State of Play: Visual Culture and Music
Simon Shaw-Miller

The Music of Painting: Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts from the Romantics to John Cage, by Peter Vergo, London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2010, 368pp., hbk, 16 col. and 230 b. & w. illus., $89.95, £39.95


Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky and Beyond, by Peter Dayan, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 190pp., hbk, 8 col. and 5 b. & w. illus., £55.00

The publication of these three books provides an opportunity to review what we can now confidently call a true field of research: music and visual culture. It may not exactly have come of age, but it is at least up and running as a scholarly endeavour producing ever more lively, challenging and substantial research.

These publications represent rather different faces of the subject, asking in the way of Gauguin: ‘Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?’ But they may also indicate an answer to these questions. The Music of Painting by Peter Vergo addresses the first question and functions as a touchstone in this endeavour. Vergo has been interested in the relationships between music and the visual arts for over thirty years and was one of the first voices in the field.1 The collection edited by Charlotte de Mille is a ‘state of play’ (‘what are we’) selection of essays, mainly by early career scholars, that displays a refreshing range of approaches and research topics; a clear portrait of the field’s complex and polyphonic identity. Peter Dayan’s book is a series of related case studies that, nevertheless, provoke a bold, over-arching theoretical ambition. The ability to formulate a coherent theoretical project is, I hope, indicative of where research in the field needs to go.

Vergo’s The Music of Painting is a sequel to his earlier study That Divine Order: Music and the Visual Arts from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century (also published by Phaidon, in 2005) and together they represent a kind of summa of these interests. They provide a survey of art and music relations, from Western antiquity and ancient Chinese music and art theory, to the career of the American composer John Cage in the middle of the twentieth century. That Divine Order largely focused on mathematical order and music, positing harmony, via music, as a paradigm that might be adopted by artists seeking to claim a value for their own art that some felt it might otherwise lack. However, The Music of Painting is both textually longer (by nearly one hundred pages) and chronologically shorter in scope. It also has a less clearly articulated thesis; unlike That Divine Order, mathematical order is engaged in only as a small part of the story of twentieth-century art, and the concept of harmony, central to the earlier book, underwent a revolutionary transformation during the timeframe engaged by this second book, through (but not exclusively) the impact of Schoenberg and then the aleatoric aesthetics of his pupil John Cage.

Vergo is at his best when setting out his stall, when discussing paintings that aspire to musical principles, or explaining basic music theory and how it does, or does not, inform painterly aspirations. Both That Divine Order and The Music of Painting provide a treasure trove of empirical material and detail. To take two exactly contemporary examples from the latter: Vergo is fascinating on the construction of Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné’s ‘optophonic piano’ (1923), and compelling in his argument that Paul Klee’s painting New Harmony (1936) is unlikely to have been directly influenced by Schoenberg’s dodecaphonic interests (despite the views of earlier commentators).2 Vergo argues that it is closely related formally and colourwise to Klee’s own Intensification of Colour from Static to Dynamic of 1923. This work was painted around the same time that the Second Viennese School were privately discussing Schoenberg’s ‘Method of Composing with Twelve Tones which are related only with one another’3 and, therefore, too early for a more general public awareness (plate 1). In the forward ‘Towards the Condition of Music’, Vergo writes ‘I have largely ignored Cage’s attempts to incorporate into the domain of music not merely silence but also indeterminate sounds and noises’ (6). My position would be different: I would see silence and indeterminate sounds and noises as always and already part of all music. What Cage did was simply to shift emphasis, to show that there is no silence anyway, and that indeterminacy
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in composition is supplemented by determinacy in performance (and vice versa). This is why the phrase ‘Cage’s silent piano piece’ (as the dust jacket has it) is not a very helpful way of describing 4’33” - it is not silent, nor necessarily a piano piece, nor indeed fixed at 4 minutes and 33 seconds! In addition, what silence and noise (as concepts or aspirations, if not as sonoric absences or facts) bring to music is an opportunity to explore music’s ontology, and it is here, I would argue, that the visual is located. As with silence and indeterminacy, the visual is already present, if often undetected in the shadows. This conceptual difference apart, I also differ from Vergo in his assertion that ‘electronic music, multimedia installation, video art and other developments’ are ‘part of a different story’ (6), hence his reluctance to include them in the present study. In many ways the story he tells of art and music in the twentieth century is one of aspiration foiled by technology. Alexander Laszlo’s ‘colour-light’ performances, Hans Richter’s, Viking Eggeling’s or Oskar Fischinger’s ‘visual music’ films, Moholy-Nagy’s interest in the gramophone as a creative instrument rather than simply a reproductive one; all of these experiments would find fuller incarnation as the century wore on: in John Whitney’s films.
and his ‘analog computer’ during his time as artist in residence at IBM in the mid-1960s; in the work of artists associated with Fluxus, especially an artist like Nam June Paik who subverted technologies of reproduction via techniques of feedback; or in the more contemporary work of VJ artists such as Addictive TV who ran the visual music event Optronica in London in 2005–07 (see http://www.addictive.com/), or the audio-visual remix act Eclectic Method who also sample, mix and re-edit audio-visual material, both in live performance and in audio and video recordings (see http://www.eclecticmethod.net/). Vergo’s story stops in the 1960s just as technology arrives at a point where the idea of visual music can be more fully realized. Indeed, in the decade following Vergo’s cut-off point, multimedia experimentation really starts to take off.

However, my main critical point about The Music of Painting is not what is included and what is not – one can always find other examples and practitioners – nor where the chronological bounds have been drawn (his project to cover antiquity to the mid-twentieth century is already more ambitious that most other researchers in the field). My main point of critique is in relation to issues of theory. Vergo makes the following point in his introduction: ‘I have dismissed any idea of trying to apply methods borrowed from some pre-existing body of theory to the extremely diverse source material considered here’ (7). While this does commendable justice to the individual works discussed, it does not provide any sense, or explanation, regarding what lay beneath all the efforts to speak across media. It is precisely this that Dayan attempts to do. The distinctions between interplay at the level of multi-, inter- or cross-mediality is not explicitly explored, although it is implicitly engaged in some examples. Vergo is especially good at explaining the technical differences between media, what musical concepts mean and how they can or cannot be ‘transferred’ across media. What is less convincing is the interrogation of this very idea of ‘transferal’ or ‘translation,’ and on this Dayan has interesting things to say.

To take cubism as one more example from Vergo: as he correctly points out, ‘one remarkable feature of their works [Picasso’s and Braque’s] painted between about 1909 and 1914 is the prevalence of musical subject matter. This can sometimes account for more than fifty percent of their still-life paintings in any given year’, and he goes on to say that this may appear surprising ‘given their repeated denials that they knew or understood anything at all about painting’s sister art’. However, the analysis of this tantalizing issue stops at the admission that, ‘no matter how poetically adapted or even distorted such depictions might turn out to be’, Picasso and Gris ‘were in some cases painting objects that first met their gaze’ (214–15). Braque is discussed in a little more detail, but the discussion soon moves on to more formal issues of space and time, and never returns to attempt an answer to the question of why music was so ubiquitous (plate 2). There is no discussion of, for example, the relationship between such still lives and the trompe l’oeil tradition with which they so clearly engage, and which likewise drew on musical subject matter for reasons of sensory play (invoking touch, as musical instruments must), in addition to raising questions fundamental to issues of representation and illusion, dear to the hearts of cubists. Nor does Vergo discuss the relationship between the references to music and other collage elements in synthetic cubism. The reading of the newspaper elements of many of these works, by Robert Rosenblum and Patricia Leighten among numerous others, has raised issues about the relationship between content and subject.

matter and the complex dialectics set up at various levels of signification within and without the work. Vergo missed the opportunity to weave this debate into the role of music as the principle subject of many of these collages. Music is an ideal paradigm for the way in which signification can float free of fixed signifiers, and as such it provided Picasso with a means of play (jouer or jouir): he made poetry out of the public discourse of current events played out in the pages of *Le Journal*. Indeed, given how important the artists involved in this movement are (more so than, say, Henrik Neugeboren who takes up almost as much space a few pages further on), they occupy surprisingly little of Vergo’s overall story.

Like Vergo, Dayan does not explicitly engage this corpus of ideas, but he does a parallel job. De Mille’s collection, on the other hand, is emphatically and explicitly engaged with modernity and, according to the dust jacket, aims to ‘re-think modernism itself in the light of both the fine arts and music, to advocate a multiplicity of modernisms…’. Her book has been sensibly selected, edited and designed, from a series of papers given at a Royal Musical Association conference in March 2008, and is organized in five sections with an introductory essay by Vergo. The quality of the essays, as in any collection, varies, but they are rarely against the ideology of media mixture, for example.
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The first section considers German aesthetics, especially the legacy of Wagner’s much-misunderstood concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk. The accounts range from Diane Silverthorne’s essay on music and book design in the Vienna Secession, to Spyros Petritakis’s comparison of Richard Strauss’s compositional interests and Böcklin’s art in the context of German nationalism. Isabel Wünsche’s essay closes this section and considers synaesthesia and the early twentieth-century Russian artists Nikolai Kulbin and Wassily Kandinsky, as well as the composer Mikhail Matyushin. The concept of synaesthesia, together with that of the Gesamtkunstwerk, both introduced in this first part, are so important that they stray into other sections of the book. Indeed, the first essay in the second section is on French art and the Gesamtkunstwerk in the late nineteenth century: Jim Rubin writes on Wagner’s ideas and the evocation of sound in Courbet’s landscapes, whilst Corrinne Chong’s essay on the aesthetics of vagueness, an attribute associated with signification in instrumental music, considers Fantin-Latour and Berlioz. The third section has two essays, one by Ayla Lepine, which provides an account of English ecclesiastical architecture in Cambridge and spiritualism read through the multi-medial and sensory nature of such spaces, and the editor’s own essay. De Mille offers a neat account of the conflation of German expressionism and Bloomsbury’s aesthetic concerns through specific writings by Virginia Woolf and Kandinsky. Section four links early abstract animated films in Malcolm Cook’s essay with Jody Patterson’s account of Stuart Davis’ paintings, jazz and the political left in New Deal America. The final section has two essays on mid-century topics: Melissa Warak’s account of the Fluxus works of La Monte Young and their relationship to Zen ideas, and a consideration by Olga Touloumi of Xenakis and Le Corbusier’s Philips Pavilion for the World Fair of 1958, the importance of drawing, and the graphic and mathematical elements of musical scoring. This should give some sense of the scope of this collection, and while the sectioning of the essays is not always entirely convincing, nor the book’s title, which gives no indication of the comparative nature of the enterprise, the book does provide a collective indication of the riches to be mined from a rigorous consideration of the visual culture of music.

While de Mille’s book may be polyphonic, it does, like Vergo’s, leave the difficult, complex, but ultimately perhaps most stimulating and interesting questions, to one side. This is perhaps inevitable with a collection of essays, but the answers to which we should perhaps now turn are to be discovered by seeking out the ‘thorough bass’ of music–art relationships. I evoke Goethe here, in a quote familiar to all who work in this area. In conversation with his assistant Riemer on 19 May 1807, Goethe pointed to a lack of an underlying theory in art: ‘Painting has long since lacked knowledge of any Generalbass; it lacks any accepted theory as exists in music.’ Basso continuo, as it is perhaps more commonly known, is a means of realizing harmony based on bass notes alone (sometimes with figures, hence ‘figured bass’). The relevant point is that the rules of continuo realization are widely enough understood to allow a skilled player to realize the harmony from an unfigured bass part. Goethe’s remark was about the lack of an intuitively felt, but objectively understood, theoretical harmonic foundation. This point was later picked up by Kandinsky and seen by him as both a plea for a comprehensive artistic theory (for abstraction in art) and one based after the model of music theory (the most abstract of the fine arts) (plate 3). I do not propose the construction of an essentialist theory of music–art relations, but believe attempts to dig beneath the surface, to seek out ideological coincidences, and to construct interdisciplinary connections, as Dayan’s book does, should be sought out and applauded when attempted.

Whilst the title of Dayan’s book says it all and makes for intelligibility, it is rather clunky, distinctly unmemorable, and, since the image on the front makes the same point as the title by other means, the overall design is rather cluttered. Dayan’s case studies are well chosen: two artists, two composers and two poets; James Abbot McNeill Whistler, Erik Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire, Georges Braque, Francis Ponge and Igor Stravinsky. They form discrete, but complementary instances which allow Dayan to develop and nuance his argument effectively. This is an interesting book, and one that comes from outside the usual field of references. It is refreshing, despite the relative youth of the field, to have common questions considered from different angles. It does, of course, have an impact on the originality of the arguments; many of Dayan’s establishing points ‘feel’ familiar if couched in different words, yet his conclusions are often refreshingly new. What Dayan means, for
example, by ‘an interart aesthetic’ is what could also be described as a central plank of many theories of modernism; Daniel Albright, to pick an example almost at random, shares points of reference with Dayan, but his work is not mentioned. Indeed, Dayan shares hardly any common references with the other two books reviewed (his chronology is similar, but his geography is more restricted). In addition, unlike the other books, Dayan sets out to establish laws on which to construct his argument. Its core argument, with which I have a great deal of sympathy, is this: from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, an intermedial aesthetic principle was established by which artistic value was to be sought, not within the formal logic of the unique medium, but through the transposed value of another medium. Thus art is judged as music, music as poetry and poetry as art. The key issue here is that music, poetry and art are to be understood as aspirations separate from specific manifestations. Thus, there is no question of a particular work of art being judged as if it ‘illustrated’ a particular piece of music; rather, painting as an art aspires to the condition of music. This is obviously not an original argument, but where it does diverge from Walter Pater’s dynamic is in the circular nature of this field of references. So art is not to be grounded in music, rather, music then slips into the aspiration of the poetic, which then modulates to the value of imagery. This constant displacement is a subtle device for discussing issues of value, especially in the concluding chapter on the re-emergence of an interart aesthetic together with a renewed interest in ‘the beautiful’ in the contemporary art of Richard Wright and Pierre Soulages. Dayan writes, ‘The intermedialist and the critic [academic] agree that we have no access to the universal laws of art. The difference is that the critic [and academic] concludes from this that those laws may not exist and at the very least cannot form a proper object of research; whereas the intermedialist concludes that they define a realm beyond the reach of the critic and that they are precisely for that reason, the only proper object of research’ (166).

4 Umberto Boccioni, cartoon depicting a Futurist ‘intermedia’ serata, 1911.
At the outset Dayan establishes five laws that he claims are shared by all artists who aspire to an interart aesthetic, and to which he regularly refers throughout his analysis. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The work of art should be considered a new reality, an object, rather than a vehicle of subjective expression (a point related to Barthes’ ‘death of the author’).
2. The relationships between any two art forms are always ultimately incalculable.
3. All art is universal and non-rational and can only be experienced or asserted rather than explained in any objective way.
4. All art objects are unique. This uniqueness is the work’s guarantee that it cannot be ultimately defined (as in 3).
5. The only way to truly convey the relations between media is to describe one medium in terms of another (as in the title of the book).

While these divisions prove useful to Dayan’s overall argument, I am not convinced of their applicability to all instances of what might be called ‘interart’ aesthetics (although I understand the more partial way he is employing the term). For example, the applicability of law number two will depend on the exact nature of the interaction. In some art that I would call ‘interart’, the relationships may figure at a technical level, as, for example, in Paul Klee’s interest in additive rhythms and counterpoint. But this idea should probably be applied more widely and to figures outside Dayan’s orbit. Dayan excludes Wagner, for example, a key figure in modernist discussion and in the other two books under review. Indeed Wagner is seen as antithetical to Dayan’s understanding of interart, because he ‘is thought to have committed the sin of believing that words and music could work together in pursuit of a common dramatic aim’ (3). Wagner is, therefore, in breech of Dayan’s second law.

As I said above, I would choose to define the situation differently. I would argue that within the idea of interart aesthetics there are competing and varied notions of how intercourse between the arts might be manifest. The part played by the competing concepts of inter-, cross- (or trans-) and multi-media or disciplinarity provides the possibility of seeing many artists between the brackets of Wagner and Cage (and beyond) as relating their art provocatively to the condition of that of another art. Indeed the ontological conditions of ‘the arts’ are often under negotiation. Where the medium of one art form stops and that of another starts is not always clear, nor agreed. This brings us close to Dick Higgins’ notion of Intermedia and in all cases it is helpful to ask detailed questions about the specific nature of artistic and medial interaction (plate 4). Dayan’s project, however, is not this broad; he is not aiming to provide a theory of all interart relations, and his conception of interart is more limited and focused. He is principally concerned with questions of aesthetic judgment.

This brings me to a final point, on nomenclature. There is no doubt, as these three books testify, that the study of the relationships between art and music has developed into a substantial area of real scholarly debate. What is less clear is not only how to name this field – visual and musical culture; sonic and visual studies; audio-visual research; art and music history, etc. – but also how to characterize concepts internal to it: interart aesthetics, inter/cross/trans/multi/disciplinarity, etc. It is, of course, advisable to keep this conversation fluid, to avoid prescriptive definition in order to allow research and theory to experiment, but it seems to me there are two diverging if sometimes interpenetrating streams. One of these, perhaps the biggest, is what we might call audio-visual studies, which tends to focus on sound and art, or sound-art; the other is represented by the publications under review, and is addressed to music specifically and to art. This latter is concerned with the historical, social, ideological and disciplinary traditions of music as a cultural practice and how they relate to, or differ from, the historical, social, ideological and disciplinary traditions of visual art. Of course there is overlap, but music is not just sound. Sound is often not just sound either. Music is an historical art; it has its own history. Perhaps music is too important not to be a subject for art historians?

Notes
5 See Patricia Leighten, Rerordering the Universe, Princeton, NJ, 1992; and Robert Rosenblum, ‘Picasso and the typography of cubism’, in Roland


**Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement in the United States and Mexico**

*Vanja V. Malloy*


This exhibition and catalogue are very important for scholars of surrealism, given their extension of the debate that has taken place since the 1980s on the role of women in the movement. Although the surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s, along with their art and writing, were viewed as largely misogynistic by academics such as Rudolph Kuenzli and Hal Foster, more recent perspectives by Penelope Rosemont and others have argued for the significant roles played by actual women (and not just the image of ‘woman’) in surrealism, which were formative in shaping its theory and iconography.¹

The exhibition contributed to this inquiry by resituating it in America, where surrealism was well known from the 1930s and where it landed for the duration of the Second World War, from which point surrealist activity intensified in North America. Its themed rooms (‘Alice in Wonderland’, ‘Identity-Portraiture’, ‘The Creative Woman’, Romance and Domesticity’, and so on) focused around lesser-known artists such as Gertrude Abercrombie, Sylvia Fein, Maria Izquierdo, Helen Lundeberg, and Rosa Rolanda as much as artists typically placed in the surrealist context: Frida Kahlo, Lee Miller, Alice Rahon, Dorothea Tanning, and Remedios Varo. The outcome of giving so much wall space to what were thought to be fringe figures is startling. Although none of their work can compete with Kahlo’s massive and majestic canvas shown here, *The Two Fridas* (1939, plate 1), the quality of the work is very high and in the case of Lundeberg, Rolanda, Fein and others, it is not indebted to any of their better-known, canonical male colleagues. The show was tightly knit and organized in a semi-