chion, 1990, p. 29). An enhanced pictorial texture of the frames helps re-position mimetic material away from its narrative potential. Steve Bird (2010a and 2010b) utilises spectral manipulation of both camera-captured and microphone-captured materials to achieve similar ends (see for example *Time and Tide*). Radical geometrical motion editing of real-life images, such as in the first part of Pierre Paré-Blais's *Spiralling* (0:00-2:50), enables composers to utilise mimetic material (in this case photos of stairs treads, risers, handrails, balusters, and the hollow geometries of indoor building staircases) according to the principle of visual suspension (Hyde, 2012, pp. 173-174), treating them as building blocks of a compositional language which French readers may wish to call *Vidéo Concrète* (Hyde, 171).

### Visual silence

Hyde (2012, p. 174) considers visual silence, the absence of changes in chroma on statistically significant parts of the frame, for statistically significant chunks of a work, as a central syntactical element to disentrail visual materials from established mediated experiences, and utilise them in a *concrète* fashion. *¿Te Acuerdas Hijo?* (Fischman, 2006) features visual silence extensively, a method to frame moving and morphing shapes within a largely black background. The result is the strengthening of such shapes' potential as *objet audiovisuel* (Garro, 2005, p. 18), i.e. entities possessing distinctive gestural behaviours, trusted with expressive roles within the compositional montage.

The 'welder' sequence from *Dammtor* (Garro, 2013, 7:14-10:55) utilises all of the above techniques (see fig 1): Slow motion (playback speed = 25%); pictorial enhancement (colour exaggeration, vivid red hues, contrast); visual silence (large sections of the frame are black for compositionally significant amount of time). The considerable slow motion, with a playback speed reduced to 25%, causes the image of the individual metal sparkles to remain in the frame for longer. Consequently, a video echo effect is applied to enhance the light trails left by each individual sparkle. The final visual texture, characterised by over-emphasis of the red hues and selective contrast, was achieved by hard-light compositing two copies of the processed video, one strongly de-saturated, the other with a chroma-key spill suppressor filter to reduce the green hues from the shot.

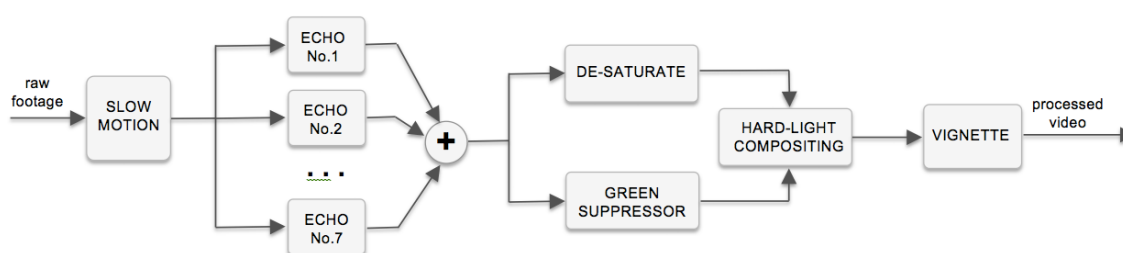


Figure 1. *Dammtor*, video processing in the 'welder' sequence.

## Granularization

The reader will forgive my intentionally unusual spelling of the word, with which I refer to the particular subset of audio granular synthesis techniques, in which mimetic sound materials (for example microphone recordings), are spliced into small chunks (grains) each lasting few tens to few hundreds milliseconds, and used without overlapping<sup>2</sup>. In electroacoustic culture, the pointillistic nature of granularized mimetic sounds represents an element of stylistic signage recognised by composers and audiences alike. The audio-visual designer, especially that of electroacoustic provenance, will be keen to adopt the compositional paradigms, as well as the processing techniques, of granularization and apply them to both sounds and images. Thence, visual granularization can be theorised drawing some, but not all, conceptual parallels from the known and trusted corresponding sound processing technique<sup>3</sup>. Examples can be found on many passages from *Dammtor* (for example 13:20-15:20) which demonstrates that such approach to the generation of visual material is both effective and flexible, because it can be used to generate pointillistic video snippets and bursts as well as denser video granular streams.

## Montage

Montage refers to “the process or technique of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of film to form a continuous whole” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2010). Montage can have an important influence on the visual idiom constructed with the materials; this is true in cinematography, where montage and story-telling are strictly linked, and it is true also in videogames, where montage and game progression are naturally intertwined, interactively, through the actions of the player. The particular nature of montage in electroacoustic videos has been discussed elsewhere (Garro, 2005, p. 12). Frequent, albeit not necessarily indiscriminate, synchronisations between video cuts and sonic events conjure up a praxis, which I call *gestural montage*, a possible extension of Sergei Eisenstein’s taxonomy of montage (Eisenstein, 1949, pp. 82-83). Gestural montage is important in the arsenal of mimetic electroacoustic video composition, because it provides an effective syntactical device to marry video-cuts or transitions with gestural sonic design, both supreme acts in their respective medium.

## Conclusion – from concert to screening

Audio-visual compositional strategies are often concerned with the negotiation of a suitable, mutual space between the sounds and the images, the latter tending to dominate the perceptual field. Mimetic audiovisuals, in particular, continuously struggle to escape the gravitational pull of visually-driven narrative. Rather than a predicament, this should be regarded as a welcomed *raison d’être*: a purpose of existence, which resides in the artistic and idiomatic cracks found within the established languages of cinematography and other mainstream media. The power of sound, in particular of Electroacoustic Music which celebrates it better than any other discipline, can be used to wedge those cracks wide open, a function which is

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<sup>2</sup> This is tantamount to low value of grain-density.

<sup>3</sup> Such framework is provided extensively in my article, Diego Garro, “On the Brink of (In)visibility – Granulation techniques in visual music”, in eContact! 15.4, [http://cec.sonus.ca/econtact/15\\_4/garro\\_granulation.html](http://cec.sonus.ca/econtact/15_4/garro_granulation.html) (last accessed 09/14).

achieved most effectively within the framework of a concert presentation. With growing frequency, in fact, electroacoustic events, conferences and symposia feature video works, a testament to their status within the electroacoustic community. The ‘concert’ becomes a ‘screening’ event and we are confronted with a certain degree of uncertainty, and perhaps apprehension, regarding the degree to which established listening modes are altered by the presence of the images: there is now a glow on Pythagoras’s curtain.

The balance between sound and visuals, which is initially the domain of audio-visual design, can be altered in a screening/concert presentation depending, among other things, on the interaction between technical and cultural factors, which we will briefly examine next.

### **Sound spatial presence**

The sound spatial presence, that is sounds ability to occupy and articulate the concert acoustic space with both power and detail, can be very weak in the case of a stereophonic projection, which relies on consumer-level loudspeakers. Conversely, it can be formidable in the case of competently handled multi-channel projections, within suitable acoustic settings, where high quality loudspeakers are employed.

### **Audiences’ expectation**

The audience’s expectation towards electroacoustic audiovisuals can vary considerably. Concert goers may feel particularly protective of the sonic centrality, which underpins much of the electroacoustic paradigm. Or, conversely, the audience may welcome the novelty provided by the imagery which could yield yet an additional ‘something to hold on factor’ (Landy, 1994, p. 49) in a language notoriously complex.

### **Narrative pull**

Another element of variance can be provided by the degree of gravitational pull, felt by a particular audience, towards narrative interpretations of audiovisual constructs featuring mimetic material. On this respect, electroacoustic culture provides the strongest centrifugal antidote to such attraction thanks to its long established, flexible approach to the act of listening: for a sonically literate audience, narrative means much more than story-telling.

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