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Early Music Videos and the Visual Music Scene

FACT's exhibition *The Art of Pop Video* charts the history of the music video back to its beginnings. Dr Holly Rogers, Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Liverpool explores some of the key early combinations of music and moving image.

26 March 2013

It's commonly believed that the rise of MTV during the 80s kick-started the visual music revolution that changed how we think of music and the moving image. But the combination of music with moving image can be placed on a well-trodden path that goes back to the earliest recorded artistic endeavours.

After becoming popularised in the work of Wagner during the nineteenth century, the notion that image and music could combine so closely as to form a new audiovisual artform was taken up with great gusto by filmmakers in the early twentieth century. During the 20s, Berlin became a particular hub for filmed visual music. Pioneer Hans Richter created intensely rhythmic films by using musical forms to direct the flow of his abstract moving images; something he referred to as "instrumental themes". The interesting thing about films such as *Rhythmus 21* (1921) is that Richter thought his images were so musical that sound was no longer needed for the finished film.

Although Richter's contemporary Walther Ruttmann also used abstract images, he commissioned new music to be performed during his films. For *Lichtspiel No 1 (also 1921)*, he asked his friend Max Butting to compose a string quartet for visualisation and describes the results as resting "somewhere inbetween music and painting".

But it is the beautiful, colourful play of Oskar Fischinger's audiovisual animations that most people think of in relation to early visual music. Fischinger is perhaps best known for his work on the "Toccata and Fugue" scene from Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). However, Fischinger wasn't happy with the results and later took his name off the credits before the film was released. Fischinger insisted that his images were not meant to be "translated music, because music doesn't need to be translated on the screen": rather, they were meant to enter into a conversation with the music in order to create something totally new. You can see his hand-drawn animated dialogue with Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody in his 1938 film *An Optical Poem* where music and image constantly dance around each other, but never descend into empty repetition.

The work of the early visual artists had a great impact on later filmmakers, through Norman McLaren, the Whitney Brothers and Stan Brakhage. But you can also see their influence in many recent music videos, where music and image are often rhythmically coordinated, yet retain their own narrative. Other videos reference early visual music directly, such as Michel Gondry's video for The Chemical Brothers' *Star Guitar*, which is a tribute to Ruttmann's 1927 film, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and many of David Lynch's music videos.

The Art of Pop Video exhibition is at FACT until 26 May. [Find out more here.](#)

[Click here](#) for more information about Holly's book *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music*.



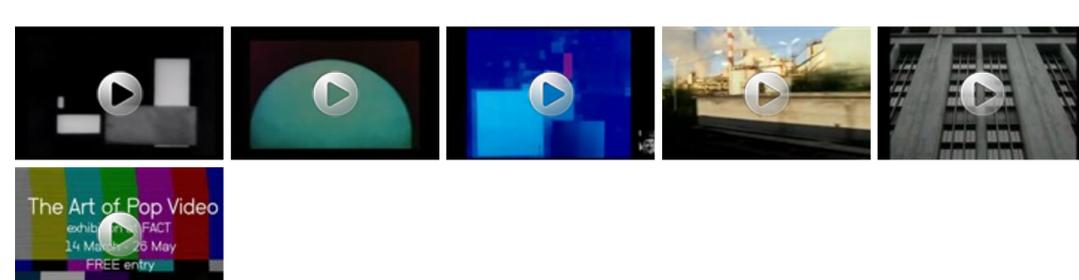
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