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The In-Between Zone: Suspended experience in popular music and imagery

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the experience of spatio-temporal suspension in popular music and the associated imagery of the music video, where perceptions of time and space recede and liminal zones of perception arise. Correlations between sensory modes in the time-based arts can be observed in what psychologist Daniel Stern suggests are ‘correspondences’ between art forms. But how do different modes of perception share dynamic characteristics and contribute to suspended experience? By employing the idea of affect, our primary neurological response to change and movement in the environment, this enquiry sheds light on why popular audiovisual art forms such as music videos sometimes mirror dynamic events in music. Drawing on theory by Stern on the meta-modality of neurological waveforms, the investigation analyses a popular music video displaying characteristics of suspension and suggests how we may be responding to previously learnt sound characteristics as ‘affect attunement’ to phenomena already experienced in the environment.

KEYWORDS

suspension
affect
aesthetics
liminality
perception
popular music

INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic representation of space and time as a feature of popular music is an area sometimes overlooked despite being a defining feature of much music since the 1960s and well into the twenty-first century. When music is so immersive that time and space appears momentarily suspended it allows the imagination to enter liminal ‘between’ zones of experience, which I have found not dissimilar to hypnogogic states, what Achtermann refers to as ‘secondary worlds’ and ‘constructs of the imagination’.¹ I have termed this state ‘spatio-temporal suspension’ and am interested in how this music often conjures a kind of visual interiority, or the evoking of mental imagery. The article outlines current theory on the perceptual bridge between musical and visual, focusing on Stern’s writings on neurological waveforms of response to dynamic events known as ‘vitality forms’ and Clarke’s adaption of J. J. Gibson’s ecological theories of perception in the analysis of music. By also examining my own responses to suspension in music I will offer

thoughts on how this experience occurs and will suggest by way of analysis of a recent music video by the band Radiohead that popular audiovisual art forms sometimes exhibit dynamic characteristics in both visuals and music that are conducive to suspended experience.

BACKGROUND TO SUSPENDED EXPERIENCE

As a musician and composer of popular music I first observed suspended phenomena in progressive popular music of the 1960s, in what is generally regarded today as psychedelic pop or rock. When this music is also combined with often fantastic forms of moving imagery or animation the experience can be highly immersive. For Reising, ‘inner time-traveling constitutes one of the hallmarks of psychedelic experience...[P]sychedelia revolutionized rock... by reconceptualizing time’.² The aesthetic manipulation of time exhibited in sound recording techniques such as speed change, phasing, reversal and looping I contend contributes in part to suspension and a number of these techniques are examined later in the article.

The spatial environment of a music performance also plays a significant role in the experience. When room characteristics are altered or abstracted significantly from the everyday, especially in popular music recordings, perceptions of space are challenged and are highly conducive to imaginative thought. Doyle observes the role of ‘reverb and echo effects deployed...to render aural vistas’ in what he considers ‘pictorial spatializing’ in popular music and the manipulation of spatial environments with reverberation and delay is also considered.³

Musical features are often the primary factors in suspension. Apart from popular music, similar occurrences appear in early twentieth century art music such as Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky and traditions such as Indian classical music and Georgian vocal music. The use of quartal/quintal harmony and mode, drone, repetition and ambiguous rhythmic devices like hemiola and mixed metres are common to examples of music that contribute to suspended experience. However, the primary focus of this article is how these musical and spatial characteristics appear to trigger responses similar to the dynamic events occurring in moving imagery and how ‘correspondences’ arise between sensory modes as observed by Stern.⁴ In this sense my research seeks to not only identify aesthetic factors leading to the feeling of suspension but also to understand from a neurological point of view how the experience occurs. In order to do this we need to introduce the psychological concept of affect.

DEFINING AFFECT

In aesthetics, affect is often defined in terms of emotional response, or as interpreted by Laszlo, 'the emotion arising in the context of a stimulus-response relationship'.⁵ However, in psychology, emphasis is placed on neurological response to change in environment, particularly the perception of movement before thought or signification takes place, viewed by psychologist Daniel Stern as 'dynamic forms of vitality'.⁶ Affect precedes will and consciousness, occurring before the identification of feeling or emotion. As neurological waveforms of response to internal and external stimuli including sound and vision, affect has considerable relevance for the dynamic time-based arts and as a concept has been broadly taken up in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and aesthetics as observed by Gregg and Seigworth.⁷

Eric Shouse, drawing on Brian Massumi's definition in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* sees affect as 'the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience'.⁸ Notably Shouse observes that:

'music provides perhaps the clearest example of how the intensity...of sensations on the body can 'mean' more to people than meaning itself...[T]he pleasure that individuals derive from music has less to do with the communication of meaning, and far more to do with the way that a particular piece of music "moves" them'.⁹

In other words, although meaning in music can be derived from lyrical, structural or symbolic content on a cognitive level our *physical* engagement with music is where we derive our initial sense of understanding and pleasure. Importantly, Shouse observes 'the power of affect lies in...“abstractivity” that makes it transmittable in ways that feelings and emotions are not'.¹⁰ This has direct implication for perception of music as an abstract dynamic art form and also relates to moving imagery in a manner that I will outline shortly.

Stern observes the role of affect in what he terms 'vitality forms', suggesting that we have been 'attuned' to aesthetic waveforms since birth - as infants we learn primarily by mirrored movement and experience.¹¹ This 'affect attunement' is noticeable in the interaction between mothers and infants as a matching of dynamic forms though not necessarily sensory modalities. Significantly, Stern observes that 'cross-modal merging and synesthesias ... are initially more common in infancy'¹² and in the dynamic time-based arts the capacity of vitality forms to 'elicit similar felt states regardless of what modality they arise from'¹³ provides opportunity for collaborations across art forms or what Stern terms 'correspondences':

“Correspondences” between art forms are necessarily created because of the meta-modal nature of vitality forms that assure a common ability to render similar, but not identical, experiences. The magic lies in pairing the similar with the “not exactly the same”.¹⁴

This potential for ‘correspondence’ indicates the likelihood of pairing moving imagery with the auditory or musical. In the case of music that displays suspended qualities, the auditory phenomena experienced corresponds dynamically with forms of moving imagery and the mental imagery evoked by this music relates to its dynamic characteristics, albeit in an abstracted form. Stern suggests that ‘the dynamics of experience are revealed in all art forms because they speak the same meta-modal language of vitality forms with or without identifiable emotions’.¹⁵ Dynamic characteristics across art forms observe similar principles and temporal and dynamic contours that occur in music and sound are often analogous to visual phenomena in the form of pattern, repetition, frequency and other factors.

Figure 1 provides a sample of auditory and visual correspondences identified in experiences of *suspended* music and moving imagery.

Figure 1: Auditory and visual correspondences relating to the suspended experience.

Element	Auditory/musical	Visual
Repetition	Repeated pulse or motif, ostinato <i>Sensation of stasis, time suspended</i>	Repeated elements, patterning. <i>Sensation of stasis, time suspended</i>
Speed	Change in speed of musical figures <i>Altered sense of time/space</i>	Change in speed of visual elements <i>Altered sense of time/space</i>
Reversal	Alters perception of time/reality, <i>Heightens sense of unreality/uncertainty</i>	Alters perception of time/reality, <i>Heightens sense of unreality/uncertainty</i>
Diffusion	‘Blurred’ by reverb, equalization, distortion <i>Draws attention to timbre/texture</i>	Out of focus, blurred effects, e.g. ‘bokeh’, <i>Draws attention to texture</i>
Doubling	Beating, chorus and phasing effects <i>Results in ‘between’ auditory qualities and implied movement</i>	Moiré effects and visual patterns <i>Results in optical effects/illusions and implied movement</i>

Although not comprehensive the list does provide some indication of where an overlap between sensory modes occurs. What should be noted is that all of these elements involve degrees of abstraction from an original source and an increased perceptual focus upon

phenomena resulting from this abstraction. For example, in the case of repetition recurrent figures over time become backgrounded as attention shifts to differences and variations.

Clarke notes that with degraded or ambiguous perceptual information in an environment, attention is drawn instinctively to the quality of these characteristics before attempting to make sense of the 'larger' picture, stating that:

[m]usic which presents sampled everyday sounds in a transformed, or radically de-contextualized fashion may encourage a listener to detect the structure of the stimulus information (what might be called 'purely sonorous structures') by virtue of a disruption of the normal relationship of source specification.¹⁶

Clarke, in utilizing Gibson's ecological approach to perception, refers to the principle of 'invariance' in an environment - the idea that 'relationships between stimulus properties... remain unchanged despite transformations of the stimulus array as a whole'.¹⁷ He uses the example of an unfamiliar language - although to a native speaker a language's primary function is to communicate meaning in the form of words and syntax, to the non-native speaker attention is drawn to more to the language's auditory characteristics; the actual sound or accent. Clarke observes in Steve Reich's tape phase piece 'It's Gonna Rain' (1965) that the looped repetition of the piece's spoken title shifts focus from the words to 'the particular character of the sounds themselves—their texture, timbre, rhythm and pitch' as the asynchronous tape loops move gradually out of phase.¹⁸ Ambient music pioneer Brian Eno also remarked in regard to this piece:

Any information which is common, after several repetitions, you cease to hear... You'll see any aspect of it that's changing, but the static elements you won't see. And what fascinated me with that piece was that it generated a kind of audible difference and patterns. The amount of material there is extremely limited, but the amount of activity it triggers in you is very rich and complex.¹⁹

This is similar to Pierre Schaeffer's observations on 'reduced listening' approaches to sound. Using the concept of acousmatics to describe the separation of a sound from its source as a 'sonorous object', Schaeffer notes that in the repetition of a signal:

It gradually brings the sonorous object to the fore as a perception worthy of being observed for itself; on the other hand, as a result of ever more attentive and more refined listenings, it progressively reveals to us the richness of this perception.²⁰

I would argue that when visual or auditory characteristics are abstracted significantly from their source by way of diffusion, distortion, speed change, reversal and other factors there is an increased focus upon the ‘rich’ phenomena generated and a fascination or captivation occurs leading to realms of imaginative thought. The dynamic characteristics of music and moving imagery in sound recordings and video readily afford abstraction and our affectual response to perceptually challenging phenomena is to construct ‘alternate’ forms of mental imagery in order to make sense of the perceptual information. This is Achtermann’s ‘secondary world, constructed in the mind’, or ‘constructing sounds that give the impression of an environment which might exist’ (in this case referring to the ambient work of Eno).²¹

Young observes a ‘potential to create distinctions between apparent “Reality” and “abstraction”’ in the ‘limitless universe of sound’ afforded by electroacoustic music, suggesting:

[b]ecause they create a sense of detachment from known physical Reality these two perspectives may be taken as a metaphorical representation of the inner world of the imagination, where free and fantastic associations between objects and experiences can take place.²²

These “inner worlds” I contend are representative of suspended experience, and a number of abstracted musical and visual characteristics identified are exhibited in a popular music video I will analyse as a demonstration of suspended phenomena occurring in current popular music.

AN EXAMPLE: RADIOHEAD’S ‘DAYDREAMING’

‘Daydreaming’ from the Radiohead album *A Moon Shaped Pool* (2016)²³ is an example of how visual concepts and techniques employed by filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson appear to correspond with musical and auditory elements in the song. It also demonstrates how Radiohead’s use of ambiguous musical and auditory techniques contributes to an overall sense of suspension. The song commences with an audible tape-speed fluctuation, establishing from the outset a sense of temporal fluidity and an analog aesthetic. Echoing, repeated bell-like sounds imbue a sense of spatial and temporal unreality with diffuse timbres and the lack of a definable pulse. The blurred, out-of-focus figure of vocalist Thom Yorke emerges gradually from a brightly-lit tunnel opening, followed by a series of diffuse, unidentifiable walking figures.

As the foreground comes into focus, the sound of a solo piano also begins to emerge at 0:24, establishing the song’s introduction. The piano motif rhythmically is a gently rolling arpeggio of three beats over two forming a hemiola or sesquialtera, a mixed metric device.

Although a pulse is now evident, the syncopated pattern resulting from the combination of metres contributes to a floating, unsettled sensation that accompanies Yorke's constantly moving figure. Harmonically each piano figure contains a note in the form of a suspended fourth or ninth - although the commencing note of the vocal melody indicates a minor key the tonality until this point is ambiguous, further contributing to a suspended quality.

Yorke's vocal appears at 1:21 beginning with the lyric, 'Dreamers, they never learn' introducing the song's verse or 'A' section but also intimating habitual, repetitive behavior and a dream-like state. Reversed vocals and instrumentation emerge at 2:02, imbuing a sense of temporal unreality as Yorke, facing the camera and appearing to walk in a trance, self-consciously blinks as if attempting to awake. It becomes apparent that Yorke has been walking through one room after another with no obvious relation between each location. This somnambulistic quality, as if Yorke were a ghost walking through different periods of his life, is echoed in the repetitive, insistent piano motif. Time and space appear to be distorted, cyclic and unending, like an M.C. Escher lithograph.

However at 2:18 Yorke pushes through one more door and emerges abruptly into daylight, an outdoor woodland setting. This coincides with the song's 'B' section and a notable shift in tonality to a major key with the piano arpeggio doubling in speed, an effect not unlike the euphoric sensation of stepping into a bright clearing. The fact that every scene until this point has been an interior is made particularly acute. Increasingly high-pitched backwards sounds heighten a sense of unreality reinforced by disjunctive cuts between exteriors and interiors in the video. The bass guitar entering for the first time at 2:40 provides an insistent pedal point and increasingly urgent dynamic as Yorke emerges again into daylight, this time in a beach setting, as the doubled piano arpeggio falls away to the simpler motif of the verse.

At 3:00 the verse returns with basic instrumentation of voice, piano and bass and a gentler dynamic. This scene is shot entirely in one location - a deserted car park - for almost a minute, implying perhaps a return to a 'reality' of sorts, with Yorke smiling, apparently at ease, even miming the vocal, the only point in the video apart from the very last scene that this occurs. However a keyboard with a slightly dissonant timbre begins to take the place of the piano arpeggio at 3:14 and backwards vocals and bell sounds return, signaling unreality again. At 3:48 Yorke rubs his eyes as if trying to wake up and pushes through a fire exit at 3:58.

At this point the B section returns. Although still in a major key, the context has changed, with backwards voices entering and Yorke appearing through a series of rapidly intercut entrance doorways in domestic situations, as if hastily revisiting previous lives, mirrored in the doubled

piano arpeggio. The bass guitar which had dropped out at 3:59 re-enters at 4:14 and remains as an insistent pedal point, seemingly propelling Yorke through each location with further backwards and time-stretched vocals reappearing at 4:32 and instrumentation rising in pitch and dynamic from 4:40 as his pace intensifies.

After climbing a series of stairwells Yorke emerges again into daylight at 4:55, this time at the base of snow-covered mountains, with music and instrumentation pulling back dynamically to a more sparse arrangement, appearing to echo the cold, bleak landscape. As Yorke trudges exhaustedly through the snow a prominent reversed guitar and time-stretched vocal appears at 5:03, indicating that the dream isn't quite over. The insistent piano motif which had faded upon entry of the reversed guitar reappears at 5:15 accompanied by an ascending keyboard, suggesting a growing anxiety as night falls rapidly. At 5:26 a glowing cave opening emerges in the dark blue landscape - Yorke crawls into the cave and as he collapses wearily by a campfire at 5:43 the music dynamically pulls back to the original piano motif of Section A and an extreme backwards and slowed-down spoken vocal. This is matched by reversed footage of Yorke mouthing the largely unrecognizable vocal at 5:53, obscured by the flickering firelight. Although disconcerting and somewhat surreal the overall affect is calming, almost hypnagogic as the piano gradually fades away to Yorke drifting off to sleep as the screen turns to black.

CONCLUSION

This music video is a cogent example of how affect is mirrored musically and visually, with abstraction of music and visuals contributing to a sense of a 'secondary world'. Distortions of linear time, narrative and location in the video combine with the music to inject a sense of unending cyclic continuity throughout, providing a disorienting experience of time and space suspended. The continual crossing of thresholds such as the endless passing through doorways throughout the video should not be discounted – liminal experience arises in these 'in-between' zones between inside and out, day and night, waking and sleeping that are especially conducive to imagination and creativity.

Osborn (2017) in adopting both Gibson's and Clarke's 'invariant' ecological approach to the analysis of Radiohead's music observes that it occupies a perceptual zone between expected norms of rock music and deviation from it, stemming from 'an ability to write music that balances expectation and surprise...[V]iolations of these subjective expectation-realization chains prompt the listener to search more deeply for meaning'.²⁴ Osborn describes this in terms of salience, by 'building upon a host of expectations inherited from classical and popular music

while at the same time subverting those expectations several times over' and sees Radiohead's recordings ultimately as 'a sonic ecosystem in which listeners participate, react and adapt in order to search for meaning'.²⁵ Notably, he also observes that 'the same strategies can be used to analyze music videos'.²⁶ This 'rich' area of experience as outlined previously by both Schaeffer and Eno is especially prevalent in the music and videos of Radiohead and other music artists that maintain a 'salient' zone suspended somewhere between presumption and disbelief.

Working within the constraints of an overarching concept, it is of interest to observe how closely Anderson's completed video maps dynamic changes in the music and how much of this would have been intuitive. Music videos are one of the more overt examples of where the possibility of correspondence between art forms in popular culture occurs, though this can be seen in many forms of art in which the human body interacts dynamically within a spatial environment. Although my research is based in immersive forms of music and suspended experience, this article demonstrates how an analytical approach based on perceptions of affect could potentially be applied to music video and other forms of dynamic time-based arts, including dance, theatre and motion picture analysis, with a greater focus on the interaction of dynamic events across art forms and how we interact spatially and temporally with an art work.

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