The Narrative Potential of Album Covers

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Abstract

In Popular Music Studies there appears to be a conceptual divide between the aesthetics of videos and those of album covers because the former move in time and the latter do not. One of the consequences of this separation is that music video studies tend to take inspiration from film and media studies whereas album cover studies tend to derive ideas and methods from art history. This paper asks if this isn't a missed opportunity. It argues that album covers can and do exist in time, and it offers a type of analysis that shows how still and moving images both integrate with music to create a modal hybrid that is greater than simply the sum of their parts. One can, for example, profitably deploy narrative analysis to understand still images. Similarly, one can deploy art historical methods to assess music videos.

There is a conceptual divide between the aesthetics of album covers and those of videos because the latter move in time, while the former do not. This paper argues that album covers do exist in time, because they, too, are in semiotic coordination with music, producing opportunities for multimodal analyses. I conclude with some remarks about the opposite—that music videos might also be profitably assessed from the point of view of still pictures.

Are still pictures of *any* sort narratives? Klaus Speidel tells us that the answer to that question has been "No" since at least 1766, when G. E. Lessing reasoned that a picture creates space, and its presentation of the elements of a scene is simultaneous (Speidel). Lessing would have been thinking of a typical Renaissance artist's mastery of linear perspective, as in Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys to St Peter* (1481-82), where converging orthogonals create a mathematical expanse that determines the proportions of things at various distances from the viewer. A similar device can be found in many album covers, like Genesis's *Nursery Cryme* (1971), where it is handmade[1]; The Beatles' *Abbey Road* (1969), where it is a property of a 50mm camera lens[2]; and Soul Generation's *Beyond Body and Soul* (1972), where it is a visual pun

switching vertical recession to a horizontal plane[3]. In contrast to mere depictions of objects and spatial relations, Lessing argued that poetry necessarily exists in time as the result of the consecutive presentation of elements. He concluded that pictures only represent things, while texts can describe actions and therefore narratives (Lessing 101).

But is it the case that these album covers are actionless? Aren't the Beatles striding over a zebra crossing, while a curious onlooker, Paul Cole, turns on the right to see what is happening (DeYoung)? Isn't the girl on the front of the Genesis gatefold playing croquet? Aren't these at least glimpses of action and therefore potential narratives?

Well, no—if we believe almost all subsequent theorists after Lessing. They argue that single pictures can't *be* narratives but can at best *induce* them by inspiring commentators to develop stories through a kind of hyperactive imagination (Leitch 40). Consequently, I would imagine they would say that any kind of story precipitated by an album cover is something that exists outside the picture. In this way, they would surmise, the interpretation of an album cover is something akin to a Rorschach test (Dieterle 135).

In an era in which we understand (a) the intertextuality of multiple media and (b) texts in a Barthesian way as open instead of closed, determinate works, this line of thinking seems

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[1] See http://www.soundstation.dk/images/products/large/76/130276-b.jpg for the outside and http://magar57.altervista.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2.jpg for the inside.

[2] Abbey Road; see http://d817ypd61vbww.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/styles/media_responsive_widest/public/tile/image/AbbeyRoad.jpg?itok=BgfH98zh

[3] http://a2.mzstatic.com/us/r30/Music6/v4/2b/bc/b4/2bbcb4ef-d4b1-ad3e-5416-52cb4b539974/4538182380673_cov.1200x1200-75.jpg

weirdly passé. On the upside, theorists say pictures stimulate narration as a consequence of presenting a series of still images (Wolf 96). This is clearly an allusion to the types of closure created by sequential art forms like comic books (Duncan and Smith 316). An early artwork that uses separate frames in a similar manner is Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*[4]. Along the bottom are small *predella* panels that depict episodes from the story of Christ's childhood: the Nativity, the Flight into Egypt and the Presentation at the Temple.

A similar theory is at work in Robert Crumb's design for the cover of *Cheap Thrills*[5] by Big Brother and the Holding Company, in which a stylized Janis Joplin appears three times. These images were intended to relate a story about the band in the manner of traditional liner notes on the back of the album, but Joplin, who was a fan of underground comics and Crumb in particular, demanded that this be the cover (Sullivan).

The Adoration of the Magi also features a practice that art historians call "continuous narrative," in which a single locale hosts multiple episodes of an unmistakable story: The main image features the Magi in the distance at the top left, en route in the central background, and at the birthplace in the central foreground. Such stories of course, are anchored to a paratext, a separate text that serves to disambiguate the imagery (Genette 5). In Masaccio's *Tribute Money*[6], for instance, we find that the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament makes sense of a single scene in which a taxman at the centre demands money of Christ, who in turn directs Peter to retrieve the money from the mouth of a fish, which Peter then delivers to the same taxman at the right.

The main objection that an image is not a true narrative depends upon the idea that it is presented all at once (Chatman 118). This is not a convincing differentiator, because the words on a page are also all presented simultaneously, but time is required for the eyes to trace across and interpret them (Inhoff et al.). Perceiving pictures takes time—something theorized by scholars like Whitney Davis and easily demonstrated empirically with eye-tracking devices (Belton & Kersten). Some pictures

deliberately exploit this to create narrative-like effects. A case in point is this 16th-century landscape, once attributed to Brueghel, in which one notices crucial details in a sequence that generates a natural story and meaning effect (Altman 213). Speidel writes,

> A painting…shows a landscape with a shepherd, some sheep, a farmer plowing, a fisherman fishing and a large ship in the ocean. Only if we contemplate the picture for long enough do we discover two legs somewhere in the sea and realize that the picture tells a story…. What seemed to be an idyllic landscape becomes a scene of death by drowning. The other figures depicted as simply minding their own business may suddenly seem to be acting inappropriately…. [W]e may also discover a … corpse in the bushes…. [W]e suddenly find ourselves in the same cognitive position as the other persons in the picture. This painting has often been related to the Dutch saying "No plough stands still because a man dies…." The saying is both illustrated and performed by each new viewer in her viewing process.…

We find a similar process at work in the album cover accompanying Pink Floyd's 1969 release *Ummagumma*[7]. At first glance, we see a conventional portrait of the band at rest. On the right side we see David Gilmour seated in a chair, Roger Waters seated on the floor just behind him, Nick Mason standing in the middleground, and Richard Wright performing a leg lift in the background. Then we notice that the left side of the picture contains a copy of the whole image, as in the so-called "Droste effect" or *mise en abyme* of art history and film studies. But here the recursive appearance within the image of a smaller replica of itself is different in that the image on the wall rotates the membership of the band clockwise: Waters-seated-chair, Mason-seated-ground, Wright-standing, Gilmour-leg lift. The image within *that* image rotates them again: Mason-seated-chair, Wright-seated-ground, Gilmour-standing, Waters-leg lift. The iterations continue but become increasingly indistinct.

The cover's designer, Storm Thorgerson, explains that the soundtrack for the 1958 film musical *Gigi* was placed in the left foreground as an ironic red herring to generate debate and

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[4] 1423; see http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/69/43569-004-1A6A34C7.jpg

[5] 1968; see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/9e/Cheapthrills.jpeg

[6] 1425; see https://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/917/flashcards/1702917/jpg/21181346808522555.jpg

[7] see http://media.feedfloyd.com/post/thumb-2/5bcd3cef70749c5befd61b12a34d9e64ac72e669.jpg

underline the difference between mainstream popular entertainment and the more experimental music on the album. It's also unclear that the image relates to the music in any direct way, although the track entitled "Several Species of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together in a Cave and Grooving with a Pict" exhibits experimental *musique* concrète passages that repeat with permutations. The waiflike voices are also hinted at on the inside of the gatefold, where guitarist Gilmour poses against a well-known "elfin" tree in Kensington. The cover produces a kind of intellectual game that is itself a signifier of membership in a particular kind of social formation.

Appealing to the in-crowd is a widespread practice in album cover design, ranging from experiments in legibility—for example, from Richard Hamilton's design for the Beatles' album *The Beatles*[8] to Trevor Jackson's cover for Soulwax's *Any Minute Now*[9]—to what I'll call semiotic "in-crowd mind-games" like *Ummagumma*. A striking example of the latter in a completely different style is Peter Saville's design for New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies*[10], which fuses a nineteenth century flower painting with what looks like a printer's colour proof swatch but which is actually an alphanumeric code spelling out the catalogue number, FACT 75. The code itself is presented elsewhere in the manner of a 1980s floppy disk, indicating the band's predominantly synth-pop style. "In this way," writes design historian Patrick Cramsie, "Saville tapped into the same sort of feeling of knowingness and exclusivity among the band's fans that the designers of the psychedelic poster had earlier exploited with their barely legible lettering …, creating [what journalist John Pareles called] 'a mass produced secret'" for an in-crowd (Cramsie 308).

Santana's first album[11], also reveals much about the mindset of his cultural clientele, the expectations of record buyers in the late 1960s, and the climate in which the record was made. Lee Conklin's cover exploits the psychology of multistable perception by inventing ambiguous or alternating features deriving ultimately from test images like the famous Necker cube, first

described in 1832. This phenomenon involves a constant sensory stimulation that stimulates inconstant perceptual reversals. Through a kind of mental effort, one can reorient the cube so that it appears to "open" on the front or even the right side. The relevant detail is that the effects are sequential, and one does not see them all at once (Kornmeier, Jürgen & Bach 955). Fast-forward to 1933 and Salvador Dalí's first attempts to create multiple images in a single picture, as in his famous *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire*[12]. Fast-forward again to 1969, by which point the impact of Surrealism on posters and album covers of the psychedelic rock era is very well established. Like the music, the album cover requires time to experience, with a lion's face morphing into an African maiden in a grass skirt, a sequence of faces, and a tiny figure standing just below the uppermost face at the top.

The imagery doesn't really articulate the album's contents. The lyrics are pedestrian love songs with lines like "I'm on the pier, I'm waiting for my baby," and the music is a blend of jam rock and covers of jazz tunes modified by a taste for Latin percussion. Were it not for a recasting of Babatunde Olatunji's song "Jingo" as "Jingo Rock," there would be no African connection to the cover at all. So the cover does not "illustrate" the recording, but it does create a supplementary experience of sensory disorientation for the purpose of creating a sense of social belonging.

The use of album covers to generate a sense of belonging takes a wide variety of forms, some unlike *Ummagumma*. For instance, Ian Chapman analyzes the cover of *Kiss: Alive!*[13] according to art historical principles developed by Erwin Panofsky and others in the mid-twentieth century, concluding that the packaging depicted "glam-metal" well before the invention of the term by conflating the signifiers of glam rock and heavy metal. He then explains that the image appealed to him personally because of its iconographical ambiguity, which "afforded the opportunity for personal readings *en masse*" (Chapman 142). It is, in other words, a Barthesian text (Barthes 155-164), but its ambiguity is different in character from that of, say,

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[8] 1968, a.k.a the white album; http://atbishopsgate.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ArticleSharedImage-13491.jpg

[9] 2004; see http://images.junostatic.com/full/CS1368548-02A-BIG.jpg

[10] 1983; http://images.rapgenius.com/320b315f4abf6615ed05411bcd56d197.1000x999x1.png

[11] 1969; https://freecritique.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/santana-santana.png

[12] 1940; http://art-dali.com/image/artworks/430%20Slave%20 Market %20with%20the%20Disappearing%20Bust%20of%20Voltaire%201940 .jpg

[13] http://cps-static.rovicorp.com/3/JPG_400/MI0002/319/MI0002319 783.jpg?partner=allrovi.com

Ummagumma. Chapman does not link the album cover in any *specific* way to the music on the album, so the only temporal narrative is a matter of viewer engagement and response through subcultural identification. He theorizes that this is frequently how semiotic codes in album covers associate to create depictions of class, gender, performativity, race, sexuality, and social belonging, a process predictable and stable enough that it can be simulated in computer vision for the purpose of identifying musical genres (Jānis Lībeks & Douglas Turnbull).

Andrew Goodwin (86-89) once argued that music videos can be categorized as illustrations (where images echo the lyrics), amplifications (where images supplement the meaning of lyrics so as to create a greater whole), or disjunctures (where images and lyrics have nothing to do with each other). Some album covers can also be so understood, although I'd like to make the case for several nuances to be added to the taxonomy. Goodwin's notion of illustration, for example, is articulated in *Nursery Cryme* in more than one way. At the far left of the cover image, painted by Paul Whitehead, we can just make out a tiny figure standing on the ledge beneath a semicircular window while a figure ascends a ladder nearby. This illustrates the song "Harold the Barrel," which concerns a suicidal restaurateur standing on a window ledge while onlookers cry out, "Come off the ledge / if your father were alive he'd be very, very, very upset. / Just can't jump, you just can't jump." Here the lyrics and the image work together multimodally to create an impression, but does the music itself add another level? Yes, says an anonymous contributor to Wikipedia, who feels that the extended fading out at the end of the song, after the word "jump," symbolises Harold's leap to his death (Wikipedia).

Other, more prominent parts of the album cover illustrate not just the lyrics but also the back-stories inspiring the songs. "The Musical Box," for instance, was inspired by a fairy story invented by singer Peter Gabriel—seen in a faux Victorian scrapbook inside the gatefold—in which a young girl, Cynthia Jane De Blaise-William, beheads Henry Hamilton-Smythe while playing croquet. The ball, we now realize, is the rolling head of her victim. The song also criticizes a nurse because she "will tell you lies of a kingdom beyond the skies," and who appears on the cover in the form of a nanny carrying a punishing whip and arriving on retro-roller-blades. But the lyrics as performed in the song do not use the back-story itself, so we see that we need more subcategories of illustration to capture the difference between a cover illustrating specific lyrics and one illustrating a Genettian paratext. We also need a subcategory to distinguish genre attributions that are specific to the music (as opposed to the lyrics) from others that are more about the circumstances of production and reception. For instance, Chapman's take on *Kiss: Alive!* is basically about deciding what genre the music is and how it's visualized, yet it is still a species of illustration without actually "illustrating" anything in the lyrics.

Goodwin's concept of amplification might well be applied to the cover of N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton*[14], designed by Helane Freeman and photographed by Eric Poppleton. It exploits a low camera angle called a "beat-down" shot, in which several young men look down menacingly (Johnson). The image doesn't directly illustrate any of the songs, but it expands upon the tone of several of them. For instance, "Gangsta Gangsta" includes the phrase, "My man Dre'll fuck you up in a minute / With a right left, right left you're toothless / And then you say goddamn they ruthless!" The use of the second-person voice in the lyrics is equivalent to the subjective point of view in the shot. Here we encounter a type of emergent metaphor in a syntagmatic axis. Nicholas Cook—whose own version of illustration, amplification and disjuncture is rendered as conformance, complementation and contest (Cook 98-106)—writes of CD jewel case design, "the very fact of juxtaposing image and music has the effect of drawing attention to the properties that they share, and in this way constructing a new experience of each; the interpretation is in this sense emergent" (Cook 73). The metaphor is that listening to the radical opinions expressed on the album is like being knocked down by the truth. It is syntagmatic because it is expressed consecutively.

We need a similarly nuanced approach to the category of amplification (or complementation). Jethro Tull's *Thick As a Brick*[15] is a case in point. Intended to be a parody of concept albums (Nollen 81), *TAAB* is an extended song cycle based on lyrics written by a fictitious eight-year-old prodigy named Gerald Bostock. Encompassing a wide variety of musical genres

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[14]   1988;   http://hiphop-n-more.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/straight-outta-compton-album.jpg

[15] 1972; http://pxhst.co/avaxhome/ef/78/002478ef_medium.jpeg

and themes in different tempos, time signatures, textures and timbres, the album's progressive rock richness and diversity is articulated and expanded in Roy Eldridge's cover design, which takes the form of an entire small-town newspaper. This astonishing supplement, which singer Ian Anderson said took longer to create than the music (Rees 49), satirizes the homespun style of articles and advertising in local English broadsheets. The cover story outlines the poetic disgrace of the fictional Bostock, who was disqualified from a poetry contest for vulgar and offensive passages like "Your sperm's in the gutter, your love's in the sink." Other parts of the paper reproduce the entire poem (that is, all the lyrics), various absurd jokes (one of which concerns an "experimental non-rabbit"), a children's puzzle, and even a negative review of the music. These elements complement each other to create an immense, intertextual parody in a syntagmatic axis.

Disjuncture (or contest) can also be further subcategorized. The cover of Beck's *Odelay*[16] is a photograph of a leaping Komondor, a dog with a coat heavily corded like dreadlocks. When asked why he used it, Beck replied, "He looked like a bundle of flying udon noodles attempting to leap over a hurdle. I couldn't stop laughing. Plus the deadline for the cover was a day away" (Martell 44). Designer Robert Fisher merely added the oddly retro font. But this disjuncture, which was very much a happy accident driven by corporate necessity, is very different from that in the notorious original cover of the Beatles' *Yesterday and Today*[17]. That was an excerpt from a never-finished conceptual photo series by Robert Whitaker entitled "A Somnambulant Adventure," which Paul McCartney, at least, saw as a commentary on the Vietnam War (Gaffney). There are, therefore, both "arbitrary" and "motivated" subcategories of disjuncture.

There is plenty of room for the consideration of album covers as narratively connected to music in a variety of ways. The only real difference between album covers and music videos is that the former typically speak to collections of songs while the latter links to a single song. (A further research topic might fruitfully investigate how packaging for 45 RPM singles bridge this gap.) While the formal analysis of videos will necessarily involve different approaches to, say, editing and camera movement (Vernallis xi-xiii), I feel that narrative can function in both domains, just as interactivity is beginning to do.

I suggested at the beginning that music videos might also be profitably assessed from the point of view of still pictures. I don't have the time to explore this in depth here, but I will offer two quick examples. One is rather obvious: the kind of video that basically *is* a still picture—or that at least changes so little that no significant inflection of meaning accumulates. Here, D'Angelo's *Untitled (How Does It Feel)*[18], directed by Paul Hunter and Dominique Trenier, is essentially one shot that explores much of the singer's body in a highly suggestive way. Hunter said, "We made this for the women. The idea was, it would feel like he was one-on-one with whoever the woman was" (Peisner). Although less sexual, Miles Davis's *Tutu*[19] exhibits a similar intimacy. Interestingly enough, it was also a collaboration between male and female artists, in this case designer Eiko Ishioka (who won a Grammy for best album package) and photographer Irving Penn (Gallafent).

A second category would be music videos that deliberately exploit intertexts drawn from art history and visual culture, as in Tarsem Singh's video for R.E.M.'s *Losing My Religion*[20]— which explicitly alludes to Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*[21] (Buckley 206-07)— or Catherine Wheel's *Crank*[22], which alludes to all sorts of Christian iconography, including, for instance, Byzantine icons.

In conclusion, I feel that album covers, like music videos, can indeed produce narratives as emergent properties of various types of intertextual relationships. To capture them, we need more nuanced theoretical approaches, like illustration of lyric vis-à-vis illustration of music vis-à-vis illustration of context, or amplification through hypotextual supplementarity, or arbitrary disjuncture vis-à-vis motivated disjuncture, and so on. Clearly, we have much to talk about.

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[16] 1996; http://assets.rollingstone.com/assets/images/list/ 3e56f66b 22b00a08250fa20b1f00c11b66020fbf.jpg

[17] 1966; http://s3.birthmoviesdeath.com/images/made/beatles-yesterday-today-butcher1_1200_1200_81_s.jpg

[18] 2000; http://www.vevo.com/watch/dangelo/untitled-(how-does-it-feel)/USVI30500120

[19] 1986; http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51Ej-Za2DzL.jpg

[20] 1991; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwtdhWltSIg

[21] 1601-02; http://caravaggioprints.com/Incredulity%20of%20St%20 Thomas%20Caravaggio%20Print.jpg

[22] 1993; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoEav9mAB3U

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