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Silence is white, not golden.

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Limited Language 2006

Sight and hearing are arguably the two most powerful human senses with which we understand and navigate through our world – whether it is the simple relationship between a green flashing man, and an audio beeping at a pedestrian crossing or the more complex emotions we might feel when watching a movie – where the ‘tragic’ break-up is accompanied by a symphonic cascade of violin strings. Sound and image when harnessed by design becomes a powerful partnership which, either can impart life saving information, manipulate emotions or be empathetic to any given experience – concert lighting, movie soundtracks, audio navigation systems all draw upon long held traditions or relationships to how we see and how we hear.

In the West, at least, the relationship between sound, image and design have had distinctly different trajectories – although seen under the rubric of creative activity – all have occupied independent areas in the world of art. Music and image, outside of the West, have more inter-dependent histories. Whilst, within the West, they are, in-part, separated because of long held philosophical beliefs that each artistic form - Music, Painting, Sculpture, etc - have separate effects on an audience. Thus, it was believed, each art form addressed a specific part of man’s psyche. In the hierarchy of the senses, as mentioned in the Limited Language blog ‘[On not reflecting but sensing](#)’, the visual has had a dominant role in the representation and understanding of our world. This is no more so than in the development in understanding of colour; here, the established relationship of Harmony in music is appropriated into the visual field as an analogy for understanding the relationships of colour. It is only when art reacts against its classical traditions we see the more investigative relationships between the fields of sound image and design; relationships we would recognise in contemporary work today.

One area which has a long history in the use of sound and image are the ceremonial spaces of Western religion, the Churches, Cathedrals etc of the Christian faith are spaces where you can see an early affiliation between image and sound – the use of choral works, chants in the presence of Religious Icons, stained glass windows, painted alters; provide a powerful fusion of sound and image which was used to infuse the spiritual experience of church going. The Cistine Chapel is an excellent example of this relationship; it is a place of visual and acoustic brilliance. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has described the Catholic pulpit as a ‘mass medium’ – in a sense you can see the church synthesising much of what we use today in a digital multi-media world. Eventually we see this happening in developments outside of religious ceremony - places where the visual / aural relationship remains an important element of the performance – not least, in a modern cinema.

The 18th Century movement, Romanticism, is one example of the shared philosophies between music and image. The Romantics wanted to introduce a more experiential world of sensations rather than classical representations. Beethoven say, in the 6th Symphony op.68, in F; the Pastoral Symphony and Casper Friedrich’s art can be seen to reflect the experience of man in Nature – whilst using the methodology of their specific art form. But later, it is

Modernism that made clear, more self-conscious, experiments in the relationship between sound and image. Artists like Kandinsky, Klee and later, Miro; explored how to capture music, and the experience of sound, in their painting. Through the use of shape and colour they create a visual notation to represent the resonance of the sonic world. Kandinsky wrote in *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911-12) about the colour blue:

‘The brighter it becomes, the more it loses its sound, until it turns into silent stillness and becomes white. Represented in musical terms, light blue resembles the flute, dark blue the ‘cello, darker still the wonderful sounds of the double bass; while in a deep, solemn form the sound of blue can be compared to that of the deep tones of the organ’

What is striking about this passage is how familiar the analogy is – dark colours are commonly associated with bass tones, or states of mood in contemporary design culture; just think of the sophistication of Blue Note records sleeves in the 1950s and the Retro incarnations since.

What we can see is how, historically, a relationship has been built-up between the worlds of sound and image and this influences modern design today – back to Kandinsky’s analogy, it would make sense for the ipod to be white – it is, after all, the ‘silent’ element of the musical experience.

The final element to look at in the relationship between sound, image and design is hardware – this coming together of associations reached its climax with the production of the first Sony Walkman in 1987. This simple invention, at the bridge to the digital age, has had a profound influence on how music is consumed; from packaging to listening habits, it has brought influence upon and altered the experience of music. For many years the walkman became the generic term for listening to music while on the move. It managed to reconfirm music as a personal experience but also, walking around with music playing in your ears gave you a soundtrack to punctuate (visual) experience in a filmic way, here not only a personalised soundscape but editorial control at your fingertips too. This phenomena which has been taken up by the digital age – in both the growth in miniaturization of technology; from digital radios to DVD players, all follow the walkman format, can now be experienced - one on one – and on the move. Of course, a more obvious descendent of the Walkman phenomena is the Apple ipod. With each generation of the ipod you see a further amalgamation between sound, image and design.

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