

## Audio-Photographic Art: An Introduction to Music and Photography as a Single Art Object

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### 1. Abstract

As a sound artist my work is concerned with the emotive interaction between photography and sound. In contemporary society we are conditioned to read music and image in a particular way, be it through album sleeves, promotional materials or multimedia art. I believe that the photography and images accompanying certain music releases is inseparable from the music itself: that one medium triggers an internal rendering of the other. These renderings result not just in surface associations, but a deeper connection based on memory and emotion. In my creative work I take advantage of this by presenting music and photography together with equal emphasis on both parts. Its innovation lies in progressing from music with photography to what I'll refer to as audio-photographic art: music and photography as a single art object.

Drawing on the writing of Barthes, Deleuze and Ricoeur and using examples from my own work, this paper will demonstrate how my audio-photographic art developed from an interest in the photography based musical improvisations of Nine Inch Nails on *Ghosts I-IV* [1] into a new immersive interdisciplinary art form with its own phenomenology and aesthetics.

### 2. Introduction

Go into any record shop and you are faced with row upon row of photographs. Many of these photographs are album art, picked by the artist or label for their particular qualities. Each photograph through its pairing with the record must therefore be related in some way to the music contained on the record. This relationship is repeated throughout the music world, on promotional material for recordings, gigs and merchandise. This use of photography can lead to a deeper connection through memory and emotion creating music that is inseparable from its photographic counterpart(s).

A personal example would be Nine Inch Nails' use of David Carsons' photography on *The Fragile* [2] (figure 1). Blurry images of flowers and abstract colours evoke memories from my childhood; running around in the fields of flowers outside the village where I grew up, paddling and catching crayfish in the stream, playing hide and seek in the long grass and flowers of the nearby meadows. This connection is a deeply personal one and when I sought escapism in the music of *The Fragile*, the

nostalgic images that were evoked allowed me to hide in my own memory and idealism instead of confronting reality. The aggression and the melancholy of the music was cathartic in a time of my life when I sought the escapism that the photography provided. My perception of *The Fragile* [2] is of the music and photography as a single art object, each dependent on the other to create the immersive and emotional listening experience I had.



Figure 1. *The Fragile* front & back cover [2]

Later on in their career Nine Inch Nails went on to release *Ghosts I-IV* [1], an album of improvisations based on photography. Each photograph and piece is based on the dreams and imagination of Trent Reznor, the songwriter behind Nine Inch Nails [3]. The approach that NIN used inspired me to create *Sunrise* [4], an E.P. of music that accompanied a photography book based on the emotional journey of a year of my life. The process differs from that employed by NIN in that each track had three photographs that went with it: the music is based on images in my head and then the photographs in turn are a negotiation between the image in my head and the music I had written. The E.P. raised many questions on the relationship between music and photography and how it can work together. I then followed these questions up with the album *Waves* [5], an exploration of atmosphere, memory, concept and the direct relationship between music and photography. This was presented in the same way as *Sunrise* with the exception of the pieces exploring the direct relationship which had only one photograph each.

Through these projects I have developed an approach to working with photography and music I call audio-photographic art, a unique form of art with its own phenomenology. This goes further than most pairings of photography with music, one does not come before the other, but they are worked on in tandem with an initial uniformity in intention. The development of the music as I write it, informs the development of ideas for the photography. Once the direction has become clear, the photographs are taken and processed. Inevitably the photography does not exactly fit the original intention and the rest of the music is shaped by the direction the photography has taken. This negotiation between the two mediums creates a closer relationship where the music does not serve to enhance the photography and the photography does not serve to enhance the music, they both come together as equals in a single artwork.

### 3. Time, Narrative & Photography

To understand the unique phenomenology of audio-photographic art, particularly in the context of the related but different art of music and the moving image, issues of time and narrative should be understood. Roland Barthes claimed that photography is a 'defeat of time' [6], capturing a single moment, trapping it in the frame of a photograph, its pure essence or noeme as 'that-has-been' [6]. He calls this trapped moment 'the pose', here defined as an approach to looking at a photograph: 'the thought of that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye'. Barthes sees the pose as key to differentiating between the moving image and photography:

...the Photograph's noeme deteriorates when this Photograph is animated and becomes cinema: in the Photograph, something has posed in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever (that is my feeling); but in cinema, something has passed in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images: it is a different phenomenology, and therefore a different art which begins here, though derived from the first one. (p.78) [6]

Barthes' analysis highlights an important difference between photography and the moving image; the distinction between his use of 'pose' and 'passing' is in movement through time. In his critique of Bergson in *Cinema 1*, Deleuze [7] describes movement in cinema as being something temporal rather than spacial. Similarly Barthes talks about the 'continuous series of images', creating movement through time. This movement through time is not as a series of still images which have an abstract movement added to them but the intermediary images that the continuous series creates in our perception already existing with movement [7]. This is what Deleuze refers to as the 'movement-image' [7]. The very nature of the movement-image inherently creates a narrative through time which widens our knowledge of what we know to be true within the spacial and temporal frame.

Narrative is key to understanding the different aesthetic and perceptual concerns of the moving image and the photograph when combined with music. The relationship between narrative and time however, is not as simple as it initially seems. Paul Ricoeur proposed a theory on narrative and time in his essay 'Narrative Time' [8] where he claims that all narrative occurs through time. In it he explores narrative time in relation to written plot. He identifies three levels of interaction between public time, although only two are relevant here: the time the audience experiences, and narrative time. The first is the time within the narrative, an abstract 'within-time' in which the audience is swept up: the internal time of the literature. The time is presented historically but the audience is subject to their 'thrownness' in the story, i.e. going with the flow of the writing in the abstract moment rather than experiencing it in a clear historic timeline as it is represented. The second level of interaction he identifies is the placing of the narrative within the external time of the audience, the 'real' time as they read [8]. These narrative

interactions can be applied to the visual narrative of photography, the internal 'within-time' of the photograph is an image of the past that appears to be frozen in time. The narrative of the photograph does not move, however, the audience is, just as in written narrative, swept up in the 'thrownness' of the image: lost in the infinite abstract moment. Meanwhile the 'external time' is the time in which the audience dwells upon the image, an amount of time that, unlike cinema or phonography, is not controlled by a set timeframe. The photograph's position in this external time is dependent on the audience.

Applying Ricoeur's theory on narrative time seems problematic at first glance. The narrative in the photograph is a stolen moment from the past and does not appear to have its own movement through time as Ricoeur claims. To further develop and resolve the application of Ricoeur's theory of narrative and time to photography, it should be looked at in the context of Deleuze's theory of repetition. Deleuze uses Hume's theory that '[r]epetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it' [9] as a basis for his investigation. He separates the temporal way in which the mind reacts to repetition into two categories: passive and active synthesis. Passive synthesis is the creation of time by the mind as an immediate reaction to the succession of abstract moments. This time encompasses both the past as it 'contracts' (briefly remaining in the imagination) and the future as the expectation of repetition of the abstract moment [9]. In the photograph this is the synthesis of time in the frozen image of the past: this creates repetition, the infinite repetition of the still image, and difference, the passing of time changing the perception of the image in the viewers mind. This can be seen as an extension of the first interaction with public time that Ricoeur refers to: 'within-time', the internal time of the narrative. The audience is subject to their 'thrownness' in the image, reacting in the abstract moment, synthesising the 'within-time' of the photograph, not as a historical narrative but as instant reactions to the moment.

Deleuze's active synthesis is when instant reaction turns to contemplation. The future element of passive synthesis, expectation, turns to 'reflexive prediction'. The past element, retention, turns to 'reflexive representation' in the separate temporal space of the memory. This synthesis of time (that relies on memory and understanding) is no longer in the abstract moment but becomes a part of the historicising or 'levelling off' of 'within-time' into 'ordinary time' that Ricoeur talks about in 'Narrative Time' [8], forming connections with past experiences rather than the localised temporal space. This forms a part of the second relationship with public time that Ricoeur refers to, the external time of the audience: placing the narrative into the collective history and context of those that experience the photography. Each person who views the photograph takes a unique amount of time dependent on their own memories, understanding, context and how they use these to interpret the narrative of the photograph.

The active and passive synthesis of time however, are not necessarily directly opposed to each other. My own experience of audio-photographic art, whether intentional or not, has often been of both these forms of temporal synthesis acting at the same time. The passivity of 'thrownness' and getting lost in the abstract

moment whilst also actively accessing memories and retrospectively historicising the experience. Jaques Derrida calls this active/passive relationship 'auto-affectation', the act of affecting the self [10]. In this case the active accessing of memory in reaction to the sound and image affects your 'thrownness' in the image and immediate reaction to the abstract moment, constantly re-contextualising the experience.

Derrida's reading of time is key to his understanding of photography. He sees time as auto-affective [11]: something in which we are passive, letting it pass over us but we also actively affect. He analyses photography in the same way; the camera passively recording time but actively affecting/negotiating with it through artistic decisions before it is even printed such as shutter speed and digital processing. Here, photography is 'dealing with' time, altering it but leaving its basic truth of time recorded intact [11]. This analysis problematises Barthes' view that the photograph is the ineffaceable truth of a single moment captured forever by showing that the photograph is in fact an amount of time recorded and presented as a single moment. Its truth is still self evident however, the artistic process of taking a photograph has intervened in this 'reality'. The infinitely repeating recorded time that the photograph represents is still presented as the single 'moment' in a still image and therefore the active/passive synthesis of time will still create a unique aesthetics which will have a unique effect on the audience.

This creates a narrative-time relationship with music that the moving image cannot have to the same extent. When viewing the moving image, the audience's perception and interpretation of narrative is guided by the movement of the frame through time and, often, space. What happens within this frame is true, and using the signifiers in the frame, the narrative constructed in the mind is likely to align itself with the intentions of the artist. Of course no two people will interpret it the same way, but shared cultural values can lead to a general consensus on meaning. In audio-photographic art, each piece is far more open to interpretation. The static narrative of the photography, open to contemplation combined with the music creates an all together different effect. As each audience member contemplates the photography, memories unique to themselves will inform and add to their interpretation. Here the effect on the audience is not entirely guided by the artist but also by the audience themselves and their own memories. This gives audio-photographic art the potential to forge much stronger emotional connections with the audience. To me this is very important as the value of the arts is not in financial gain or even creative innovation but its real effect on people. In this way art is relevant to anyone and everyone.

#### **4. In Practice**

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the theory and applied to my creative practice. Firstly the very act of presenting photography and music as a single audio-photographic artwork is a new approach, going beyond a supplementary relationship with chance dictating the likelihood of a strong emotional reaction and towards something more symbiotic. The audio-

photographic experience I had with Nine Inch Nails' *The Fragile* [1] demonstrates how the combination of music and photography can have an emotional effect. The unique temporal properties of the photograph allow me to get lost in the image, subject to my 'thrownness'. This leads to the second conclusion: the temporal nature of an audio-photographic experience creates a distinct effect exemplified again in my reaction to *The Fragile* [1]. Over time, the infinite repetition of the photograph creates active synthesis, allowing different recollections of the past associated with the blurred images of flowers to come to the fore. My memories shift in tandem with the atmosphere of the music, each track creating a new context for the photography. Through this experience I forged a strong and unique emotional connection to *The Fragile* [1], not just with a single track but the album and artwork as a single piece of art, each track highlighting different elements of the photography and accessing more memories. Here however, the album is now presented as an audiovisual work but as music with supplementary images. The occurrence of the audiovisual phenomena came down to chance; it was chance that I had those memories that I identified with the images; it was chance that at the time I identified with the angst of the music; it was chance that I discovered the album at a time when the contrast and combination of the memories and music could have had the most potent effect. Finally, it is clear that to increase the chances of this phenomena occurring and strengthen its effect, the theory of audio-photographic art should be applied coherently and consistently to audiovisual composition. This is what I have aimed to do on my album *Waves* [9].



Figure 2. 'Rooftop'



Figure 3. 'Rooftop'

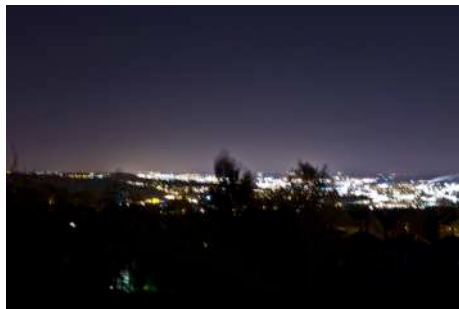


Figure 4. 'Rooftop'

In 'Rooftop' on *Waves* [9] I have used three photographs accompanied by six minutes of music (figures 2, 3 & 4). Here I have applied many of the ideas of audio-photographic art in the process of composition and taken them further than was possible with *The Fragile* [2]. When creating audio-photographic art, it is possible to take advantage of its unique aesthetics to increase the chances of active synthesis and the triggering of memories. The visual narrative (an evening cityscape) of 'Rooftop' is one that many will be familiar with and able to project their own interpretations and memories upon. Without the temporal and/or spacial context that the moving image supplies, this culturally common image will have its own connotations for each individual audience member, especially if the viewer/listener recognises the city. The use of a common/open visual narrative can mean that rather than forcing my authorial vision onto the audience, they can interpret and react to the images in their own way. This approach is extended to the sound part of the piece: the tension between noise and melody in the music also creates ambiguity - the major key clashing with the often perceived negativity of noise. Furthermore, 'Rooftop' does not have any lyrics: another strategy to avoid forcing narrative. This along with the other aspects previously mentioned, is designed specifically to enhance the move away from a timeline based narrative and step towards a more interactive, interpretative and inclusive art form.

Through these methods I have created a piece of art which reproduces the conditions that make the chances of an emotional connection through memory and atmosphere more likely. It is this which, for me, makes this way of creating art relevant.

## 5. References

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