

*Visual Music Culture* by Kerry Brougher reviewed a series of filmmakers who used moving images to describe the conditions of music. Brougher not only described the techniques of these visual artists seeking to emulate sound, but addressed the theoretical approaches these artists took and how the films came to represent real life abstraction and experimentation, ultimately exploding into experience-based sensory onslaughts, poetic investigations of life's complexities, and technical innovations that helped describe the intricacies and wonders of the spiritual and cosmic world that surrounds us. While doing the reading, three artists whose work had a profound affect on me were Harry Smith, John and James Whitney, and Stan Brakhage. In this written response, I'll review the ideas and aspects of their work that stood out for me.

When discussing Harry Smith, the musical accompaniment alone indicates a huge shift from his predecessors. In contrast to the classical choices of Ruttman and Fischinger or the playful Marconi selection for Len Lye, Smith's work was often accompanied by tribal, spiritual pieces. His *Early Abstractions* work is dated 1946 – 1957, and his own personal taste in music and his work on the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (released 1952) surely had an impact on his aesthetics, imagery, and overall tone. Brougher writes, "while Kandinsky's abstraction remained linked to landscape painting, Smith's films manage to overcome such conventional references, becoming instead pure color and form."<sup>1</sup>

Smith was an active contributor to his local community of artists, writers, and musicians, and his audio-visual work was not just something to be observed in a closed environment but was an integral part of the pop culture of the San Francisco area. Brougher writes, "in some sense these visual-music films acted as equivalents not just for the soundtracks on the film, but as a backdrop for the Beat Generation itself."<sup>2</sup>

In contrasting the work of Smith with Abstract Expressionist painters, Brougher writes, "filmmakers such as Fishchinger, Hirsh, and Smith began merging painting's spiritual dimensions with popular culture: for them art was not so much about the self but rather a commonly, shared egoless experience."<sup>3</sup> By taking the work out of the museum and into the streets, there was a wider impact on society.

During and after the reading, I did a number of searches for other work done by Harry Smith, and I came across an acceptance speech that Smith did at the Grammy's after receiving the "Chairman's Merit Award". During the speech, Smith said that his dream came true, and that he had seen "America change through music". His work in visual music was a large contributor this change.

John and James Whitney were not only innovators in the area of visual music and art in general but also developed new technologies, methods and techniques to accomplish their projects. Whether it was a new way of using film to create sound and visuals, as represented in their *Five Film Exercises* which was a precursor to the electronic music that was to come, or using pinholes in index cards in the *Yantra* piece, they were at the forefront of incorporating computational approaches in their work.

Since arriving at Parsons last Fall, the term emergence has been on my mind on an almost daily basis. Emergence, a way of describing how complex systems arise out of the multiplicity of simple interactions, happens naturally in the environment and is at the core of where new technologies and tech-art is headed, such as swarming behaviors in robots and the work of Zimoun. The piece *Lapis*, which took James Whitney over 2 years to complete, illustrates the complexities of music and the mind through emergent patterns applied to visual music. Brougher, in describing *Lapis*, writes, "[t]he result of the artist's extraordinary ability to shape and form mandalic imagery with his innovative 'atomic' language, *Lapis* is, in the words of Youngblood, not ust a work of art but 'an attempt to approximate mind forms."<sup>4</sup>

Although all of the artists described in the reading made use of new technologies and approaches, John and James Whitney were the first that introduced what I would describe as computer-generated images. In describing the Whitney's embrace of technology, Brougher describes, "[t]he extraordinarily complex macrocosmic forms made up of microcosmic elements in James's *Lapis* would not have been possible without a machine, yantra, in this case an analog computerized optical printer loaned to him by his brother John."<sup>5</sup>

Although Stan Brakhage did not make use of the latest technologies available, he provided innovative work that was a convergence of Smith's "optical assaults" and the Whitney's complexities in "perceptual

phenomena”. Music was a major influence for Brakhage, who studied informally with John Cage and Edgard Varèse, but he did not provide soundtracks with his visuals. Brakhage described this by stating, “[t]he more informed I became with aesthetics of sound, the less I began to feel any need for an audio accompaniment of the visuals I was making.”<sup>6</sup>

The use of repetitive, looping imagery, editing skill, and soft tones, *Cat's Cradle* (1959) resembles the blinking of an eye in a musical dream and a place between awareness, confusion, and the sensual. In discussing the musicality of Brakhage, Brougher writes, “[l]ike Fishinger's and Lye's use of rapid color changes to create optical effects, Brakhage used color to create pulse or vibration, thereby giving the silent film a musical underpinning.”<sup>7</sup>

Watching Brakhage's *The Dante Quartet* (1987) made me think of the song *Johnny Teardrop* by the band Suicide. Through movements, echos, and haunting imagery mixed with glimpses of partially recognizable shapes and textures, your mind searches out for something to hold on to. Brougher discusses, “The filmmaker's polyphonic use of paint and light creates an almost hallucinogenic world, a realm somewhere beyond nameable things—a plane of pure perception in which the viewer begins, as Kupka desired, to resonate ‘with events and movements throughout the whole universe’ to become part of the music of the spheres.”<sup>8</sup>

Brougher covered Disney's desire to make “a great hit” and provide a larger audience a new experience with visual music, and with the advent of cheaper technology and distribution for mass culture, an outlet for everyone to contribute to the global media conversation continues this “great hit” of art, music, and the visual. My experience with the reading was completely different than it would have been 5 years ago because I was able to watch the majority of the pieces discussed in the book online.

I noticed that page numbers were skipped throughout the scanned reading we received, so I went to the Gimbel Library and checked out the full *Visual Music* book to see what the missing pages actually were. These missing pages were expanded stills of the films discussed which expanded my already thorough enjoyment of the reading, but further illustrates why visual music and other subjects like it will be discussed and represented in different contexts in the future.

While reading *Visual Music Culture*, I thought about where this was all leading, and I feel that the experiential and the ability of the viewer to truly interact with, as opposed to only observe, the actual piece is where visual music has gone in recent years and will continue to be explored. Combining Harry Smith's organic content and integration into a larger cultural context, John and James Whitney's use of technology, and Stan Brakhage's editing and aesthetics is what I hope to explore with my own work in process and experience-based visual music pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> Brougher, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 124.

## **Reference**

"Emergence - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence> (accessed February 9, 2010).

Wiseman, Ari, Judith Zilczer, Kerry Brougher, and Jeremy Strick. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005.