

Master Thesis

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An attempt to visually interpret a piece of music

Eesti Kunstiakadeemia

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of Master of Arts in Animation

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Abstract

This master thesis discusses and analyses the process and the result of the attempted visual interpretation of the song “Wartä” by *Einä Ninnts*¹ (Switzerland, 2020). This paper is divided into four parts. The first part contains a brief historical context around the influence of music in visual arts. The second part describes the idea and the preparation behind my attempt. The third part analyses two examples that are of significance to my work. The fourth part includes a reflection of the endresult as well as a conclusion.

¹ Link to the song: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XCwtBLTcByTY8fhx2C_xKOXgR7G0OKY-/view?usp=sharing

Introduction

“All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”

-Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*, 1873

In my written thesis I will try to contextualise and reflect the process of creating a graphical visualisation of a piece of music.

In the first chapter I will shortly address the historical context in which the connection between music and visual art gained importance and describe its impact on the development of abstract art. Additionally I will introduce the key-concept of *Synaesthesia*.

In the second chapter I will generate an overview of the idea and the concept behind my own attempt. I will shortly demonstrate my personal path towards this experiment. I will introduce the piece of music and describe my preparations that lead to the final result.

In the following chapter I will address the examples that I decided to examine for this paper. I will focus on two examples that serve as a reference for my own attempt. I will give a brief introduction to the artists and their ideas and continue with an analysis of a selected work from their oeuvre.

I will then proceed to analyse my own attempt. This chapter serves as a reflection and proposes improvements and changes for possible future projects.

In the last chapter I will conclude my findings.

The influence of music in visual art

“What stranger exercise could be inspired in the whole field of art than to make sound visible. To make available to the eyes those many pleasures which music offers to the ears.”

-Louis Bertrand Castel, early 17th century²

The possible connection between sound and vision has been a field of theoretical speculation that dates as far back as the ancient Greek. Philosophers like Aristotle and Pythagoras assumed that there must be a correlation between the musical scale and colors of the rainbow.

In the early 17th century Louis Bertrand Castel (1688-1757), French mathematician and philosopher attempted to directly translate music into the visual realm. His invention, the Ocular Harpiscord, is inspired by a musical instrument where each note was connected to a color tone. While pressing the keys, the colors would be displayed to the audience through the revelation of candles and colored glass. Castel is likewise credited with formulating the first theory which focuses exclusively on sound/color analogies which he put into practical use with his color instrument.

Later on, Italian Futurists Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra composed a series of ‘color sonatas’ to be played on a light organ similar to that of Castel. By then, electricity had been invented and each key on the organ was associated with a colored lightbulb.



A caricature of Louis-Bertrand Castel's “ocular organ” by Charles Germain de Saint Aubin

²transcribed from: Norman McLaren: Creative Process (Donald Williams, 1990)

For further information on Louis-Bertrand Castel:
Maarten Franssen; THE OCULAR HARPSICHORD OF LOUIS-BERTRAND CASTEL
The Science and Aesthetics of an Eighteenth-Century Cause Célèbre; (1991)

While early debates on visual music have been focused on clear analogies, later on music and primarily its natural condition of autonomy have played a major role in the development of Modernist Art at the beginning of the 20th Century. In the time period pre Second World War, the interest in image-sound relationship was at its high in both painting and abstract film.

Artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee as many others of their contemporaries were looking for inspiration in the field of music mainly because of its underlying principles and its sovereignty from everything outside of itself.

Therefore, many of their theoretical thoughts and writings did not propose art to be literally like music³, rather art should, according to their belief, aspire to become as independent from the outside world as music was. The strive for autonomy led both Klee's and Kandinsky's work (among many other modernist artists) on a path towards abstraction. Objects and features began more and more to serve merely as vehicles for color and form, their 'meaning' as an object surrendered to the abstract depiction of its form only.

In 1938, a group of American painters formed a unit directly inspired by theories from European Modernists. In their Manifesto one can indicate the same idea of detaching painting from objects that derived from artists like Kandinsky and Klee:

"The Transcendental Painting Group is composed of artists who are concerned with the development and presentation of various types of non-representational painting; painting that finds its source in the creative imagination and does not depend upon the objective approach."⁴

Art according to Kandinsky had to emerge out of the artist's 'inner necessity' and was to reproduce an 'internal nature' that was fundamentally different from the external one. However, he argued that both of these 'natures' were "equally great, equally powerful".⁵

This distance from external representations was aimed at a final liberation of painting itself. No longer should objects that existed inhabit the canvas, rather new harmonies should be created solely with the use of color and form.

This idea of dissonances being a form of a remote consonance, i.e. new harmony derived directly from composer and contemporary Arnold Schönberg. His atonal composition reminded Kandinsky on his own attempts to break free from the figurative tradition in painting. They later collaborated on the Blaue Reiter project in Munich. Both artists believed that abstraction was the best way available for uncovering an unseen territory of existence. About Schönberg's music Kandinsky was recorded to say: "Schönberg's music leads us into a new realm, where musical experiences are no longer acoustic, but purely spiritual. Here begins the 'music of the future'."⁶

³ "I do not want to paint music." - Wassily Kandinsky in his Cologne Lecture, 1914; <https://theoria.art-zoo.com/the-cologne-lecture-wassily-kandinsky/>

⁴ Harold Porcher: An Introduction to the Transcendental Painting Group; <https://www.swanngalleries.com/news/modern-post-war-art/2020/06/an-introduction-to-the-transcendental-painting-group/>

⁵ as qtd in: Ulrike Becks-Malorny: Kandinsky - The journey to abstraction, p.55; Köln, 1994 (Original: Kandinsky, Reminiscences; 1913)

⁶ Ulrike Becks-Malorny: Kandinsky - The journey to abstraction, p.61; Köln, 1994

This reference about possible prophetic attributes of the arts was deeply rooted in his belief that something expressed in material form could not foresee anything that has not yet been materialized. According to his theory, the one thing that could be used as a guidance towards future developments would have to be feelings coming from the spiritual realm. Therefore, spiritual art's purpose was to act as a gateway to the future.

Kandinsky himself summed up his thoughts on the relationship between the arts, and their individual journey towards independence as following:

“One art has to learn from another how it tackles its own materials and, having learned this, use in principle the materials peculiar to itself in a similar way, i.e., according to the principle that belongs to itself alone.”⁷

The content of painting should be painting alone, he considered everything outside of it as “destructive secondary sounds” if it interfered with the medium.

For Kandinsky color was “...a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul. Colour is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key.”⁸

One can see, that the vocabulary used to describe certain issues or theories about visual art, is often connected to music. Terms like ‘harmony’, ‘composition’ or ‘rhythm’ became common language to articulate ideas surrounding the visual. This new terminology manifested itself in the titles given to their creations. Kandinsky painted ten works in total entitled ‘Composition I-X’, Klee would assign his works with titles such as ‘Neue Harmonie’ or ‘Rhythmic’. Another important figure in the development of modernist abstract art, the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), employed musical genres as titles for his works, for example ‘Broadway Boogie Woogie’, or ‘Victory Boogie Woogie’.

Another contemporary and a key figure in modernist cinema as well as cameraless animation, Norman McLaren (1914-1987), had similar thoughts to Kandinsky considering abstraction and music as pointed out in the 1970 documentary “*The eye hears, the ear sees*”:

“I’ve always been interested in abstraction since the age of about 14 or 15. I think it’s a very important area too. It’s like music which is an abstraction. It’s not, it doesn’t refer to things outside of itself.”⁹

He then went on to state that his exploration of abstraction was aimed to find “visual ideas that do not refer to anything outside of themselves”.¹⁰

⁷ Ulrike Becks-Malorny: Kandinsky - The journey to abstraction, p.64; Köln, 1994

⁸ as above, p.20

⁹ *The Eye Hears, The Ear Sees*; National Film Board of Canada, 1970; <https://archive.org/details/theeyehearstheearsees/theeyehearstheearsees-reel2.mov>

¹⁰ as above

Influenced by Oskar Fischinger's 1938 film 'Optical Poems', McLaren himself started investigating abstraction in the medium of film. During his 43 year long career working at the National Film Board of Canada, he directed 50 films, most of them contained abstract elements. In his approach to the moving image he tried to eliminate all possible distractions to create an intimacy with the medium similar to that of a painter with his canvas. This viewpoint corresponds with Kandinsky's theory of 'inner necessities', that a work of art should be the product of an inner artistic voice. By removing the distance (i.e. the camera) in the artistic process, McLaren cut down the conscious control which allowed him to translate his thoughts directly onto film without indirections. The influence of Surrealist thoughts and working methods in his approach is evident.

McLaren started many of his films with a musical script, attempting to then visually 'translate' this music onto film. In another documentary on his life and work entitled *Creative Process* he indicates that he never knew what was going to happen in his films beforehand, which forced him to adapt and improvise as he was progressing. In an attempt to synchronise his visual creations with the already existing music, the music was measured and noted on the side of the 35mm celluloid as a preparation. He used this chart as a guide and then scratched or painted frame by frame directly on film.

McLaren's interest in the translation of music derived at least partly from his ability to 'see music':

"...I could visualise the equivalence of these things ((tempi, fortissimo...)) in the picture area. Things could skip and leap about joyfully or they could drag themselves tragically around. There's a whole lot of adjectives that you can apply to music and you can apply to the movement and shapes of forms in an abstract film..."¹¹

This overlapping sensory ability is called *Synaesthesia* and played a crucial role in the connection between music and art in the early 20th century. Synesthesia (Greek: syn = at the same time, aesthesia = perception) refers to the simultaneous perceptions of different sensory impressions, (ex.: seeing color while hearing sound). Among important modernist artists there were many who stated and described such a condition that French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) already emphasized in his poem 'Correspondances', published half a century before the concept became important in the visual arts:

"Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent"

"Perfumes, colors and sounds respond to each other"¹²

The idea of an interplay between the different senses to create a sensation that affects the soul similar to the way music does, was at the core of many artists intentions.

¹¹ Norman McLaren: *Creative Process* (Donald Williams, 1990). https://www.nfb.ca/film/creative_process_norman_mclaren/

¹² Charles Baudelaire: *Correspondances*; 1857; <https://bacdefrancais.net/correspondances.php>

Mary Ellen Bute, another early American abstract filmmaker added a preceding intro text to her 1936 film *Synchromy No. 2*:

"Seeing Sound

Music, in addition to pleasing the Ear brings something to the eye.

The following film is designed by a modern artist to create moods through the eye as music creates moods through the ear.

*Do you see anything like this when seeing sound?"*¹³

This embeded the whole concept of Synaesthesia and the at the time omnipresent fascination with the creation of something music alike - through visuals.

For abstract filmmakers in the 1930s, cinema was viewed as the artform that makes it possible to adress and express this synaesthesia. Artists like Len Lye, Oskar Fischinger, Norman McLaren and Mary Ellen Bute all attempted to visually transfer the effect music had on the senses to the screen. Likewise, with the help of abstraction, cinema should be freed from any outside influence and become independent, towards where cinema's content was cinema alone. One can here clearly identify ideas that first emerged in abstract painting and then later manifested in cinematic art.

¹³Mary Ellen Bute: *Synchromy No. 2* (1936); <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x58zv6>

“Wartä”: An attempt to visually interpret a piece of music

Part I:

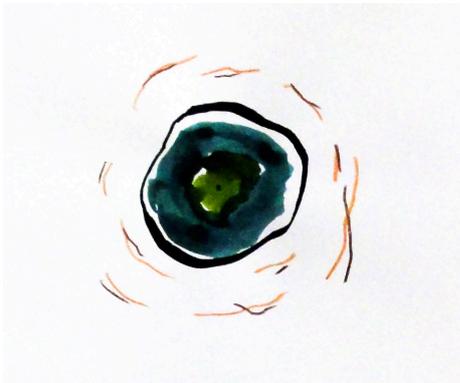
Origin / Inspiration

Ever since I started developing and implementing ideas with various instruments on paper, music had always been the main source of inspiration rather than already existing forms of visual expressions.

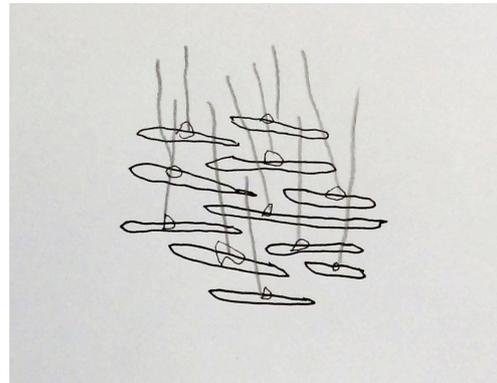
There have been three main projects that I have completed recently that were particularly of value and which all contributed their part to the attempt described in this thesis.

My latest attempt to visually interpret sound was a short music video for a song of friends which I finished in 2019¹⁴. The song consists of different loops layered onto each other and variably faded in and out over the course of 3 minutes. I intended to find correlating images to each singular sound, with the idea that I then would be able to play the same song simultaneously with my visuals.

One could compare the approach to some of Oskar Fischinger’s *Studies*¹⁵ which Luke Smythe describes as “...illustrative, with each and every visual occurrence mirroring a corresponding musical event.” The visual representations of music are directly linked to its musical equivalent. Almost all of the movements have “an intuitively predictable quality, ...”¹⁶ and therefore lack a certain feeling of spontaneity and independence.



Still I: Visual sound of a Bongo drum



Still II: Visual sound of a finger cymbal

A next project of smaller degree consisted of a task to contribute a few seconds to a collaborative music video that was intended to be screened at Monstra Animation Festival in Lisbon. For the short sequence that was given to me, I decided to animate as fast as possible without too much planning and without using the help of a light table. This approach left little control to me and gave the lines a feeling of vitality and unpredictability that I became interested in. The final image was then digitally inverted, creating white lines on a black background which visually reminded on images directly scratched in film.

¹⁴ Racoon & Radio Kasio - Apple on the tree: <https://vimeo.com/360256514>

¹⁵ Example: Oskar Fischinger *Study No. 6 (1930)*; <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm4980980>

¹⁶ Luke Smythe: Image and Music in the Direct Films of Len Lye, p.5; *The Journal of New Zealand Art History*; 2006

A third project included a large piece of paper on which I intended to draw a short film, meaning each frame would be located directly next to its preceding as well as to its following one, similar to a strip of analogue film. As I didn't divide the paper in equally sized sections, each frame visually interacted with all its surroundings and it generated an overall look that felt engaging.

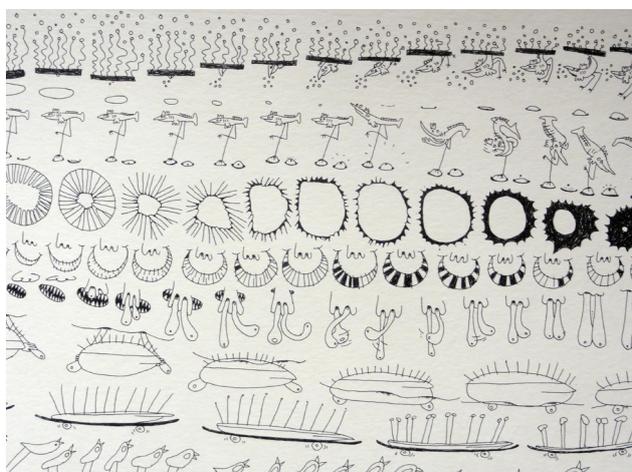
Similar to flip books and various early animation visualisation tools (ex.: praxinoscope) the viewer can adjust the tempo of the film, switch back and forth between frames and therefore create individually felt rhythmic sensations. This type of "film" could also be related to the first experiments of capturing a moving subject with the help of still images by Eadweard Muybridge at the end of the 19th century.

His contribution in developing this technique led to the conclusion, that "photography was no longer about capturing the visible but extending vision into new realms - making the invisible world of motion tangible."¹⁷

Therefore the juxtaposition of each frame of a moving line next to each other results in a breakdown of its motion, revealing the two basic factors of movement according to Etienne-Jules Marey: "... time and space; to know the movement of a body is to know the series of positions which it occupies in space during a series of successive instants."¹⁸

Not unlike traditional film, the spectator creates the motion by detecting the differences between two frames.¹⁹ However, what differs between images projected one after another at a certain speed and the same images displayed next to one another on a single sheet, is the effort the viewer consciously has to invest, to create the imagination of movement.

Drawing from personal experience, I recall a sense of achievement and satisfaction when mentally reconstructing and 'seeing' a motion while looking at skateboard sequences in magazines. The demand for participation of the viewer seems interesting to me.



Detail of the mentioned short 'film' on a single sheet of paper



Sequence of a fall

¹⁷ Cresswell, Timothy: On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World; p.71; Routledge, 2006

¹⁸ Marey, E.J. (1878a) La Methode Graphique dans les Sciences Experimentales et Principelement en Physiologies et Medecine. Paris: Masson.

¹⁹ "Animation is manipulating the difference." - Norman McLaren: Creative Process (Donald Williams, 1990). https://www.nfb.ca/film/creative_process_norman_mclaren/

Two questions emerged:

Was it possible to combine some of the favourable elements of these projects?

What would an attempted fusion of these experiments look like?

Technique

In the attempt to interpret a song into visual elements described in this thesis I aimed to include some of the positive elements of those three projects mentioned previously. These elements include:

a.) find visual forms and figures to an already existing piece of music

b.) work on a small scale

c.) avoid control with a light table

d.) find visual solutions to create an image which uses white lines on a black background

e.) juxtapose each frame next to each other on a large scale format

In the following paragraph I will shortly address the choices that were aimed to include those elements and establish the final technique.

Songchoice

“Wartä” (engl. for “Waiting”) is a song from the Switzerland based band “Einä Ninnts”.¹⁹ Several qualities of the song implied its suitability for the experiment.

Firstly, the song with an overall length little over one and a half minutes (=1092 frames at a speed of 12 frames per second) seemed to be appropriate for practical reasons regarding the final size of the “film”.

To test the visual resonance with the sound, I combined my animation for the Monstra Festival with the song. The image quality as well as its unpredictability appeared to match the song's raw mood even though no immediate synchronisation was produced. The overall fast tempo of the song corresponded well with the nervous white line on black background.

Thirdly, the song's lyrics spoke to me on a personal level, with its theme of always “Waiting for better times”²⁰ instead of changing something for the better by acting.

Material

The main goal was to achieve or rather improve the visual quality attained by digitally inverting small scale drawings into white on black images. For this experiment I wanted to surpass the digital as much as possible while simultaneously creating comparable visual effects. These premises led me to try out a technique similar to that of scratching directly on film. I handpainted a coated paper with black paint and tried to scratch images into it using various instruments like tattoo needles, cutting knives and sandpaper.

²⁰Original: “Wartä uf bessri Ziitä”; The full translation of the song's lyrics can be found on page 30

To additionally decrease the amount of control, I wanted to apply a layer of paint in different yellow and red tones underneath the top layer. By scratching away the black coat, the otherwise strictly white line would therefore gain a color quality depending on its underlying structure.

Furthermore, both points *b.)* and *c.)* emerged out of a necessity if all frames of the final animation were supposed to be scratched directly onto the same paper (Point *e.)*). Identical to scratching directly on film, the amount of control over the difference between two following frames is strictly limited.

As Norman McLaren, pioneer of working directly on film, pointed out in 1968:

“I set limitations. Yes, technical limitations and artistic limitations, too. Because I think most works of art depend upon a set of technical limitations. Many works of art get much of their sprightliness and liveliness from a set of limitations. (...) It’s easier to work within a set of strict limitations than not.”²⁰

Judging from my own experience up to the present I would substantially agree with McLaren’s statement and I wanted to further explore the possibilities of limitations with this thesis.

Preparations

Graphical Chart

In order to gain an overview of the song’s basic structure, I proceeded to visually transfer the most important elements of the song onto a timeline divided into 12 frames per second.

I detected three main elements:

- the drum with the focus on the snare and the bass kick*
- the guitar and the bass guitar*
- the vocals*

For both the snare and the bass kick I used a distinguishable visual sign.

For the guitar riff I used different colors with the aim to graphically separate the structure. The colors and the pitch are unrelated.

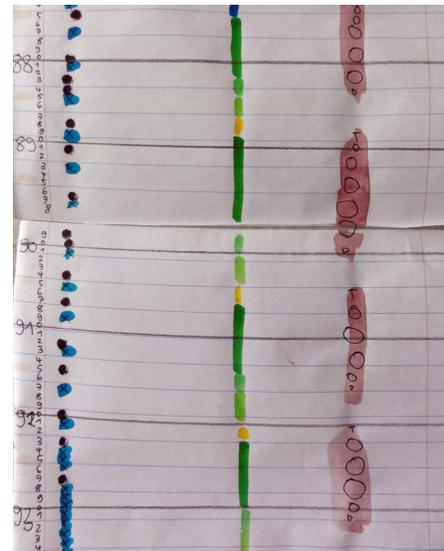
The lyrics are written down with letters at the exact point of their appearance.

It is important to note, that said chart was intended to clarify basic structural elements. Therefore, one cannot entitle it with absolute accuracy. However, it sufficiently functioned as a helping tool.

²¹ Norman McLaren in “On the creative process”, p.20; compiled and edited by Donald McWilliams; National Film Board of Canada; 1991



Guitar/Bassline and overall structure



Detail of graphical chart. From left to right: Frame-count, Drumkit, Guitar/Bass, Vocals

Tests

In order to evaluate the most suitable method to prepare the final sheet of paper, I conducted a series of tests with different paints. A few parameters were set before the evaluation:

-The paper I was going to utilize: A roll of coated paper I found in an empty hostel. The coat restrains the color from fully binding with the paper, which makes it easier to scratch parts of the applied paint away again later on. The slightly engraved structure on the surface of the paper serves as a pleasant side-effect.

-The color of the top layer: Since the final image seeks to resemble the outcome of a previously described experiment, namely that of a digitally inverted black ink drawing, the top layer demands to be black.

-The color of the underlying paint layer: Inspired by the luminosity of the yellow and red tones in Paul Klee's *Der Goldfisch*, I decided to apply a similar range of color tones for the underlying structure.

Kandinsky described yellow as the “earthly color” and red as “burning and glowing with an almost purposeful strength” while black “...has an inner sound of an external silence without future, without hope... Black is externally the most toneless color, against which all other colors sound stronger and more precise.”²¹

Remaining generally neutral towards those attributes while not disagreeing, I simply embraced the idea of scratching away this dark silence to uncover the urgency and raw power of the music, the “burning and glowing of the earth”

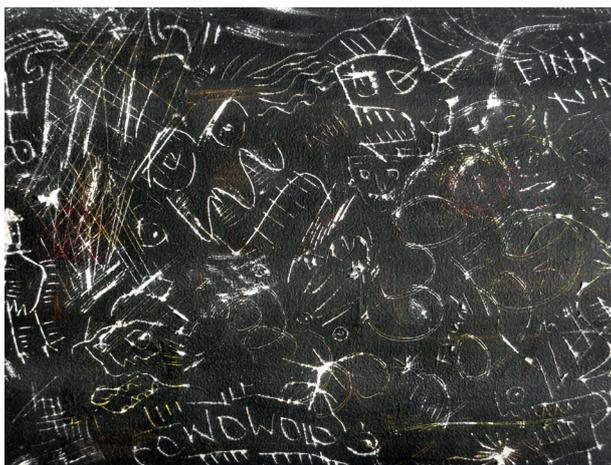


Paul Klee, *Der Goldfisch*, 1925

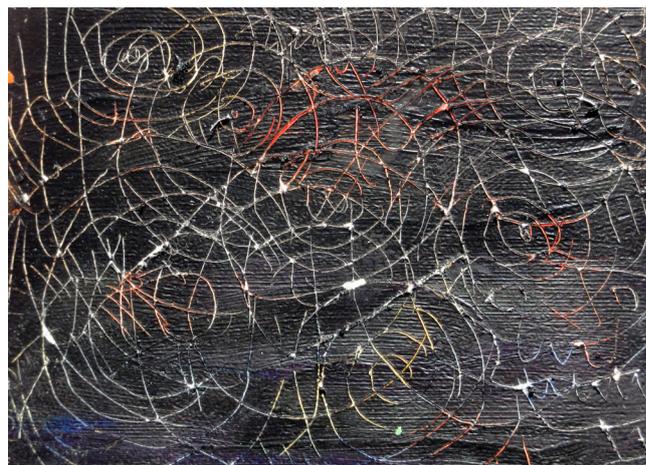
²² Wassily Kandinsky: On the Spiritual in Art, Chapter B: Painting; 1911; <https://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art206/onspiritualinart00kand.pdf>

Those prefixed parenteners left the small testrun to determine which paint would fit the requirements the best. I examined different combinations of oil paint, acrylic paint, and ink. Two factors were of importance to establish the final choice: Firstly, it mattered how well one could scratch away parts of the coat without destroying much of its surroundings. Secondly, the final look was taken into consideration seperately.

Overall I came to the conclusion that acrylic paint (for the underlying layer as well as the top coat) combined both of the crucial factors the best. While oil paint is pleasant to scratch away, the final look lacks a general feeling of rawness and brutality that acrylic could deliver. Waterbased ink on the other hand came into conflict with the coated paper, meaning large parts of the paper would not accept the paint and would leave arbitrary empty white fields.



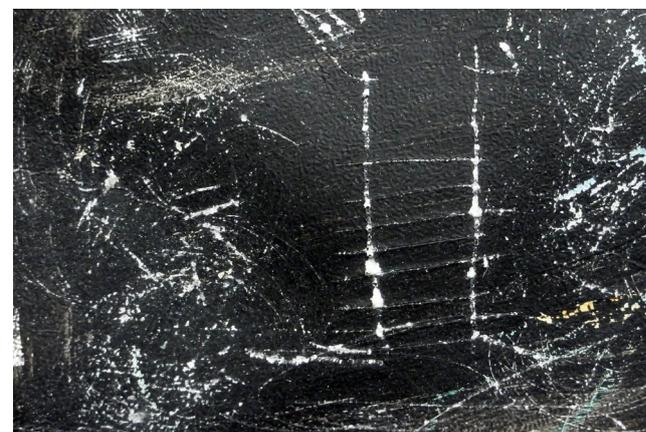
Top layer: Acrylic paint; Bottom Layer: Acrylic Paint



Top layer: Oil paint; Bottom Layer: Oil Paint



Top layer: Waterbased Ink; Bottom Layer: None



Top layer: Acrylic Paint; Bottom Layer: Colored pencils

To further explore my own approach I decided to research visual works that bear similarities to what I was attempting to achieve. In the next chapter I will proceed to analyse two of these examples from art history.

Marcel Duchamps: Nu descendant un escalier no. 2 (Nude Descending Staircase No. 2)



Nu descendant un escalier no. 2 (1912)



Charicature in *The evening Sun*, 1913

Even though this work appears to bear no connection to audio-visual ‘translations’ it nevertheless seems important to my attempt in its depiction of motion on a singular display. As an important and early example of capturing movement on a static image that inspired many artists to come, I consider its context and analysis of value to my own work.

Marcel Duchamps (1887-1968) was a French-American painter and sculptor and is considered to be one of the most important figures in art of the 20th century. One of his main intentions was to escape from simply creating what he called “retinal art” (meaning art that is visually pleasing alone) and move towards producing art that “serves the mind”²².

His 1912 painting *Nude Descending Staircase No. 2* now widely regarded as a Modernist classic, was at first rejected by his cubist contemporaries as well as the public. It contained extreme distortion of the contemporary style of realism and turned a previously respected image - that of a nude which embodied a tradition of representational beauty and classical culture - into a machine like figure simply walking down a set of stair. This combination of neglecting the tradition of a subject in painting as well as placing the same subject in such an ordinarily mundane setting resulted in general public confusion and rejection.

²³ Rosenthal, Nan. “Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)”. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/duch/hd_duch.htm (October 2004)

The display of the painting in 1913 in the United States of America at The Armory Show caused a scandal with newspapers printing caricatures and writing derisive commentary. Even the 26th president of the United States Theodore Roosevelt Jr. who attended the exhibition compared the painting of Duchamp to his bathroom rug. This resulted in large numbers of people aching to see what had already been publicly ridiculed and contributed extensively to its success.

The painting depicts as previously mentioned a machine-like figure descending a set of stair. The colors vary between yellow ochres and browns, forming abstract shapes that remind of paintings from cubist artists of that same time. Whereas cubists attempted to capture an object with all its simultaneously existing dimensions by dividing it into abstract particles reorganised on the canvas, Duchamps *Nude Descending Staircase No. 2* is concerned with depicting the movement of a figure in space and time.

Despite the fact that optically the painting reminded of other cubist works from that time, it was accused of containing Futurist ideas and concepts and not taking Cubism seriously enough. The overlapping of action to create a dynamic graphical simultaneity indeed can be positioned close to Futurist statements. Futurists experimented with different ways of capturing the ever growing dynamics and speed of the modern world, they embraced new technologies and the constant acceleration that was embedded in them.

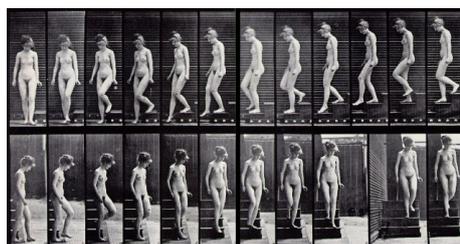
In 1909 Futurist Manifesto, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, wrote:

“We declare...a new beauty, the beauty of speed.”²³

Duchamp later declined the direct influence of Futurist ideas in that particular time. Contrary to Futurists, who attempted pure illustrations of static movement, Duchamps aim was to simply capture the ‘idea’ of a movement. When asked about the specification of the figure dismounting the stairs he had to say the following:

“To tell you the truth, I have never thought about what it is. Why would I think about it? My paintings don’t represent objects, but abstractions. *Nude Descending a Staircase* is an abstraction of movement.”²⁴

The visual idea of his painting was inspired by the sequence photographs of Muybridge and Marey. In particular the photographic sequence entitled *Descending Stairs and Turning Around* by Eadweard Muybridge had a direct influence on Duchamp.



Eadweard Muybridge: *Descending Stairs and Turning Around*, 1887

²⁴ Futurist Manifesto: <http://bactra.org/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html>

²⁵ As qtd. in: Sarah Kolb: *Painting at the Service of Metaphysics: Marcel Duchamp and the Echo of Bergsonism*, Germany; 2015; p. 90.

The systematic organisation of Muybridge's photographic studies is reflected in the painting itself as Duchamp pointed out:

"It is an organisation of kinetic elements, an expression of time and space through the abstract presentation of motion. ... But remember, when we consider the motion of form through space in a given time, we enter the realm of geometry and mathematics just as we do when we build a machine for that purpose. ... When the vision of the Nude flashed before me, I knew that it would break forever the enslaving chains of Naturalism."²⁵

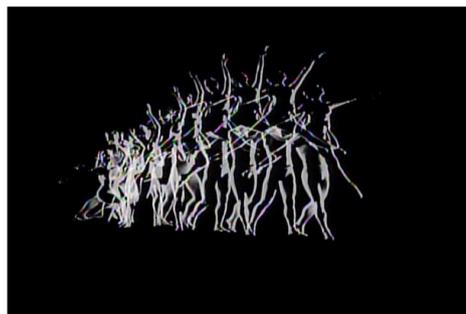
In contrast to the works of Marey and Muybridge the singular stages of movement are not taken apart from each other, rather they overlap and create a sort of melting pot of movement. Indeed the figure's motion cannot be reconstructed mentally like it is possible with the photographic studies. The figure seems hard to grasp. One might argue that this is the case because of its cubistic abstraction and/or because this superimposed continuity generates a feeling of motion itself, and that the figure indeed is still moving - or rather the motion is still active - while we look at it.

Duchamp himself went on to clearly distance his work from the cinematic qualities of Muybridge's photographs:

"My aim was a static representation of movement, a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement—with no attempt to give cinema effects through painting."²⁶

Interestingly, his painting appears to have influenced artworks in cinema itself. Norman McLaren's film *Pas de deux* (1968) seems to take Duchamp's visual idea to the medium of cinema, combining both the strict division of singular frames seen in Muybridge (inherent in the medium of film itself) with the overlapping simultaneity of *Nude Descending Staircase No. 2*.

One can understand *Pas de deux* (1968) as a series of photographic attempts to capture the mere 'idea' of motion as seen in Duchamp's painting.²⁷



Still from Norman McLaren's film *Pas de deux* (1968)

Even though most of McLaren's film are of interest both regarding audiovisual connections and my own attempt, I will now continue to analyse a short film directed by Len Lye. Lye was a contemporary of McLaren, whose cameraless filmwork had direct influence on McLaren.

²⁵ T. Copplestone, *Modern Art Movements*, Paul Hamlyn Limited, London, 1976, p.29.

²⁷ Peter Brooker, Andrew Thacker (2005). *Geographies Of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*. US: Taylor & Francis.

²⁸ *Pas de deux* (1968): https://www.nfb.ca/film/pas_de_deux_en/

Len Lye - Free Radicals (1958)

Len Lye (1901-1980) was a New Zealand born visual artist that contributed to the development of abstraction in film. He is best known for his experimental films and his kinetic sculptures. His basic interest lay in the arrangement of motion and movement:

“All of a sudden it hit me – If there was such a thing as composing music, there could be such a thing as composing motion. After all, there are melodic figures, why can't there be figures of motion?”²⁸

Len Lye was recorded to say the above after he had spent some time watching the clouds move across a blue sky. The influence of music is evident in his approach to work with a timebased medium such as film. However, he was not interested in traditional concerns of filmmaking, namely narrative and representational, rather with his works he attempted to create sensations “...that would be directed in the final instance toward the body rather than the eye and ear.”²⁹

His film *A colour box* (1935) is considered to be a pivotal work in the field of cameraless animations. The handpainted film was funded and distributed by John Grierson, who likewise had discovered Norman McLaren at Scottish amateur-film-contest. Lye's work with John Grierson would not develop into a similar career spanning collaboration as it had done so for McLaren, nevertheless it is worth noting that two of the 20th century's most credited filmmakers were discovered by one and the same person.

Len Lye's interest in music was mainly focused on Jazz and African Tribal music - contrary to other abstract filmmakers like Oskar Fischinger or Hans Richter who used classical orchestrated music for the outline of their works. His choice of music clearly reflected and affected the visual. Unlike Fischinger or Richter, who tried to detect and uncover analogies between sound and vision, Lye's object was to generate a sort of dissonance between image and sound that would result in a new form of harmony. The resemblance to ideas of Schönberg and Kandinsky seems obvious.



Detail of Len Lye's 35mm filmstrip painted for *A colour box* (1935)

²⁹ Len Lye, 'Beginnings', in Roger Horrocks (eds), *Figures of Motion, Len Lye/Selected Writings* Auckland: Auckland University Press, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984, pp.31-32

³⁰ Luke Smythe: *Image and Music in the Direct Films of Len Lye*, p.11; *The Journal of New Zealand Art History*; 2006

“Lye’s aim was not merely to translate the music into images but to develop visual ideas in counterpoint. He liked to have enough synchronisation to keep the images in step with the music but not so much that their dance became predictable. He felt free to pick up ideas from any aspect of the music - the rhythm, the timbre, the style of a particular player, the general mood, or the look of the printed soundtrack.”³⁰

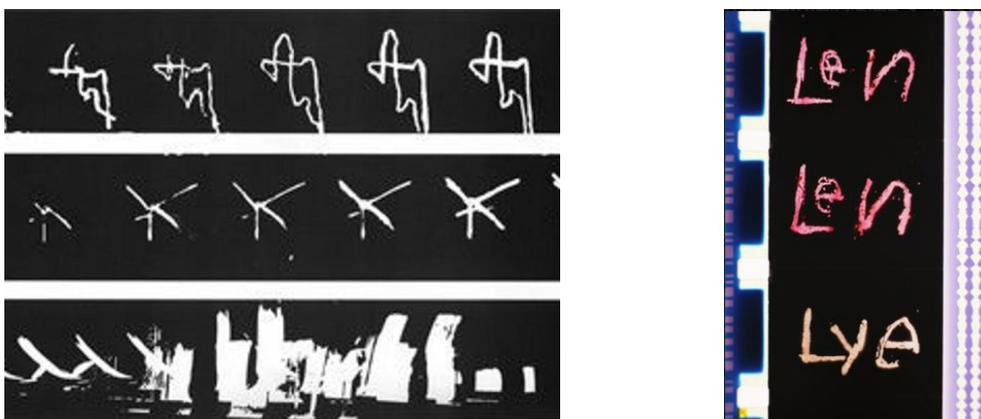
One of the prime examples of the mentioned attributes can be found in his 1958 film *Free Radicals*, which is widely considered to be one of his most important works.

In the 4 minutes of the film the visuals are accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of traditional African drumming and singing of the Baguirmi tribe of Africa. The entire film is scratched directly onto film with various sharp tools and leaves the viewer with an anarchic and nervous flickering of white lines on a black background. There is a feeling of rawness and fundamental liveliness throughout the entire film. The structured chaos seems full of vitality, the lines are almost feverishly jumping from frame to frame as if releasing a previously attained energy from electrification - they appear to be truly free and independent from any outside representation.

About the process of scratching directly on film Lye had to say the following:

“You stick down the sides with scotch tape and you get to work with scratching the stuff out. You hold your hand at the right height and act as if you were making your signature. It goes on forever. You can carry a pictographic design in your head and make a little design. You can’t see what you’re doing because your hand is in the way. That’s why those things have that kind of spastic look.”³¹

The lack of control is evident in the final output and creates much of its fascination. As if staring into the unpredictable flickering flame of a fire, the overall feel of *Free Radicals* draws the eyes close to the screen and does not release them until the end.



Details of the 16mm filmstrip from *Free Radicals* (1958)

³¹ Horrocks, Roger: Len Lye: A Biography p.p.137-8; 2001

³² Russet, R. Experimental Animation : Origins of a new art. New York, 1988; De Capo Press.

At the beginning of his process, Lye would 'translate' the music frame by frame onto the filmstrip where normally the printed soundtrack is located. This enabled him to freely react to the sound while he was advancing with his visual counterplay. As mentioned earlier, Lye's focus was not concentrated on a perfect audiovisual synchronisation, rather he seemed to freely handpick certain rhythmical accents and adjust the image to those moments. Luke Smith described those moments of brief synchronisation as being perceived almost like extremely short periods of frozen time before they released this tiny tension once again to freely float amongst the screen.³²

"Even when they are moving in close harmony with the soundtrack, their agitated activities retain an edge of uncertainty as if they had been reluctantly pressed into following the expressive dynamics of a particular musical motif, while retaining the capacity to resume their own free movements at anytime."³²

I would argue that the above analysis perfectly encapsulates the ever-present possibility of explosive motion that are engraved into those lines. They appear as if belonging to a restless and slightly aggressive force of nature that Len Lye had managed to capture for a brief period of time.

One can only wonder where these lines continued to move after he had finished with his process.

³³ Luke Smythe: Image and Music in the Direct Films of Len Lye, p.7; The Journal of New Zealand Art History; 2006

³⁴ as above; p.6

Wartä: An attempt to visually interpret a piece of music

Part II:

In the following chapter I will shortly describe the process of creating the visuals for “Wartä” and later conclude with a reflection on various elements of the attempt.

Process

The decision for the final size of the paper came partly as a necessity. Since I had already used half of the paper for the various test, the final measurements of the paper are 1.5m x 1.0m. As a next step I calculated the approximate size of each frame and divided both length and width into sections to gain a general overview.

This was in no way intended to limit each frame to exactly the measured size, rather it should serve as a guide to remain within a flexible boundary. It was aimed to ensure that I would not suddenly find no more space on the paper while only half of the song was visualized. During the process I would continue to check the remaining space in relation to the remaining amount of frames and adapt according to my findings. If there seemed to be a shortage of space I proceeded to shrink the size of the following frames. On the opposite I gained a certain freedom for the upcoming frames when I realized that I was ahead of time compared to the space already used.

For the underlining layer of color I decided to write down the five main lines of the song’s lyrics, starting with yellow and continuously approaching red. I welcomed the idea of having something as defined as written words underneath the black cover, creating a field of color chances that either would or would not be uncovered by the placement of the frames.

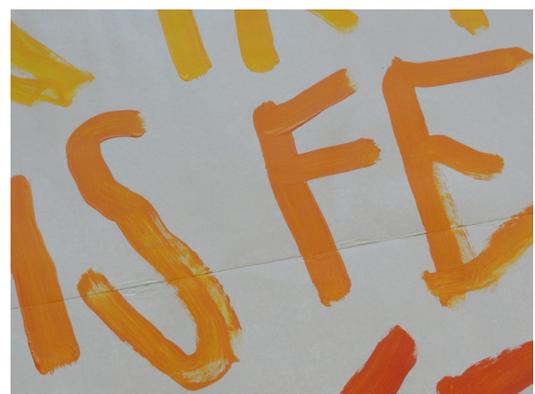
In the final attempt I chose to use two main instruments for creating the lines:

-Sewing needle: I discovered that the right diameter of a sewing needle perfectly fits a mechanical pencil with the same intended size for lead. That way I created a tool that was both sharp and pleasant in its handling.

-Tattoo shading needle: This tool consists of several small-scaled needles assembled together. It is typically used to create shading effects in skin-tattooing. For my project it enabled me to scratch bigger areas and add subtle details to certain frames.



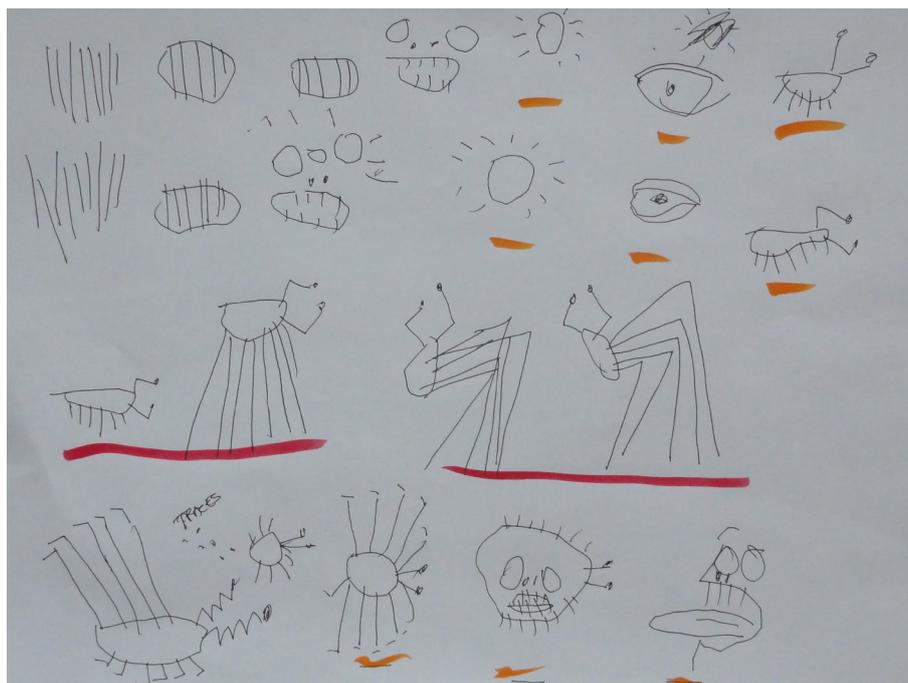
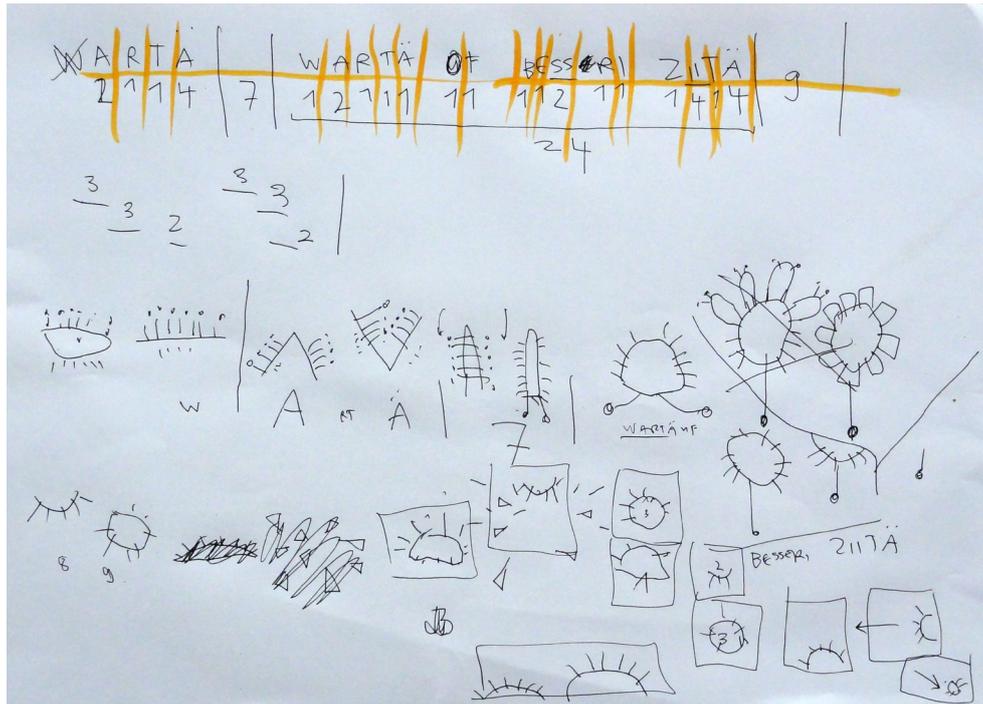
Underlying color layer before the top layer was added



Detail of underlying color layer

In order to react to certain rhythmic elements of the song, I created loose storyboards as I progressed for small sections of the song using the chart (described in Chapter 2) as a guide. Apart from deciding rhythmical accents these storyboards functioned as a first step to compress visual ideas for each section but were generally treated only as a guideline. While scratching the images into the paper, I was still open to react to unforeseeable factors such as mistakes, arising ideas, space and so forth.

I will now proceed to discuss and evaluate some of the insights gained during the process.



Examples of a storyboards for two specific sections of the music

Reflection

Before the final attempt, the visual world of the “musicvideo” had not been fully defined. Certain elements had proven to work during the preparation period and it became clear while testing the materials and the instruments that the visual world would remain limited. That was both due to the small framesize combined with the fact that the paper only allowed a certain number of scratches in an area before the image would be completely undefinable. Altogether this resulted in abolishing the idea of too specific and detailed images. Rather I would have to investigate more abstract visual forms.

Generally speaking I would argue that the scratched line quality bears similarities to the marks of an ink pen. In both methods the paper is purposefully hurt in order to create visual signs and both methods result in producing a three dimensional relief that can be felt when moving across the paper with a finger. It is obvious that the amount of pressure plays a significant roll. However, I would argue that scratching away paint generates an even more “violent” image, the line bursting into the visual world like the opening of a wound. This extremely physical quality seemed to match the songs overall feeling of restless thrive and explosive energy. As analysed in previous chapter, I was on a quest to find wild, violently free lines underneath the surface, similar in the quality of Len Lye’s *Free Radicals*.



Detail of ‘hurt paper’, if two lines were too close to one another, the paper inbetween would be affected



Difference in the result of the two instruments: Circle shape: Sewing Needle; Surroundings: Tattoo-Shader

The combination of this limitation caused by the material and the examination of the song’s theme of always waiting for something better in the future, resulted in the idea of insectlike visuals. While the song’s imaginary character remains waiting for better times, the insects never stop exploring their surroundings. The fact that I had to uncover those “insects” underneath a black layer only added to the suitability of the image. No more specification were defined before the start of the experiment.

During the process I seemed to develop a type of language. While progressing I gradually developed a palette of various visual elements that felt engaging and that I could revisit for upcoming frames. My aim in that aspect was to take these elements and make use of them in the most possible ways, creating different solutions for the same visuals.

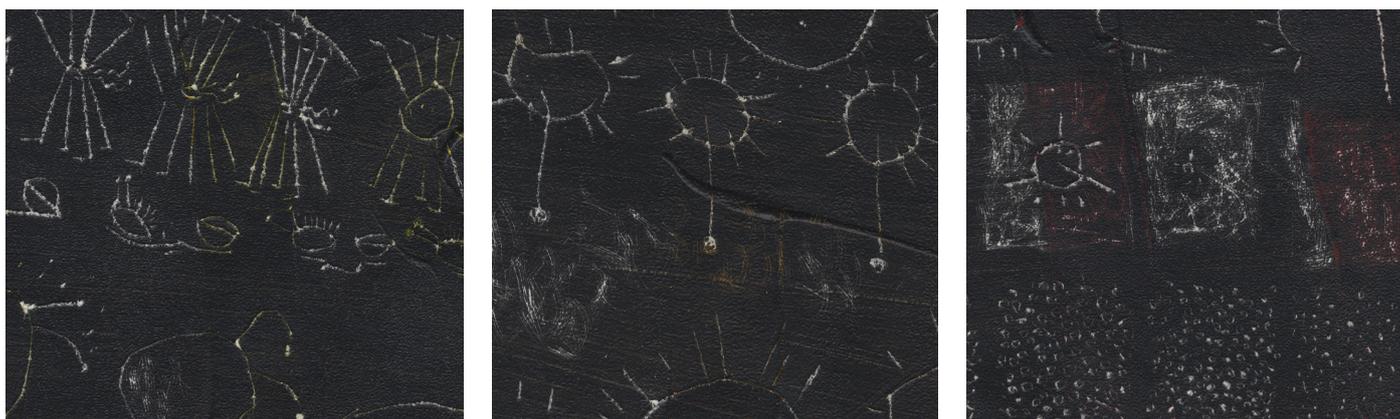
When I arrived at the final section of the song I was able to take advantage of these previously established patterns and combine them in an attempted visual “summary” trying to create an overall feeling of togetherness.

As a side effect of the undefined framesize, it was difficult to use the space within a frame as a component to play with. Without a clear understanding of the relation between to bordering frames it is hard to define the position of a line within a frame. As a result the individual images mostly tend to appear central within their “frame”. I would argue that this characteristic can be explored more consciously in future attempts.

If one were to analyse the use of music in the visuals and compare it to other examples, I would argue that “Wartä” is to be located somewhere in between Oskar Fischinger’s visually illustrative analogy and Len Lye’s free expression of sound.³³ In my visual translation I mostly focused on the moment defining elements of the music, be it either vocals, intensive drum patterns or fast guitar chord changes. I tried to react to those elements transferring certain rhythmical accents to the paper while attempting to not simply create a visual analogy. I purposely decided to react to certain accents while I ignored others.

Moreover I tried to be aware that certain repetitive rhythmical changes in the music could generate a similar feeling of rhythm in the visual interpretation when consequently translated. Altogether I tried to find a balance between the two different attempts.

The final image seems to resemble a mixture of Eadweard Muybridge’s sequence photography and Duchamp’s painting *Nude descending staircase, No. 2*. Certain visual elements overlap due to the lack of borders in between the frames while one can mostly distinguish the individual stages of motion. An even closer resemblance would be detected to an imaginary assembly and arrangement of the filmstrip used in Len Lye’s “Free Radicals” on a singular display.³⁴ The main difference then would be the actual size of the frames which are in my case varied over time, whereas the framesize of film remains the same according to its defining format.



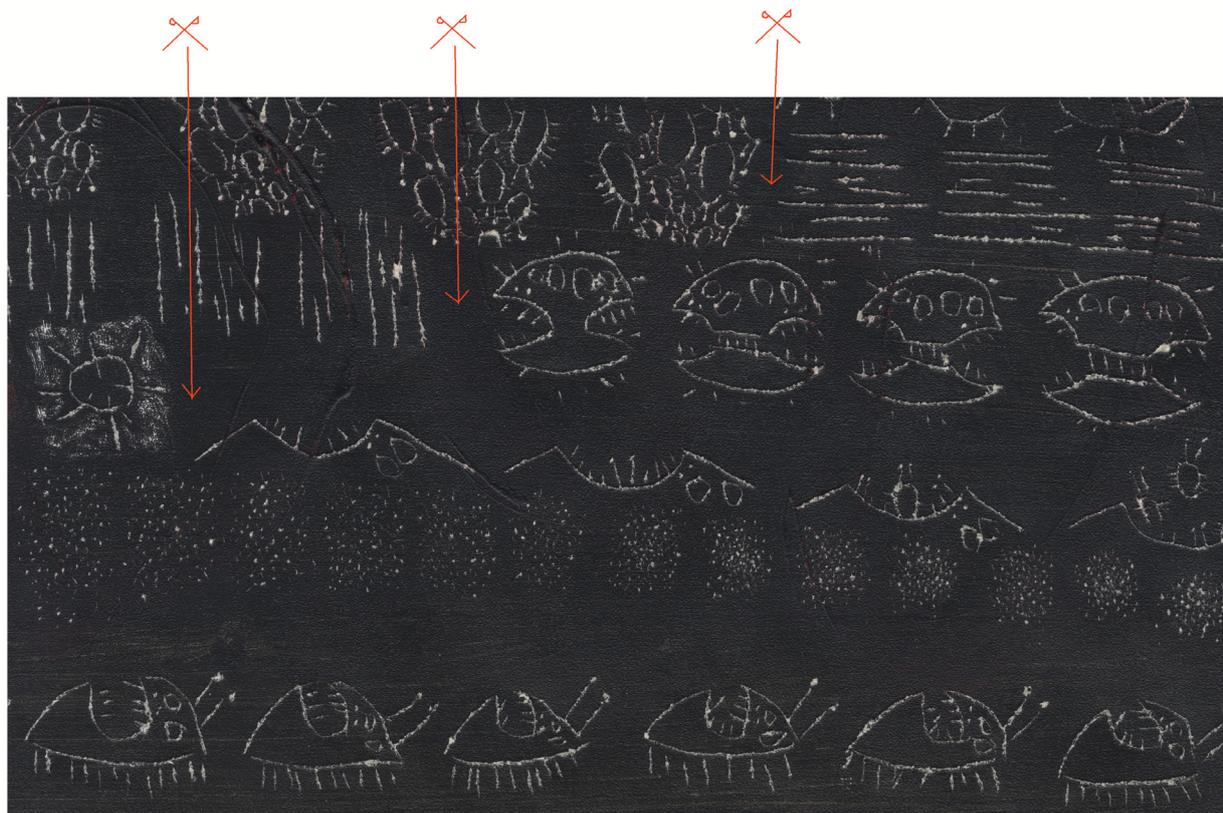
Three details of the final result, each exposing a different color of the underlying layer.

³⁴ I am aware that it is difficult to compare a moving to a stationary work, therefore this positioning derives solely from my conscious and reflected decisions during and after the process.

³⁵ Here Lye’s film only serves as an example, the same could be said about basically every other film scratched directly onto film.

An element that amongst others could certainly be explored further with this method is the use of cuts. While I did use cuts, they were mostly related to rhythmical changes in the music, analogically translated to paper. To further examine this aspect I would argue one could gain a lot of insight from studying comics and the way they handle sudden changes in images from one panel to another. Additionally, an attempt of a more narrative film with a similar technique would arguably investigate the editing even more. It seems of interest to me regarding the fact that cuts would then not simply be related to each other on a time base, they would have to be considered on a spacial level as well.

On an additional note, it would definitely seem interesting to me to have a musician or a group of musicians interpret my visuals back into sound. The process could then continue with somebody else interpreting the newly composed music into images and so on, resulting in an openly played audiovisual form of the widely popular game *Telephone*.³⁵



Cuts; one can see the spacial relationship between the different cuts

³⁶ In this game, the first person in a line or a circle whispers a word or a phrase into the ear of the person next to him/her. The game continues with players whispering the phrase to their neighbors until it reaches the last player in line who then reveals the phrase. The excitement of this game emerges out of the various elements that affect the original phrase along the way and most of the time completely changes its meaning.

Conclusion

Upon starting the research for this paper I was aware of the influence music had onto visual art and art in general. Nevertheless, through the investigation I gained clearer insight into how certain artists dealt with this influence and I furthermore explored certain theoretical approaches towards the audiovisual connection. Additionally I learned about the various methods these artists used in order to achieve their aspirations in the field of visual sound relations. Moreover the research introduced me to the concept of Synaesthesia and its importance in the historical development of visual sound.

I am aware that this field of research is far wider than displayed in this master thesis and that important historical figures have been left out. These selective decisions were made in order to focus on information that seemed to be of value to my own attempt.

The most important contribution from this written thesis to me personally was the experience I gained both from practically experimenting with physical material and from systematically reflecting the findings during the process. The technique of scratching images into a layer has long been a method that I wanted to explore. I found that the line quality differs from other methods I had used before. I especially embraced the unpredictability and the ruffness as well as the violence of the line. Together with the underlining colored layer it is certainly a technique that I would want to further explore in future projects.

Norman McLaren spoke about handmade cinema as being equivalent to watching thought, if thought could be watched after all.³⁶ After this experiment I can relate to that statement even more than beforehand. Through the involvement of unpredictable elements and limitations, the process itself equals a series of unexpected discoveries and the reaction towards them.

Personally I would argue that making films in such a manner - especially because of the qualities mentioned above - is at least as exciting to the executor as it might (or might not) be to the final audience.

³⁷ Norman McLaren: Creative Process (Donald Williams, 1990). https://www.nfb.ca/film/creative_process_norman_mclaren/

Summary

This paper aims to both theoretically and analytically support an experimental short “film”. The main concept behind the practical work consists of visually interpreting a song onto a singular sheet of paper displaying each frame of the film next to the other, resulting in a visual display of different stages of motion similar to the sequence photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey.

The paper seeks to reflect the process of the practical experiment starting from its original inspiration. It tries to position its idea in relation to previously conducted visual experiments. It then proceeds in covering material tests as well as the development of the technique. It concludes in analysing the outcome. It aims to critically reflect the visual quality and the relationship between the musical script and the final result. Finally it seeks to present methods to further explore the technique and introduces possible future projects that might be of interest.

In addition, the paper investigates the historical background of the relationship between sound and image. It mainly focuses on the connection between the influence of music in visual art and the development of abstract images in both painting and cinema. It introduces the concept of Synaesthesia and its importance to this development. Furthermore, it analyses two examples of visual artworks in detail that seem to have significance on the practical work.

Lyrics: Einä Ninnts - Wartä

ORIGINAL:

Wartä
Wartä bis Abed isch

Wartä
Wartä bis Friitig isch

Wartä
Wartä bis Feriä sind

Wartä
Wartä uf bessri Ziiitä

Wartä
Wartä bis äntli Abed isch

Wartä
Wartä bis äntli Friitig isch

Wartä
Wartä bis Feriä sind

Wartä
Wartä uf bessri Ziiitä

Wartä ufä Tod

Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod
Tod

ENG:

Waiting
Waiting for the evening

Waiting
Waiting for Friday

Waiting
Waiting for holidays

Waiting
Waiting for better times

Waiting
Waiting til it's finally evening

Waiting
Waiting til it's finally Friday

Waiting
Waiting for holidays

Waiting
Waiting for better times

Waiting for Death

Death
Death
Death
Death
Death
Death
Death
Death
Death

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CV

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(Together with Sămi Ortlieb)

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THE NEEDS OF
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<https://vimeo.com/409195172>