



Exploring the Audiovisuality of Neo-Post-Punk Music: Dynamic Media, Art Direction and Motion Design in Undergraduate Graphic Design Education



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ABSTRACT This paper explores how concepts of audiovisuality and audiovisualization can be meaningfully integrated into undergraduate communication/graphic design education by providing a short-form case study of coursework and curricula along with examples from theory and practice. This research plants the seed for further investigation of these interdisciplinary terms in the context of design education and thus begins the process of defining and evaluating their use and situating them within these interdisciplinary domains.

Keywords: audiovisuality, audiovisualization, motion design, dynamic media

Introduction

This author first encountered the term “audiovisuality” during his studies (2015–2017) at the Dynamic Media Institute (DMI) at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Professor Jan Kubasiewicz, who founded the DMI program in 2000, used the term often. Historically, “audiovisuality” is not widely used in motion design literature, nor is it cited often. However, it is a term worthy of further consideration and examination within the domains of motion design, interaction design, graphic/communication design.

To better understand existing usage of this term, Professor Kubasiewicz was interviewed in preparation for this paper. In interviews Kubasiewicz provides boundless insights into audiovisuality as a subset of dynamic media.

Kubasiewicz responded to this query around audiovisuality and his usage of it with a focus on human perception: according to Kubasiewicz, “Audiovisuality alludes to the multisensory nature of human perception.” Going further, he states that, “It points to the two preferable modalities that contribute to our understanding of the world.” In his formulation of these views, Kubasiewicz cites the writings and practices of John Cage, Friedrich Kittler, and Walter Ong. These figures provide historical context and conceptual relevancy for the term and its contemporary use. In making a case for terms such as audiovisuality, Kubasiewicz made note of a host of forthcoming tools and technologies that could present even greater demands for its use. These, according to Kubasiewicz include, “extended reality (XR), augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR).”¹

At Merrimack College, we recently (2021) updated our Graphic Design curriculum. The most significant change to the program (a 4-year, 64-credit BA) now provides our majors with two options, or “tracks,” for more advanced coursework: the two options are *Brand Design* or *Interaction Design*. To accommodate this reformulated curriculum, we introduced one new course while merging two existing ones (along with updating several others). The newly introduced course is titled *Elements of Dynamic Media*. This foundations-level course will be a requirement for both graphic design concentrations. As the name suggests, it is based on the pedagogical style and body of research developed at the Dynamic Media Institute². The goals of this project-based introductory course are (1) building digital literacy, (2) building visual literacy, (3) building dynamic media fluency (4) developing design thinking. The other significant change was the merging of two existing classes: Animation and Motion Graphics. The two classes and their curricula were condensed into a single course titled *Motion Design*³. Together these two undergraduate courses, attempt to mirror some of the broad concerns⁴ of the DMI, which Kubasiewicz refers to as a “multidisciplinary or even antidisciplinary” program.

In preparation for this talk, the recently released book *Two Beats Ahead: What Musical Minds Teach Us About Innovation* by Panos A. Paney and R. Michael Hendrix also provides meaningful and timely context. Paney is Senior Vice President for Innovation at Berklee College of Music, and Hendrix is a Global Design Director at IDEO. Included within the book is a short profile of Kevin Grady, who, in addition to Kubasiewicz, was also interviewed for this paper. Although Grady is a notable graphic designer, his design work⁵ is not the focus here, nor is it the focus in *Two Beats Ahead*. What is essential in this context is, surprisingly, his band: *Black Plastic*. Grady is a boldly prolific and multifaceted practitioner of design and culture. For my Motion Design students he provides an excellent model for how one can embody the qualities of audiovisuality on several levels, thus providing an easily grasped mental model for design students and their work.

Teaching Audiovisuality

Paney and Hendrix, a musician and a designer, respectively, could be seen as a timely *cultural embodiment* of audiovisuality and its merits. Grady is but one figure profiled in their book which connects music, and thus the creative process to innovation. Grady is executive vice president and head of Design at FCB, America's oldest advertising agency, and the force behind Black Plastic, an eclectic music project or "band" that, in my view, could be best categorized as neo-post-punk.⁶

One intriguing aspect of audiovisuality is that it is more purely ontological than design. It suggests a quality, state, or way of being in the world distinct from "designerly" or other proximal terms. The interconnection between sound and visuals is such a broad topic that one could easily stray any number of ways with it, from synesthesia (which Kubasiewicz also mentioned in our interview) to the artful exploration of "visual music."⁷ In this short paper, the discourse around how and why design educators might formally and practically introduce audiovisuality in curricula is considered. On the topic of audiovisuality, Grady states that it is, "An immersive and useful term for designers at all levels." There are several cases where Grady's skills and sensitivities cross modalities and certainly place design beyond the visual. For example, when describing how he composes his music, Grady states that "I come up with the melodies relatively easily because I understand structure." Structure is essential to many aspects of communication design, branding, motion design, and interaction design. It is obviously essential in music composition as well. Interestingly, Grady states that "As a graphic designer, I see Black Plastic more as art direction than music" ("Black Plastic").

Breaking the Cycle

Neo-post-punk, otherwise known as post-punk revival or new wave revival, is a genre of indie rock music first developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The genre is primarily inspired by the original sounds and aesthetics of garage rock of the 1960s, new wave, and post-punk of the late 1970s and early 1980s. This author began leveraging this sub-genre of music in his teaching around 2013 when Grady (along with producer/musician André Obin) launched their band "Black Plastic."⁸ Black Plastic launched its first self-titled album in 2016—shortly after signing with the Los Angeles-based independent-label Cleopatra Records.

Inspired by the musical sub-genre of neo-post-punk and the visual qualities surrounding it⁹, in 2019, this author developed undergraduate projects that sought to contextually explore ideas around audiovisuality. As part of their coursework undergraduate Motion Design students at Merrimack College were asked to develop a stop animation projects around the genre through a prompt entitled *Breaking the Cycle*.

With the *Breaking the Cycle* project, students visually reinterpret the official music video for *Charcoal*—one of the tracks off of Black Plastic's 2018 EP Album *Stop the World*. Dave Cullen edited the original video along with Grady (Cleopatra Records). Through this project, students explore the concept of *audiovisuality* through the development of a self-captured, stop-motion-photography-based music video. Beyond "animation," the project was designed to help students delve directly into issues related to film editing, music theory, cinema, art direction, structure, and sequential composition. The project title refers to the intentional disruption of students' earlier learning—most notably more classic animation lessons around "cycles." "Breaking the cycle" as a prompt also lends

¹ Within this short, summative style essay one cannot fully extrapolate the breath of possibilities (theoretical and technological) boldly suggested by Kubasiewicz. However, to adequately frame the conversation around "audiovisuality" these cursory references are included.

² These approaches and the first ten years of the Dynamic Media Institute are chronicled in two books, *The Language of Dynamic Media* (2005) and *The Experience of Dynamic Media* (2010). Both books are edited by Kubasiewicz.

³ Readings and essay responses are assigned out of R. Brian Stone and Leah Wahlin's 2018 book *The Theory and Practice of Motion Design*.

⁴ In the outline of an unpublished work Kubasiewicz notes some of the following precepts and concerns: design for information, design for time and motion, design for interaction and data-driven/algorithmic design. Kubasiewicz subcategorizes a host of other concerns within these four broad themes.

⁵ Grady's two most well known projects are the redesign of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's nutrition facts label and a television commercial for the Truth anti-tobacco campaign (Hendricks and Paney 145).

⁶ In our interview Grady states that his music is, "not goth, but it's definitely club music for vampires." He goes on to say that perhaps it is a modern take on post-punk and/or DIY synth pop. Grady also is also not shy about sharing that the music is informed by "genuine darkness" and by that he shared the fact that he has struggled with depression throughout his life and sees music and art as a positive way to deal with it. Grady believes that much of art "comes out of darkness, and that's a good thing."

⁷ For more on this topic I recommend *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 2000* by Kelly Brougher et al. (2005) published on the occasion of the traveling exhibition by the same name.

⁸ First promoted under the name "Von Black."

⁹ These qualities are detailed later in the paper.



Figure 1: Still from Black Plastic "BITE" Featuring André Obin (Official Music Video), 2021.



Figure 2: Still from Breaking the Cycle Project, Morgan Sweell, 2019.

itself to personally expressive, personal, emotive responses. While working on the project students are introduced to non-narrative animation, avant-garde cinema, image-making methods, and photographic art direction. The original *Charcoal* track runs for three minutes and 39 seconds. At 30 frames-per-second, the students capture thousands of individual black and white frames to complete the assignment.

The choice of Black Plastic as subject matter for a student-project reinterpretation was strategic. Firstly, the project exposes them to Grady, his work, and his creative/design practice. Moreover, and perhaps more pragmatically, all of Black Plastic's original music videos are shot in black and white and on sets or locations that likely did not require significant production budgets. In addition, the video editing techniques employed in the videos (cuts that match the beat of the music) make for easily grasped audiovisual connections. The solid and steady downbeats and clear sections of the music easily translate to visual motifs, responses, and "scenes" or even vice-versa.¹⁰ Lastly, each video makes strong use of graphic visual composition within the cinematic frame. (See Figures 1–2).

According to the interviews with Grady, he is involved in various capacities with each music video—sometimes editing them himself, sometimes only conceptualizing them, and sometimes directing them. For the Breaking the Cycle project, these constraints (black and white, limited budgets, and a focus on editing and composition) keep the students focused on foundational concepts of sequential non-or-limited narrative composition. Adding to this constraint is the requirement that students use stop motion photography/animation. By using black and white stop motion photography and almost any non-linear editing tool, students are freed from being attached to a particular software tool or technology. With the project, both the instructor and the students can then focus on audiovisuality as a core objective and lecture topic. With this in mind, the students are asked to make visibly¹¹ strong connections between the music and their edited animations. The introduction of this project within the Motion Design course worked quite favorably in that it has helped remove technical and conceptual barriers to entry, especially for non-design majors. And for design majors it has helped make the transitions to more advanced motion design work more seamless and intuitive. The Breaking the Cycle project takes motion/cinematography down to the very basics by quite literally beginning with single visual frames, and expressively sequencing of them to music/sound.

¹⁰ In our interview Grady cited a collaboration between the American minimal techno producer Troy Pierce and the Columbian audiovisual artist Natalia Escobar (aka Poison Arrow) where the album was conceived in reverse: first they created the videos and then they wrote the music "together" inspired by the videos.

¹¹ In our interview Kubasiewicz makes note of how we use language based on the visual to denote understanding. "I see" for example is a metaphor for "I understand."

¹² Here Kubasiewicz and Lucid paraphrase several points from Christopher Pullman's 2005 essay "Some things change..." (Heller 2005)

Conclusion

This short paper explores theoretical and practical usage of audiovisuality within the context of graphic design and motion design education. By integrating these concepts into an introductory stop motion music video project, undergraduate students at Merrimack College developed contextually rich motion design responses based on this specific musical sub-genre. Simultaneously, they are exposed to a designer who embodies audiovisuality in his cultural output and creative practice.

In the conclusion of the sixth chapter of *Two Beats Ahead*, just after the reference to Grady, Panay and Hendrix make the following note:

An early title of this chapter was “Performing.” But as we wrote, we realized that performance isn’t the right way to describe this. We are always performing: in our jobs, in our relationships, on the internet. But what a great performer is looking for and creating in audiences isn’t about the show. It’s about something much deeper: exploring what we believe, imagining together, sharing an experience. (147)

Using Grady’s work and Kubasiewicz’ language students explore interdisciplinary ways of thinking, doing, and being. Students share in Grady’s audiovisual experience. This research seeks to connect the theoretical ideas of Kubasiewicz with the creative practice of Grady. As is noted at the outset of this paper, Kubasiewicz suggests audiovisuality is centered upon perception. With this in mind audiovisuality can help students develop skills and competencies that including design for or as an aid in perception, and for many students it forges the first formal realization of motion design as a dynamic, powerful and expressive medium.

In the 2016 Proceedings for MODE, Kubasiewicz (along with Brian Lucid) stated that “the communication design profession and its supporting educational programs have been required to shift their focus—and vocabulary—to remain relevant and appropriate in the context of new technologies. Fixed became fluid, passive became responsive, and what was once composed must now be choreographed.”¹² This paper suggests that accommodating these shifts will necessitate changes and additions to our shared vocabulary. Based on the pedagogical research of this author “audiovisuality” is well-positioned for increased use in motion design education. Furthermore, as the foci of communication designers continue to shift, the interrelation of these media will become ever more salient and will thus require ever-new language. Audiovisuality as a term/concept serves as a logical and comprehensible heuristic for understanding, describing, and perceiving sequential composition across these two senses.

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Dan Vlahos is a Boston-based designer, artist, and educator. He is currently Assistant Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Merrimack College, where he teaches in the undergraduate Graphic Design program. Vlahos is presently on the Board of Directors for AIGA Boston and is also serving on the Design Museum Foundation Council. Vlahos’ interdisciplinary design work has been recognized by the AIGA, the One Club, Print, the Interactive Media Council, and others. Vlahos began his career as a designer in Arnold Worldwide’s Volkswagen Design Group. Following his time at Arnold, Vlahos served as Creative Director for the architecture firm Shepley Bulfinch. Vlahos’ clients include Harvard University, Duke University, Educators for Social Responsibility, and the Industrial History Center. Dan received an MFA and BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where he began teaching in 2009 and was promoted to Assistant Professor in 2016. In 2017 Vlahos joined Merrimack College in a tenure-track appointment within the School of Liberal Arts. Vlahos’ design research interests center upon learning through design, design as empowerment, and dynamic media. In 2020 Merrimack College named Vlahos a Presidential Fellow in the College’s Interdisciplinary Institute, and in 2021 he was named a Design Incubation Fellow.

