

# The Musical Years: 1920–2020

Curator:

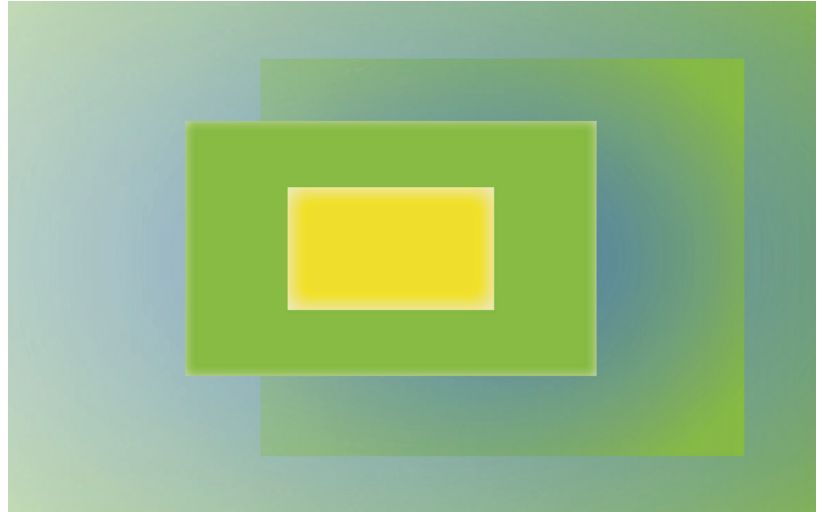
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In the last century, the invention of the motion picture camera ushered in a succession of diverse technological developments conducive to the synthesis of sound and images. Devices that combined projected images with music, such as colour organs, the optical theatre and the Sonchromatoscope, were among early examples. But it was through cinema, once it became possible to synchronize music with moving pictures, that this field of experimentation would be radically renewed. This exhibition provides opportunities to observe changes in that audiovisual production through cinematic and musical works in which a relative tension between image and music is exerted—for most often, the relationship between the two is one of subordination: either the visual production relegates the musical component to a secondary role, or the pictures serve to illustrate a musical composition.

The aim of this exhibition is to provide a spatial and musical experience of these works produced over a span of a hundred years, while prompting audiences to reflect on this process of visualization of music and musicalization of images. Contemporary artists are featured alongside film makers of the avant-garde in a circuit including silent films with added sound, abstract and experimental cinema, music videos, as well as musical performances. A series of animation films complements the program, designed especially for children.<sup>1</sup>

## Seeing music and hearing pictures

This analogy between music and image is not without its connections to the research conducted by abstract painters who sought, beginning in the 1910s, to translate harmonic, rhythmic and polyphonic impressions into their compositions. Wassily Kandinsky possessed a type of synaesthesia called “coloured hearing”: he perceived chromatic sensations when he heard sounds, associating, for example, yellow with the brassy blast of the trumpet and green with the meditative tones of the violin. The composer Alexander Scriabin founded his Opus 60, *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1911), on such synaesthetic equivalences. The piece was written for orchestra, solo piano and mixed choir, and enlivened by a “light keyboard,” or *Luce*, purpose-built for the occasion; each of its keys triggered a beam of coloured light. This chromatic spectacle—unusual, to say the least, for its time—was developed using a system of harmony and colour equivalences devised by the composer. Informed by this research, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter envisioned “absolute cinema,” in which abstract shapes recorded on celluloid film functioned in the manner of a score, with the potential to provoke musical sensations. The titles of their earliest abstract films, both silent, were *Symphonie diagonale* (1924) and *Rhythmus 21* (1921), suggesting a translation into images of the dynamic effects of counterpoint, rhythm and

harmony. Shot one frame at a time, Eggeling's symphony is divided into different "movements" of luminous white figures on a black ground; the technique is comparable to animated filmmaking and the experiments later conducted by Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren.<sup>2</sup> For the abstract film *An Optical Poem* (1937), Fischinger shot bits of coloured paper in stop-motion (frame-by-frame animation), synchronizing their movements with Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2." A title-card foreword explains that the film is a "scientific experiment" in which the music is intended to "convey . . . mental images in visual form." Where Fischinger employed superimposed shapes moving in depth to transcend two dimensions, McLaren exploited geometric abstraction reduced to vertical bands of vivid colours punctuated by equally minimalist shapes, doubtless inspired by Quebec's Plasticiens group. McLaren did innovative sound research for *Synchromy* (1971), drawing synthetic sounds and photographing them on film so as to achieve an absolute parallelism of sound and image.<sup>3</sup> Abstract cinema inspired by animation would also be explored by René Jodoin, a colleague of McLaren at the National Film Board, whose 1984 effort *Rectangle & Rectangles* was an optokinetic film made using techniques then available via the nascent tools of digital filmmaking. Around the same time, Gaston Sarault produced a stunning musical experiment in the form of an animated film entitled *Listen, You'll See* (1983). This didactic exercise comprised three visual sequences, repeated, but with a new music track each time, which transformed the expressive character of the abstract shapes moving on the screen. The sounds heard in *Listen, You'll See* clearly influence and transform the images, generating new meanings.

Returning to the 1920s, we note novel approaches to cinema that sought to move away from the research associated with abstract painting. Henri Chomette, Marcel Duchamp, Ernst Lubitsch, Zdeněk Pešánek, Hans Richter, and Ralph Steiner all made abstract films, sometimes referencing Surrealist or Futurist aesthetics, although they did away with the purely self-referential tropes that had been their hallmarks up to then. These works incorporate live-action scenes, which also depicted minimalist, graphically composed shapes, even though, for the most part, the filmmakers sought to exploit the visual effects of the cinema medium. Lubitsch's *So This Is Paris* (1926)—originally silent and later released with added sound—culminates in a bravura dance finale keyed to the repeating rhythm of the Charleston, conveying the effervescence of the Roaring Twenties. Following the beat of the music, the camera moves ever closer to the crowd, describing circular movements; the addition of dizzying superimpositions results in an ensemble of pure abstraction. Altogether comparable are the circular movements, duplication and inversion effects of Richter's *Filmstudie* (1926). His montage echoes Dadaist collage in the tension brought about by the association of figurative and abstract shapes, and the effacing of the notions of form and substance. Steiner, a photographer and documentarist, radicalized the process with *Mechanical Principles* (1930), capturing close-ups of the rotational and vertical motions of engines and pistons. In this hypnotic ballet, by turns mechanical and sensual, gear wheels come to life, masterfully filmed by Steiner and skilfully accentuated by

the music of Eric Beheim. The film exemplifies "absolute" or "pure cinema"—a term favoured by Chomette, who made and advocated for films developed out of purely formal components.

Abstract cinema appears to foster a hierarchy of the visual and the aural; the former tends to dominate the latter, since, with few exceptions, music is often synchronized to the images in postproduction, its role being to illustrate or accompany the visual content. Beginning in the 1960s, experimental filmmakers would break free of that relationship of subordination, or at least problematize it, elevating the sound track to something more than a supporting role. Martin Arnold's short *Passage à l'acte* (1993) takes a scene from the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (dir. Robert Mulligan, 1962) depicting a family breakfast—which originally lasted a few seconds—and by means of optical printing transfigures it into a twelve-minute sequence.<sup>4</sup> This slowed-down remix is punctuated by spasmodic freeze-frame effects—the door opening and closing, characters opening and closing their mouths—with corresponding distortions in the accompanying sound track. The resulting suspended images and machine-gun sounds—the door slamming, the table being struck, Gregory Peck stuttering—manifest a true procedure of abstraction.

### Exposing the musical film

The use of found footage emerged in experimental cinema in the 1970s and grew even more prevalent among contemporary artists during the 1990s. What has seldom been noted in connection with this practice, however, is the particular situation that afforded artists access to inexhaustible source materials that had been previously difficult to appropriate: historical films entering the public domain.<sup>5</sup> That availability provided the impetus for Michaela Grill and Sophie Trudeau to make *les marges du silence/ghosts along the way* (2020), an audiovisual exploration designed especially for this exhibition. It is composed of short clips from the silent film repertoire of the 1920s, spanning German Expressionism, American Burlesque, French, Japanese and Russian cinema, etc. The clips show, simultaneously and in the manner of a typology, bursts of laughter, exchanges of glances and moments of dramatic tension, along with a continual stream of intertitles. The musical component of the installation was created using a similar process. It is made up of sound samples from Trudeau's personal archive; for example, the sound of one instrument is isolated, then remixed into a new composition. By proceeding with this subtraction of shots and sounds from their original contexts and placing them in a new visual and sound framework, the artists offer a compelling cinematic journey. Consider that, from their inception until the advent of talking pictures, silent film screenings typically had musical accompaniment, performed by a pianist (though sometimes provided by an orchestra or else prerecorded). The music was originally intended to isolate the viewer from external noises—the whir of the projector, audience members' comments, other ambient sounds—eventually serving more as a way of establishing a single space connecting the space of the theatre, the figurative space of the screen, and the mental

space of the viewer. By inviting us into exactly this sort of “organized sound space,”<sup>6</sup> the installation in *les marges du silence/ghosts along the way* heightens our sensory experience of a vanished time.

In a 1970 interview with Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow wondered whether “the arrival of sound, historically, [was] just part of the process [ . . . ] towards art forms that have larger and larger amounts of sensory involvement.”<sup>7</sup> Experimentation with sound certainly contributed to the development of a multisensory approach, first in audiovisual production and later in multimedia works—although the role played by their presentation contexts no doubt merits equal consideration. The histories of art and cinema are replete with examples of inventions designed to favour sensory immersion: Raoul Hausmann’s Optophone, Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack’s and Kurt Schwertfeger’s *Farblichtspiele* and *Reflektorische Farblichtspiele* (Coloured or Reflecting Light-Plays), Alexander László and Oskar Fischinger’s Sonochromatroscope, Thomas Wilfred’s Clavilux, and László Moholy-Nagy’s Light-Space Modulator in the 1920s; the multi-projections developed by Charles and Ray Eames in the 1960s; and, of course, contemporary multimedia installations.<sup>8</sup> Early works emphasized projections of light and images on a single, sometimes large-sized, screen, with accompanying musical performances; gradually, this frontality was abandoned in favour of simultaneous projection onto multiple screens so as to amplify the immersive effect. These light, sound and image spectacles were originally presented in theatres, concert halls and cinemas—as performances—before eventually being featured in exhibition contexts. This led to the postcinematic inflection point of the 1990s, emphasizing an expanded experience of musical images, in a context in which art institutions began to focus on novel stagings and experimentations.

### A new musical phenomenon

Concurrently with these hybridizations of cinema and visual arts, the late 20th century saw the birth of a new audiovisual phenomenon, this time introduced by the music business, which was to have considerable implications for musical films. The music video genre was launched in 1981 by MTV (an abbreviation for Music Television), the first network devoted to 24-hour broadcasting of these short films.<sup>9</sup> Boasting that it had created “radio for the eyes,” MTV debuted its programming, ironically enough, with the song *Video Killed the Radio Star* by The Buggles (1979). In the late 1990s, widespread distribution of music videos on the Internet would in turn gradually “kill” MTV and similar specialty channels; conversely, though, the online universe has helped groups like OK Go achieve mass popularity through hundreds of millions of video views. The invention of music videos resulted from a logical succession of experiments connecting sound and image. They were intrinsically linked to the growth of television, beginning with broadcasts of filmed concerts—for example, *House of the Rising Sun* by The Animals (1964)—which offered the advantage of broad distribution without requiring the musicians to travel. While historians have

pointed to certain abstract and animation films as precursors of the music video<sup>10</sup>—notably, *Dáme si do bytu* (“Let’s Get to the Apartment,” 1958) by Czech filmmaker Ladislav Rychman—the film made to accompany Bob Dylan’s song “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (dir. D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) is generally acknowledged to be the first exemplar of the genre.<sup>11</sup> Facing the camera, Dylan holds up a series of cue cards on which the lyrics are written; he does not actually perform the song. One of the hallmarks of the film is its textual, self-reflexive approach, reminding us that the genre springs first and foremost from a song, consisting of music and lyrics (words). The text-based music video, a trope that often references Conceptual Art practices, has provided its share of stunning aesthetic innovations: the protagonist in the remix by Justice of Lenny Kravitz’s *Let Love Rule* (dir. Keith Schofield, 2009) must contend with a constantly moving credits crawl; in Beck’s *Black Tambourine* (dir. Associates in Sciences, 2005) ASCII characters emerge from a vintage typewriter and assemble into the figure of the performer; the main character in Björk’s *Bachelorette* (dir. Michel Gondry, 1997) is a young woman who gains fame thanks to a book entitled *My Story*, the pages of which write themselves as the narrative unfolds.

From the earliest days of music video, directors have reprised the narrative structures of feature films: examples include Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (dir. John Landis, 1982) and, in Quebec, *On ne peut pas tous être pauvre* by Yves Jacques (1981) and *L’Affaire Dumoutier (Say to Me)* by The Box (dir. Roy Pike and The Box, 1985). Occasionally, such homages have included unsettling innovations (as in *Breezeblocks* by Alt-J, dir. Ellis Bahl, 2012). The majority of videos, though they may comprise inventive audio and visual experimentations, focus on the “star”’s filmed performance. The programmers of this exhibition have not included works based on this strategy of iconic construction. Rather, we have preferred experimental approaches, radical to varying degrees, and musical/visual innovations, with an emphasis on videos directed by filmmakers and artists.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the content of these videos—what their makers are expressing visually based on the music—is not always pleasant. Many explore social and political themes using imagery depicting the atrocity of war—e.g., *The Unknown Soldier* by The Doors (1968) and *Sunset (Bird of Prey)* by Fatboy Slim (dir. Blue Source, 2000)—while others glorify violence and racism the better to condemn them; examples include *Born Free* by M.I.A. (dir. Romain Gavras, 2010), *This Is America* by Childish Gambino (dir. Hiro Murai, 2018) and *Don’t Let the Man Get You Down*, also by Fatboy Slim (dir. Brian Beletic, 2002). The video for *Rocker* by the band Alter Ego (dir. Corine Stübi, 2004) is a self-critical exacerbation of the instrumentalization of the female body so prevalent in the music business. Music videos are fertile ground for formal experimentation and, as such, can be technical and visual tours de force; witness the rhythmic synaesthetics employed by Gondry for The Chemical Brothers’ *Star Guitar* (2002); Matt Johnson’s insertion of the performers into archival footage in *Dreams Tonight* (Alvvays, 2017); the extreme experiment by brothers Jake & Dinos Chapman for *Let’s Go Fucking Mental* (The Peth, 2008); or Bill Pope and Randy Skinner’s “anti-videos”

for The Replacements (notably the three songs *Hold My Life*, *Bastards of Young* and *Left of the Dial*, 1985). Documentary with a self-reflexive bent was the aesthetic approach favoured by Jonathan Demme in capturing Talking Heads live in concert, including the famous *Psycho Killer* sequence (clip from *Stop Making Sense*, 1984). He innovated once again with his documentary depiction of New Order's musicians at work, consisting exclusively of close-ups (*The Perfect Kiss*, 1985).

It must be added that the singularity of music video resides in more than the visual effects and meanings it produces; it relies just as much on the affects provoked by musical expressivity. Thus we must acknowledge that music video is an art of communication that places imagery in the service of the music business. The images are in a way subordinate to the music and, consequently, are received by viewers in musical terms. A video's success depends in large part on its ability to synchronize the viewer's body with the rhythm, tonality or vibration of the music—in short, to animate the body via dance.

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1. The animation program is presented in partnership with the National Film Board of Canada.  
2. In 1942, Norman McLaren set up the Animation Section at the National Film Board, producing innovative works in that genre as well as training artists and filmmakers.  
3. The principle of photographic recording of sound on celluloid was key to the technological innovation that led to sound films or "talkies," which became popular beginning with 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crosland. In 1931 Fischinger remarked how the optical sound tracks on films contained abstract patterns. He then succeeded in creating synthesized sounds by drawing similar patterns, which he called "ornament sound." These were in turn photographed for reproduction on the sound tracks of his films.  
4. An optical printer is a device used to duplicate frames from an original negative onto a new piece of film.  
5. A film that has entered the public domain may be distributed, copied or adapted, in whole or in part, without authorization being required. In Canada, a work is generally no longer subject to copyright beginning fifty years after the death of its author.

6. The expression was coined by Noël Burch in *Life to Those Shadows*, tr. and ed. Ben Brewster, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 235 (originally published as *La lucarne de l'infini, naissance du langage cinématographique*, Paris: Nathan Université, 1991).  
7. Michael Snow, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," *Film Culture*, No. 48-49, 1970, p. 10.  
8. Hausmann's Optophone (patented in 1922 but unbuilt at the time, it was later reconstituted) was a device equipped with a keyboard that transformed visible shapes into sounds and vice versa using photoelectric cells; the *Farblightspiele* (1923) by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack and *Reflektorische Farblightspiele* (1922) by Kurt Schwerdtfeger, both part of the Bauhaus movement, projected moving shapes of colour onto transparent screens with musical accompaniment; the Sonochromatoscope (1926), invented by László and Fischinger, was another keyboard-driven apparatus that produced sound and coloured light and also enabled projection of painted slides; Wilfred's Clavilux (1926), from the Latin for "light played by key," was used to produce sound and light in kinetic

concerts that he called Lumia; Moholy-Nagy's Light-Space Modulator (*Lichtrequisit*, 1922-1930) was a motorized device that projected and reflected coloured lights into the surrounding space; Charles and Ray Eames devised multi-screen technology, including a system featured in the IBM pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, which allowed fourteen different films to be screened simultaneously, accompanied by a sound track.  
9. Before television, the ancestors of music videos were the short musical films made for projection in a jukebox equipped with a projector and screen, branded Scopitone.  
10. In Quebec, for example, René Jodoin at the National Film Board produced a series of experimental shorts using the stop-frame animation technique known as *pixillation*, including André Leduc's *Tout écartillé* (1972) and *Chérie, ôte tes raquettes* (1976), based on the songs by Robert Charlebois and Monsieur Pointu, respectively, and Roland Stutz's *Taxi* (1969); song by Claude Léveillée).  
11. It is the opening scene of *Don't Look Back* (1967), Pennebaker's documentary about Dylan's 1965 tour of England.

12. They include filmmakers Chris Cunningham, Romain Gavras, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Stéphane Sednaoui, Mark Romanek and Jan Švankmajer, and artists such as Laurie Anderson, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Martin Creed, Laibach, Robert Longo, Tony Oursler, William Wegman, etc. In curating the program, we viewed more than 600 videos, eventually selecting 80, which represents only a sampling of the prolific history of the genre.