

Henry Keazor

—“... if you could see it, then you'd understand?”

—Visual Music in
Mark Romanek/
Coldplay,
Speed of Sound

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"A new art—the picturesque of sound"

Musical live performance and music video have become more and more entwined in the recent past—a tendency that also reflects the fact that they are fundamentally and intrinsically connected by a common legacy: historically music video has developed out of forms close to theatrical performances such as the Eidophusikon, a mechanical picture theater developed by the Anglo-French painter Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg and presented for the first time in his house in London at Leicester Square on February 26, 1781. Here, actions such as storms and shipwrecks (the usual subjects of de Loutherbourg's paintings, who therefore called his invention a "movable canvas") were combined with music and sound on a small stage.¹ His efforts were applauded by another painter, the Englishman William Henry Pyne, who in 1823, remembering a visit to the Eidophusikon in 1786, not only praised the realistic appearance of de Loutherbourg's simulations of nature, but hailed the scenic designer and colleague as having "introduced a new art—the picturesque of sound."²

Other predecessors of the music video, such as Thomas Alva Edison's Kinetophone from 1891, attempted to provide a substitute for live performances by giving users the possibility to follow e.g. a famous singer's opera appearance while comfortably sitting at home, listening to the voice and watching "every feature and expression"³ on the singer's face and seeing all his actions. This strategy was taken up not only 80 years later by pop groups such as ABBA and Queen, who used music videos as substitutes for live performances in the early 1970s, but was also used as early as the 1940s and 1960s by musical stars thanks to visual jukeboxes such as the so-called Soundies and Scopitones.⁴

Given these strong links between live and filmed appearances in the history and the genesis of music video, it perhaps doesn't come as such a surprise that the entanglement between these two forms of an artist's presence has recently become even tighter. This is due on the one hand to technical developments such as the wide screens used during concerts, where not only close-up images of the live action on the—for some visitors very remote—stage are projected to bridge the distance between the musicians and the audience, but where, increasingly, also portions or even entire versions of music videos are shown. On the other hand the technical possibility to revise and edit film clips in real time has largely sustained their use for live creations: in discos and clubs an increasing number of visual jockeys mix visual material spontaneously into new sequences that follow the played music's flow.

In 2003, MTV launched a program called *Mash*, which presented new music videos resulting from mixing not only songs, but also their videos. The renowned film director Peter Greenaway resorted to this form in June 2005 when further developing his cinematic project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* by using scenes from the three feature films as material for a VJ performance in Amsterdam clubs during a visual art club evening organized by the Dutch VJ label NoTV Visual Music.

1 See Ralph Gilmore Allen, *The Stage Spectacles of Philip James de Loutherbourg*. New Haven, Conn.: PhD diss., Yale University, 1960; Rüdiger Joppien, *Die Szenenbilder Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourgs: Eine Untersuchung zu ihrer Stellung zwischen Malerei und Theater*. Cologne: PhD diss., University of Cologne, 1972, pages 342–366; Richard Daniel Altick, *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978, pages 119–127; Birgit Verwiebe, *Lichtspiele: Vom Mondscheintransparent zum Diorama*. Stuttgart: Füsslin, 1997, pages 31–34; and Anno Mungen, "BilderMusik": *Panoramen, Tableaux vivants und Lichtbilder als multimediale Darstellungsformen in Theater- und Musikaufführungen vom 19. bis zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert*. Remscheid: Gardez!, 2006, 2 Vols.: Vol. 1, pages 168–175.

2 Italics in the original: Ephraim Hardcastle (pseudonym of William Henry Pyne), *Wine and Walnuts: or, After Dinner Chit-Chat*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823, 2 Vols.: Vol. 1, page 296.

3 This is an announcement published in 1891 by Edison, quoted here after Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution 1926–1930*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, page 26. For the context see: Henry Keazor, Thorsten Wübbena, *Video Thrills the Radio Star: Musikvideos: Geschichte, Themen, Analysen*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007, page 57.

4 See Keazor, Wübbena, *Video Thrills the Radio Star*, 2007, pages 57–66.

Here, he mixed 92 *Tulse Luper* “stories” in real time to music by DJ Serge Dodwell (a.k.a. Radar) and projected them on 12 screens in a multi-screen way. Greenaway, who said that thus he felt as a “real-time image conductor,” “freed [...] from classic cinematographic linearity,” has been so successful with this performance that he has gone on a still ongoing world tour with it.⁵

Given this strong give-and-take relationship between the two basic forms (a live event accompanied by a music video, projected onto a huge screen behind the stage, and a live performance consisting of mixed film material, spontaneously composed together with the played music to a form of visual music), it is obvious that they can be taken further by combining them. In 2001, for example, the choreographer Frédéric Flamand presented his ballet *Body Work Leisure* during the Festival de Dance of Cannes; the piece was conceived in collaboration with French architect Jean Nouvel. Here, Compagnie Charleroi dancers interacted spontaneously not only with previously recorded video sequences to played music, but also with live shots of themselves, dissolved into each other and creating images where different layers and viewpoints were mixed into one.⁶ It is also interesting to see that by now some of the spontaneously mixed visual jockey performances have been filmed, edited, and made available on DVD so that they, in turn, have made the step from a spontaneous live event to a recorded and retouched production.⁷ This shows that the boundaries between live and recorded, carefully planned and spontaneously mixed media have become increasingly flexible and permeable, and it was just a question of time before some of the aesthetic elements of the recorded live sessions would find their way into the music video.

“Mixing filmmaking with live concert showmanship”⁸

It is perhaps no accident that one of the most prominent examples of this has been provided by director Mark Romanek. In his videos, produced from 1986 to the present and encompassing artists ranging from ABC, David Bowie, Madonna, Michael and Janet Jackson to Nine Inch Nails, Johnny Cash, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Jay-Z, Romanek has not only always shown an awareness for music video’s general history and genesis, but obviously reviews the visual past and record of artists when working with them, to get a feeling for the image and visual language already associated with them. Thus, he designed the clip for Michael and Janet Jackson’s “Scream” in 1995 as a response to the earlier videos shot for Michael Jackson by other directors.⁹ His efforts went in a similar, although ultimately slightly different direction when designing the music video to the song “Speed of Sound” by the band Coldplay in May 2005. The track was the first single from their third album *X & Y*, which was released a month later. On the one hand Romanek sets his clip in the already established tradition of the band’s earlier videos by choosing a context showing the musicians performing their song seemingly live: in almost all videos prior to Romanek’s, the band had been shown performing.¹⁰

5 See <http://www.notv.com/>

6 Documented e.g. in the film by Ludovica Riccardi, *Le chorégraphe et l'architecte* (2003).

7 See for this—among others—the examples listed in Keazor, Wübbena, *Video Thrills the Radio Star*, 2007, page 12.

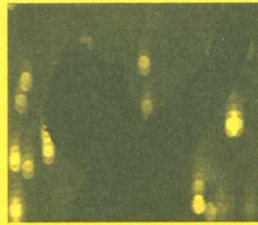
8 Alison Johns, “Coldplay Sees the Light,” in *Film & Video*, July 1, 2005, published: <http://www.studiodaily.com/filmandvideo/projects/f/musicvideos/4457.html>, date of access: August 20, 2008, in her characterization of Romanek’s clip for Coldplay.

9 See the analysis provided in Keazor, Wübbena, *Video Thrills the Radio Star*, 2007, pages 344–357.

10 The only exception being Tim Hope’s clip for “Don’t Panic” (February 2001) and the alternative American version for “Trouble” by Tim Hope (October 2001) as opposed to the videos for “Shiver” by Grant Gee (April 2000), “In My Place” by Sophie Muller (June 2002) and “Clocks” by Paul Shyvers (November 2002). Even a clip such as Jamie Thraves’ video for “God Put a Smile Upon Your Face” from 2003 not only shows narrative scenes, but intersperses them with images of the performing band. Though not showing the whole band performing, the concentration of videos for “Yellow” by James & Alex (June 2000) and “The Scientist” by Jamie Thraves (October 2002) is at least focused entirely on lead singer Chris Martin, who is shown each time as he appears to perform the song.

Ill. 1a
Still from Mark Romanek/Coldplay,
Speed of Sound, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

Ill. 1a



Ill. 1b
Dr. H. Hein, *Synaesthetic Visions on Music* by Edvard Grieg, 1927,
Ill. taken from Georg Anschütz,
Farbe-Ton-Forschungen,
Leipzig, Akademische Verlagsgesell-
schaft, 1927

Ill. 1b



Ill. 2
Still from Mark Romanek/Coldplay,
Speed of Sound, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

Ill. 3a
Still from Mark Romanek/Coldplay,
Speed of Sound, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

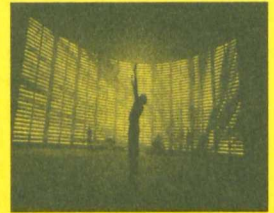
Ill. 3b/c
Max Gehlsen, *Synaesthetic Visions on Music* by Richard Wagner, 1927,
Ill. taken from Georg Anschütz,
Farbe-Ton-Forschungen,
Leipzig, Akademische Verlagsgesell-
schaft, 1927

Ill. 2



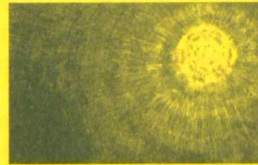
Ill. 4a
Still from Grant Gee/Coldplay, *Shiver*,
2000, © Parlophone EMI Records/
Hammer & Tongs

Ill. 3a

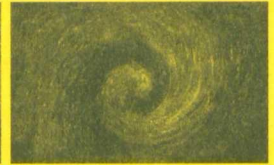


Ill. 4b
Still from Mark Romanek/
Coldplay, *Speed of Sound*, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

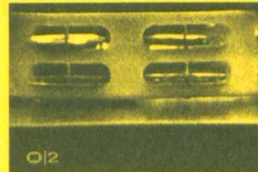
Ill. 3b



Ill. 3c



Ill. 4a



Ill. 4b



Filmed in a concert-like setting, the musicians are “playing” their instruments while frontman Chris Martin appears to sing the lyrics. And as during a performance, the musicians also move in dance-like stances to their music. They are calm and almost meditative at the beginning, then become more and more expressive and violent. A giant Venetian blind-like rack serves as the backdrop, which then—fitting the performative context—turns out to be a huge, curved view-screen behind the band, reminiscent of the aforementioned screens used during live concerts. But unlike these models, the screen doesn’t show clips from music videos or close-ups of the band (the latter duty is fulfilled by Romanek’s video itself): it rather consists of 640 LED light bars programmed to be triggered by the music and displaying colors and abstract patterns throughout the performance in synchrony with it.¹¹

The primary aesthetic guidelines according to which the screen was programmed stand in the old tradition of familiar synesthetic correspondences, which—in the history of attempts to create visual music—are also very often used as basic rules for any effort to parallel acoustic and optical phenomena. When the music during the song’s opening is still low—carried mostly by Chris Martin’s voice and accompanying piano, synthesizer, and drums—the wall remains dark. It only springs into action after the music has gained drive and volume, with the other instruments loudly joining in. As the song develops its dramatic curve, the screen is increasingly illuminated by small lights, which then also form moving shapes and patterns. When Martin sings “Look up, I look up at night / Planets are moving at the speed of light,” he not only looks up, but a slight rain of white light comes dribbling down the wall, like a shower of falling stars (Ill. 1a). As the music further unfolds, blue and red stripes begin to flow horizontally across the screen, and when the song reaches its first dynamic and dramatic climax with Martin’s high-pitched voice singing the refrain about “all that noise, and all that sound,” the wall seems to suddenly explode in a bright cloud of intense white, blue, and red light (Ill. 2). Then the pattern of a vortex-like tunnel unfolds out of roaring streams of light when the lyrics mention the “birds [...] flying at the speed of light” (Ill. 3a). Martin—who has previously reacted to the words “noise” and “sound” by capping his ears—now spreads his arms like wings.

In the song’s further development this rhythm of floating shapes, light explosions, and vortex is repeated, showing that the visuals represent distinct portions of the music, while additional and warmer colors (green and yellow) appear. The vortex ultimately shines in gold and the patterns on the screen dissolve into a rainbow of blurs and a colorful confetti-like rain. Not only the way light, colors, and movements are synchronized with the music rely on familiar synesthetic parallels (with dark, still scenes fitting to low, soft music while intense light and colors as well as heavy movement are the visual equivalent to loud and dynamic sound), but the forms created on the view-screen also seem to be in accord with synesthetic perceptions.

In the late 1920s, the German psychologist and musicologist Georg Anschütz collected paintings and drawings synesthetically gifted people had made while listening to music and trying to capture their sound-triggered visions.¹² Some of the

11 For the technical background see the articles by Johns, “Coldplay Sees the Light,” 2005, and James Montgomery, “Coldplay Went into ‘Sound’ Video Virtually Blind: VMAs behind the Camera,” August 15, 2005, published: <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1507607/20050815/index.jhtml?headlines=true>, date of access: August 20, 2008.

12 Georg Anschütz, *Farbe-Ton-Forschungen*. Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1927, and *Das Farbe-Ton-Problem*. Halle: Marhold, 1929. For Anschütz and his research see Daniel Müllensiefen, entry “Anschütz, Georg,” in Ludwig Finscher (ed.), *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999, Vol. 1, col. 753, and the obituary by Albert Wellek “In memoriam Georg Anschütz,” in *Die Musikforschung* 7, 1954, pages 199–201.

Ill. 5a
Still from Paul Shyvers/Coldplay,
Clocks, 2002,
© Parlophone EMI Records

Ill. 5b/c
Still from Steven Spielberg, *Close
Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977,
© Columbia Pictures Industries
1977/1980

Ill. 6a
Still from Paul Shyvers/Coldplay,
Clocks, 2002,
© Parlophone EMI Records

Ill. 6b
Still from Mark Romanek/Coldplay,
Speed of Sound, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

Ill. 7a
Still from Sophie Muller/Coldplay,
Trouble, 2000,
© Parlophone EMI Records

Ill. 7b
Still from Mark Romanek/Coldplay,
Speed of Sound, 2005,
© Parlophone EMI Records/
Anonymous Content

Ill. 5a



Ill. 5b



Ill. 5c



Ill. 6a



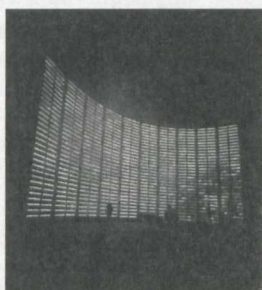
Ill. 6b



Ill. 7a



Ill. 7b



forms documented there show a certain similarity to the patterns chosen by Romanek (Ill. 1b, 3b, 3c). It appears as if the director, renowned for his meticulous preparation, has drawn some inspiration from them.¹³

But the Coldplay song is not only interpreted with the help of these synesthetic choices in colors and shapes: the camerawork (Harris Savides) as well as the editing (by Adam Pertofsky) also play very important parts in the video, because they likewise try to translate the music's dynamics into visuals. Thus, in the beginning, when the music is still soft and low, the clip shows longer, less edited scenes of the musicians playing their instruments. But the frequency of the cuts increases throughout the song's development. The same holds true concerning the camera: while it first stands still and records the band from a fixed viewpoint, it then begins to move, shooting from oblique angles, eventually starts to dance to the sounds, and finally parallels even its own dynamics to those of the music. When e.g. the end of a musical phrase is indicated by a guitar chord (minute 3:23), the camera tilts aside, cutting off the flow of images and thus underlining the end of a sequence also on the visual level—a movement accompanied by images of Martin, who blocks his own view by holding his hands in front of his face, thus also indicating an interruption. Or, when Martin emphatically sings about "All that noise, and all that sound," capping his ears in order to show how loud these noises and sounds are, the camera starts to vibrate as if shuddered by the impact of the sound waves hitting it.

All this continues on the level of the chosen camera views: with the muted opening of the song, the clip brings the viewer into an almost intimate proximity to Martin, picked up out of the darkness only by some soft indirect lighting. Here, the audience is even granted the opportunity to "sit" next to Martin and observe his hands in close-up as he accompanies himself on the piano. Later, when the volume, speed, and dynamics of the song have fully developed, these "intimate close-ups"¹⁴ are exchanged for wide shots of the room which—showing the vastness of the screen and the room that dwarfs the band—correspond to the height and width of the tonal as well as dynamic space in the music. As already shown, this interpretation of the sound is backed up by elements of the clip which react to the lyrics, such as Martin's gestures or the patterns on the screen.

"Trademarks"

Sometimes the video's different layers—music, lyrics, the light-wall, camera-angle, and editing—are even juxtaposed, e.g. when words are sung that talk about "all those signs, I knew what they meant. [...] Some get made, and some get sent" to the sound of a pickered guitar while the visuals show tight close-ups of the LED light bars, dissolving them into colorful light dots and luminous, horizontal strings of pearls that seem to represent the mysterious "signs" mentioned twice in the lyrics (first as "the sign that I couldn't read," then as "all those signs, I knew what they meant").¹⁵

13 Illustrated here are 1) Plate XIX, 2; 2) Plate IV, 1 and 3 from Anschütz, *Farbe-Ton-Forschungen*, 1927. They show synesthetic visions experienced and then depicted by 1) the teacher Dr. Heinrich Hein while listening to Edvard Grieg's piece "Wedding Day at Troldhaugen" and 2) by the painter Max Gehlsen while listening to (1) Richard Wagner's "Magic Fire Music" from *The Valkyrie* resp. (3) to Wagner's "Isolde's Love-Death" from *Tristan and Isolde*.

14 As Romanek calls them in his original treatment, which can be read on Romanek's old website: http://www.markromanek.com/video/24_treatment.html, date of access: August 20, 2008.

15 Seen like this, they recall the colorful, abstract horizontal patterns used in the video for the title "Little Black Rocks in the Sun" by Add N to (X), done in 1998 for the production company Trash 2000 by directors Nick Abrahams and Michael Tomkins—a comparison which is inasmuch fitting as electronic pieces like "Little Black Rocks in the Sun" and its likewise "electronic" video are considered by a film critic such as Chris Darke exactly under the aspect of their inherent synesthetics and relationship to the place of their reception, i.e. a performance in a club. See for this Darke's comments in the fourth episode of the TV show *Fantastic Voyages: Befreite Bilder* (2000), produced by Christoph Dreher and Rotraut Pape. Moreover, the whole light wall, with its colorful, sometimes abstract patterns, can also be put into a relation to the art design of the Coldplay album *X & Y* and of the covers of the singles, first among them "Speed of Sound." They are all based on the digital code, developed in 1870 by Émile Baudot. By using five-bit sequences, this code generates a binary representation for each letter or character in the western alphabet. The titles of both the album and the single were thus translated into a series of colorful blocks and columns.

Here, the viewer is at a point where at the same time Romanek hints upon earlier Coldplay videos, shot by other directors. In Grant Gee's clip for the 2000 track "Shiver," the band is simply and blandly shown in an undecorated rehearsal room, surrounded by equipment and performing the song. The camera angle mostly switches between wide shots and close-ups of the musicians, but at one point (minute 3:49) several extreme close-ups of the surrounding sound equipment are suddenly cut very briefly into the flow of the images: first two close-up views of the running tape machine that stands in the background, then a detail view of a tambourine that lies unused on one of the amplifiers in the foreground (Ill. 4a). Given that only four of the instrument's slots are shown, at first sight they rather appear like a piece of a geometric, abstract grid—their shape similar to the patterns of Romanek's high-tech blind in *Speed of Sound* with its LED slots, which are also presented in brief close-ups (Ill. 4b).

At the same time, Romanek's clip also refers to another, earlier Coldplay video shot by Paul Shyvers in 2002 for the song "Clocks," with which "Speed of Sound" musically has been compared ever since its release. Again, as in Gee's clip, a performance context was chosen, but this time the band plays in front of an audience and the video seemingly presents scenes shot during a live concert. But as the clip goes on, more and more moments reveal that the concert setting has actually been staged: some scenes such as the one with a thrown water bottle, rotating in slow motion and picturesquely leaving behind a trail of water drops, sparkling in the spotlight, could have been added later, but the fact that the audience remains strangely calm and almost immobile throughout the concert also shows that the whole setting has actually been created for the video shoot. The lighting and the thus created atmosphere (Ill. 5a) is clearly indebted to Steven Spielberg's 1977 science fiction film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where at the conclusion, during the "jam session" when humans communicate via music with alien visitors, similar constellations of an audience standing in the dark against a strongly lit stage can be seen (Ill. 5b). This reference is remarkable inasmuch as Spielberg's scene draws its imagery from the typical setting of a pop or rock concert and uses it for its depiction of the musical dialogue between aliens and humans. In order to create a visual counterpoint to this acoustic communication, production designer Joe Alves also included a giant light board behind the musician (Ill. 5c), thus "translating" the sounds into different colors, synchronized with the played music¹⁶—and looking almost like a modest forerunner to Romanek's light wall.

Moreover, throughout Shyver's video itself one discerns parallels to Romanek's clip not only concerning typically Coldplay "trademark" elements (such as Martin's jump-like dancing, also shown in other clips) or particular shots and effects used (such as slow motion), but also concerning the overall dramaturgy. Thus, as in *Speed of Sound*, *Clocks* shows the band consecutively and increasingly lit by blue, red and yellow light. Here, too, the refrain is (literally) highlighted by an outburst of bright light. Occasionally stills taken from Shyver's video, also heavily relying on light effects, could even be mixed with stills taken from Romanek's clip, e.g. when in both cases Martin's piano-playing hands are shown in close-up or when guitarist Jonny Buckland is photographed against the backdrop of a colorfully lit grid structure, which in the case of *Clocks* is actually a metal lattice floor (Ill. 6a), while in *Speed of Sound* it is a part of the huge light wall (Ill. 6b).

The wall itself was inspired by yet another Coldplay video, this one made by Sophie Muller in 2000 for the song "Trouble." She presented Chris Martin as a prisoner, tied by his band mates to a chair that stands in a dark cold, humid warehouse, lit only here and there by searchlights and car headlights. The conclusion of Muller's video possibly inspired Romanek to use the giant view screen: Martin, still tied to the chair, falls to the ground and from there seemingly looks up into freedom, which is represented by a huge, dusky sky—which then, however, turns out to be nothing but a giant canvas with an image of the sky (Ill. 7a).

16 For a description of the production of the "jam session" and its elements see Bob Balaban, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind Diary*. New York: Paradise Press, 1978, page 126.

The reason Romanek drew upon the other Coldplay videos¹⁷ and deduced and abstracted elements from them is that he wanted to deliver “the most intimate, vital, and passionate performance by Coldplay yet committed to film.”¹⁸ To do so he of course had to attentively study his forerunners. But by doing so in a certain way he has also adopted the practice followed by the aforementioned VJs: instead of mixing real excerpts taken from other videos, Romanek quotes their elements and develops them further. Whereas the huge canvas with the red, white, and blue hues in Muller’s clip works more as a dramatic surprise, revealing the only glimpse of hope and freedom as actually just an illusion, Romanek uses the giant color view screen in his clip (Ill. 7b) as a means to create a visual equivalent to the music where its development and dynamics are translated into some sort of visual music. He puts the audible before the viewer’s eyes. He thus escapes, on the one hand, from a bland and trite illustration of the cryptic and poetic lyrics, and on the other hand takes up the question asked there, confronting the audience with it: “If you could see it, then you’d understand?”

17 Even the dark opening—“And so ‘Speed of Sound’ opens in the pitch-black,” as Montgomery, “Coldplay Went into ‘Sound’ Video Virtually Blind,” 2005, puts it—is referring to another Coldplay video: *Yellow* by James & Alex (June 2000), which follows Chris Martin as he performs the song throughout a sunrise at a beach, also opens in total blackness and has almost 40 seconds of darkness at the beginning.

18 Romanek in his original treatment—http://www.markromanek.com/video/24_treatment.html, date of access: August 20, 2008.