

# Sound and Image Worlds in Pop Music

Diedrich Diederichsen

## The Constitutive Function of the Image in the Cultural Format of Pop Music

When I define pop music and attempt to distinguish it from the popular music that preceded it or was contemporary with it, the visual element is a key criterion. But it is not a visual component in the sense of an end in itself with respect to extensions and couplings of media, formats, genres, and traditions. This is the case with all of the efforts to bring image and music, sound and visibility together that have taken place during the last 100 to 150 years, efforts that generally are ascribed to developments within so-called high art and treated by the field of art history. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or total artwork), absolute film, the ideal of synesthesia, color-light music, and composition on the basis of extramusical—including visual—criteria, are historical phenomena based on principles like color/sound analogies, structural analogies, and syntheses of—or new hierarchies among—the arts. They sought—at the level of rhythm, pitch, duration, and tone color—to produce connections of the most disparate kinds to images and other visual stimuli. In pop music, combinations like these initially play a purely secondary and at most a decorative role. When a visual component does eventually become systematic within pop music, it is for entirely different reasons. It is not until the psychedelic music of the 1960s, and then above all in the abstract genres after techno and post-rock, that pop music too develops image/sound combinations that endeavor to reproduce the abstractness of absolute music on the visual plane.

Pop music is essentially *recorded music*. The point of reference for fans and recipients, but also for the music industry, is recordings, not compositions. However, until just before World War II, the buying and selling of music primarily revolved around the buying and selling of scores, especially in the world of popular music, and around the commercialization of the rights associated with compositions. It is not until the record becomes the music industry's privileged commodity and, moreover, not until it begins to be bought and sold above all as the transcription of a highly specific (rather than just any) recording of a well-known song that pop music as I understand it begins to differentiate itself from other popular music. For now the person of the performer becomes the central phenomenon in a very special sense. He or she is not simply a capable performer of a given piece of material but its "actor" as well. The sound recording, which now becomes the focus of attention, above all carries the traces of a concrete human being, not the interpretation of a work. The miracle of phonography, like that of photography, is the authentic, indexical trace of living persons, and that trace supplants the old miracle of artistic skill. The artists and performers who lend themselves to the attractions associated with this transmission of uniqueness are very different from those who excelled at the old approach, the execution of a score with the greatest possible artistic skill.

Various cultural forms arose for relating to the new logic of attraction that now characterized sound recordings. On the one hand, the emergence of a sonic fetish of uniqueness fit in well with the idea of absolute music, whose aim was precisely to erase the visual and content-related components of

historical musical practice from the definition of the musical.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, what was central to this logic of attraction was precisely not musical values: sounds and noises pointed to concrete bodies as their cause, often to sexualized bodies, not to scores. Thus, the critical outcome of the new centrality of the recording was not so much the autonomization of the musical aspect of music—although this is an observable consequence of the growing importance of the phonographic phenomenon, and one that can be seen, among other things, in the development of a performerless New Music in the 1950s—but the experience of a lack: the sound implied the existence of a person, who was not included with the sound. At the very least, one had to have pictures of that person, or even better live appearances. The visual dimension of pop music thus responds initially to the question of—and demand for—the performer, who constituted the actual attraction of pop music in its early years. There have to be pictures of this attraction. And yet the suspicion can never be entirely dispelled that in place of the originator and performer we are being presented with an actor. It might also be argued that the fundamental tension of pop music consists in the fact that this question can never be answered.

### Moving Pictures: Soundies, Telescriptions, TV Shows, and Backstage Realism

The so-called soundies were invented before the actual pop-music era, yet the interest in particular performers was already highly developed in the 1930s, especially with respect to African-American music. In 1940, two American firms came out with the Panoram, a kind of visual jukebox that presented short, mainly song-length performances on a kind of screen when a coin was inserted into the machine. Here one could see for the first time how a musician like Nat King Cole, who later would become such a successful TV star, did not face a live audience or other musicians or engineers present in the studio during his performance of “I Am a Shy Guy” (1946), but instead looked directly into the camera throughout the entire performance. For the most part—for example in soundies with Louis Armstrong (e.g., “Sleepy Time Down South,” 1942), Cab Calloway (“Minnie the Moocher,” 1942), and others—the performance is presented in a relatively straightforward and unsensational manner, like a stage performance. At most, the viewer’s attention is distracted, in the case of Armstrong, for example by the dancer Nicodemus or a shoe hanging from the ceiling (in “Shine,” 1942). Other soundies were short mini-musicals, such as those of comedian-performers like the African-American trio Day, Dawn and Dusk, or white groups who occasionally appeared in blackface, like the Radio Aces, whose soundies with their faint suggestions of narrative may be seen as fore-runners of the music videos of a later generation. However, contemporary witnesses of the short-lived genre—the final series came out in 1947—are unanimous in reporting that what was fascinating about the soundies was precisely not these little theatrical plots or staged dance numbers but the unobstructed close-up view of the performers. Many artists still performed virtuoso showpieces, among them a certain Walter Liberace, who later became famous without his first name, whereas others, from Cole to Calloway, were already performing a persona. Indeed, a direct path leads from these short films to pop music. It’s no wonder that with Armstrong, Dorothy Dandridge, and Cole, the artists who succeeded in soundies were precisely those who would later turn out to have considerable pop talent, despite the fact that their careers took place largely before the advent of pop. The format that followed the soundies, the so-called telescriptions, was produced for television beginning in 1947 and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Corbett, “Free, Single, Disengaged,” *Die Beute* 3, no. 1 (1996), 74–87, especially 78ff.

continued to be broadcast until special music programs were created specifically for that medium.<sup>2</sup>

American television began to show pop music or its precursors in the early 1950s, primarily on regional channels. In 1957, the show *American Bandstand*, which had been broadcast regionally since 1952, began to run nationwide on the ABC network. Thus, the first great wave of rock and roll's success coincides with the consolidation and standardization of first the American and shortly thereafter the European presentation of this new music. There was almost always a visible live audience in the TV studio, which effectively showed the larger television audience how to interact with this music and helped them in practicing to do so. Dance crazes were launched in this way. This audience usually was positioned on the same plane as the musicians or at least very close to them. Sometimes the band was surrounded by the audience on two sides. Many artists performed in the midst of the audience on little raised platforms which anticipated the solo dance stages of later discotheque architecture. Almost all of the famous television music shows worked with a larger number of cameras than had previously been used to film musical stage performances. Thus, viewers could see the performing musicians not only in the context of the stage but also individually and in little groups. Various different sight lines were tried, and the interaction on stage was produced more dramatically. All this served above all to reinforce the presence of the musicians, and it did so in a new sense. It was definitely not a matter of showing that one had mastery of an instrument or a beautiful voice, but rather of presenting an act, a stance, a character. To some extent, this activity was still partially informed by the common stock roles of the popular music of the prewar years (the Latin lover, the more or less asexual crooner, the vamp, the "strapping good girl," etc.), but the essential innovation of pop music consisted in dissolving these stock roles into individual ones, along with the more or less elaborate narratives and legends that went along with the latter. Early music television offered new stagings for these roles.

There were also European shows like *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (1961) and *Ready, Steady, Go* (1963) in Great Britain and the *Beat Club* in Germany, launched in 1965. This format, based on American models which included a live audience, only disappeared when the staged, partylike equality between the performers and the model recipients ceased to reflect the pop music of the early 1970s, which had become both more antagonistic politically and more ambitious artistically. Two new visual genres took its place: the stage and backstage documentary, and the psychedelic stage set with light show and additional camera effects. The documentary aesthetic found expression both in big-screen movies (from *Dont Look Back*, USA 1967, dir. D. A. Pennebaker, to *Mad Dogs & Englishmen*, USA 1971, dir. Pierre Adidge) and in TV shows (*Rockpalast*, GER 1974–1986, which was based on publicly accessible live concerts and returned to the air in 1990). The same was true of the psychedelic aesthetic, which could be seen in big-screen movies like *Pink Floyd: Live at Pompeii* (FR/IT 1972, dir. Adrian Maben) as well as on later episodes of *Beat Club* (beginning in 1968) and in ambitious TV shows like *Baff* (a psychedelic and politically provocative program initially produced by Hans-Gerd Wiegand, beginning in 1968 on the broadcaster WDR) and *p* (produced for the SDR beginning in 1969 by Werner Schretzmeier), to cite just a few examples from German television. Toward the end of the 1960s, the possibility was even considered of creating a fourth channel, a special youth-oriented network that would have been critical, aggressive, and psychedelic.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Scott MacGillivray and Ted Okuda, *The Soundies Book* (New York: iUniverse, 2007), 376–399.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Detlef Siegfried, *Time Is on My Side: Konsum und Politik in der westdeutschen Jugendkultur der 60er Jahre* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006), 532ff.

Of course, the use of images to create a new type of performer and star also involved using feature films to introduce the new rock and pop stars. Here too, in most cases the stars played themselves or a character like them, not merely a role involving music, as had still been the rule for musical stars in the prewar era. The latter was the case, for example, for Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Donald Novis, and other lesser known stars of the prewar period as well as performers in most of the musicals of the postwar years, even those starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Because they predominantly were African-Americans, jazz musicians virtually never appeared as objects of audience identification in the segregated Hollywood of the prewar years but at most as local color; that changes somewhat after the war, for example in Howard Hawks's spectacular film *A Song Is Born* (1948) with Lionel Hampton, Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and others as jazz scholars.

The stories of young pop singers that were written especially for Elvis Presley, from *Jailhouse Rock* (USA 1957) to *Fun in Acapulco* (USA 1963), were very similar to his familiar, non-narrative stage persona. There was at any rate a semiotic interchange between the figures. In comedies from *The Girl Can't Help It* (USA 1956), directed by Frank Tashlin, to *The Patsy* (USA 1964), directed by and starring Jerry Lewis, viewers could experience pop musicians as themselves in cameo appearances. But the roles for stars who appeared as lead actors were also very close to those which the same performers played in the context of the music business. Nor was 1956 the first time that—with *Rock around the Clock* (USA, dir. Fred Sears) and Bill Haley—a rock and pop singer appeared in a movie. Haley himself had appeared two years earlier in *Round Up of Rhythm* (USA 1954), directed by Will Cowan, with three numbers presented as self-contained performances. Then came The Beatles, who had roles written especially for them in the Richard Lester films of the 1960s, playing themselves in *A Hard Day's Night* (UK 1964) and *Help!* (UK 1965).

The identity designed for The Beatles—and underpinned by their personal existence—as anarchic, fun-loving cutups with four distinct but closely related characters went on to become a model for countless Beat bands. By 1965, with a weekly half-hour animated series (*The Beatles*, USA 1965–1967) recounting childlike adventures on the basis of two songs per episode, the Beat band had already been reduced to a stereotype and turned into a format for children. The four- and five-member constellations of the Beat bands contained the material for immanent narrations that deviated from the classical concept of the two lives of the stars. According to this old Hollywood principle, two fictitious identities were developed for each star: on the one hand the range of his or her possible roles, and on the other a public private identity for fan magazines and gossip columns that stood in a particular relationship to those roles. In place of this practice, bands supplied material for internal developments that could be observed from without and that could be depicted both in episodes from their live performances and in the latter's musical equivalents: the phenomenon of two Beatles singing harmony vocals into one microphone while another Beatle sang the solo part into another one was a dramatic and visible element of every live performance, but it also could be seen in photographs or simply heard on records.

But when one is dealing with a band and not just an individual artist, the question of who has precisely what relationship with whom is much more relevant than the relationship between private life, public life, and star fiction. The structure of the band phenomenon and the feeling—also present for solo artists—that in pop music a single attitude runs through all the various ontologies of the star were more interesting and more powerful than the old dichotomy between role and (staged) person, to which gossip columns sometimes added the unvarnished, actual person.

The new relationship of role to artist and persona was thematized not only in the Beatles films but above all by Bob Dylan, who presented himself to the public with obviously fictitious life stories and who, in the above-mentioned documentary *Dont Look Back*, directed by D. A. Pennebaker, saw to it that the backstage scene could not be regarded as the locus of the authenticistic revelation of the *truth* about a given star but instead emerged as the latter's actual staging. At about the same time and in the context of the successes of such visual strategies—which in the early years of pop music may be seen as primarily the effect of its new performative orientation—record companies began to shoot short promotional films, whose function was principally to stand in for the less and less easily available live appearances of the international stars in the Beat- and pop-music TV shows that were cropping up all over the world in the 1960s. Most of these programs were built around live appearances or at least around presence, while also being guided by current pop-chart rankings. In the West in the 1960s, the pop charts increasingly tended to converge. This was a new phenomenon. Even world-famous stars had earlier had their successes on the pop charts at different times in different parts of the world. Until then, however, only very few performers had been successful beyond the boundaries of local or national areas of influence. The little promo films responded to this new situation of a worldwide demand for visual presence. Big-screen movies and TV series often provided the framework for them. Sometimes they were actually scenes excerpted from movies like *The Beatles' Help*.

Soon, however, such films also were being shot in order to “break” young bands with the help of an original visual concept. This phenomenon finally culminated in the artificially assembled band The Monkees, which was put together on the basis of purely theatrical and casting-related criteria for a TV series about the initially fictitious band of the same name, which only supplied a corresponding (musical) reality after the fact in the form of records. In an irony of history, it then turned out that in Mike Nesmith The Monkees actually had a gifted musician who wrote songs for them and later enjoyed a highly regarded solo career as a singer-songwriter. Moreover, it was Nesmith who in 1979 developed the TV show *PopClips* and sold it to the youth-oriented Nickelodeon cable station. Shortly thereafter, Nickelodeon's parent company, Warner, watered down the concept; the final outcome of this development and of the influence of a rapid succession of owners was the creation of the first 24-hour music television network, which we know as MTV.

These short films, however, which tended to depict the bands as fun-loving kids tussling and joking with each other in the style of The Beatles, disappeared around 1970 at the latest with the new demand for authenticity on the part of “purified” audiences caught up in cultural revolution, who now no longer wished to see anything that might remind them of the commodity character of pop music. Bands now preferred to appear less frequently and to do so, when they did, in the TV studio, where they regularly caused small scandals. Jefferson Airplane's vocalist Grace Slick appeared on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* with her face painted black; Jim Morrison failed to alter supposedly controversial lyrics, despite having made an agreement to do so with Ed Sullivan; and T. Rex (and later many others) poked fun at the phenomenon of lip-synching by making an ostentatious show of moving their lips out of synch with the music. Television was no longer a credible medium for the new generation.

The hippie generation's cult of authenticity and critique of the commodity was one of the reasons for this development, and it brought us a series of concert and backstage films, including those about The Doors, Leonard Cohen, Joe Cocker and Leon Russell, and T. Rex; the films *Rainbow Bridge* (UK 1972, dir. Chuck Wein), about and with Jimi Hendrix, and *Festival Express* (USA 2003, dir. Bob Smeaton, Frank Cvitanovich), with Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead; and,

finally, the more ambitious examples of the genre—from *One Plus One* (USA 1968) with the Rolling Stones, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, to Bob Dylan's own *Renaldo & Clara* (USA 1978). Popular festival documentaries like *Monterey Pop* (USA 1969, also directed by Pennebaker), *Gimme Shelter* (USA 1970, directed by the Maysles brothers), and *Woodstock* (USA 1970, dir. Michael Wadleigh), which dominated the programs of art-house cinemas throughout the world in the early 1970s and first brought a global generation up to the countercultural standard of the late 1960s, completed the genre, which stood for a paradigm shift in the pop-music world's conception of itself: at issue was no longer the precarious balance between role and reality in a genre that flirted with the possibility of their identity. The focus now shifted to what was supposed to be incontrovertibly authentic about pop music: the music as craft, as live practice, as observable activity, and the actual experience associated with it, complete with drugs and groupies.<sup>4</sup> Yet precisely this simpleminded insistence on authenticity, in its naive misunderstanding of the commodity form as a straightforward lie that could be countered by simply confronting it with a resolutely emphatic presentation of the truth, accreted as much as possible by sweat and dirt, helped to usher in a particularly mythological phase in the history of pop music. The fact that this arena rock, with its phallic and macho guitar heroes and the crushing architecture of Nazi party rallies, had just a few years earlier had its origins in a critical intention may be regarded as an irony of this development.

For our purposes, it is more important to ask whether and how this development led to the loss of a visual tradition within pop music. After all, the whole point was that the images of bands, their stages, and their costumes were no longer supposed to look intentionally designed and concocted. Yet precisely the long-haired, macho hard-rock bands—but also the Southern rock groups and the numerous successors of the blues rock bands of the 1960s with their normatively undecorative jeans outfits—would soon undertake intensive efforts at staging. The arena rock of the 1970s glorified and codified the pathos-laden formulae of supposed authenticity and sanctified its cult of masculinity. A bizarrely opulent work like *The Song Remains the Same* (USA 1976, dir. Peter Clifton, Joe Massot), about the band that was perhaps more closely associated with this period than any other, the mythic arena rock and occultist band Led Zeppelin, not only revels in the power aesthetic of a camera that toadies up to the singer's body from beneath; it also combines a live documentary style religiously inflated by the use of lighting design, camera angles, and stage design, with fantasy narratives and sequences from the lives of the musicians interwoven with fairy-tale images.

## Stagings: Song Dramaturgies, Stage Sets, and Light Shows

Thus, in these image-sound strategies, a mythologized authenticity is combined with elements from the psychedelic culture of the 1960s, whose principal stations we should now pass in review. The early 1960s began to witness an autonomization of the sound components which—at the beginning of the pop-music era—usually were above all the badges or sonic logos of a style, a scene, an individual musician, or a studio and its artists. New sounds were no longer as closely associated with the performers and other creators as they had been at the time of certain “signature sounds” of the 1950s, which often could be

<sup>4</sup> The year 1969 saw the publication of the novel *Groupie* by Jenny Fabian, about life on the road with the British band The Family. Four years later, Pamela Des Barres published her memoirs under the title *I'm with the Band*. Frank Zappa's ambitious rock musical grotesque *200 Motels*, which was released as a film, parts of which were included in the shows of his band, The Mothers of Invention, also focused on the new theme of the “band on tour” with groupie adventures and police raids.

seen as belonging to the tradition of the trademark flourishes of singers and musicians of earlier eras. Above all technical noises, sounds made possible by new amplifier and musical instrument technology as well as by sound effect machines, were increasingly developing a life of their own.

Artist-producers like the Englishman Joe Meek, who literally cobbled together a wide range of different technical effects (e.g., the sound of a toilet flushing played backward); the Americans George “Shadow” Morton and Phil Spector, who were able to experiment freely in their collaborations with artificially created girl groups; and famous Motown artists, arrangers, and producers like Berry Gordy Jr., Norman Whitfield, and the songwriting and production team Holland-Dozier-Holland, rang in the 1960s with an increasingly colorful palette of sound designs. Yet above all in hippie culture and the forerunners of 1970s “prog rock,” the sounds lost their clear correlations—such as cosmic, oceanic feeling (Meek), emotionality (Spector), and angry virility (the famous power chords of Beat bands like The Who)—and instead came to stand for new and indeterminate aural experiences. This shift is also reflected in the architecture of the songs: whereas in pop songs the chord changes and the relationship of verse, bridge, and chorus are synchronized with turning points in the content of the lyrics and/or their dramaturgy, in psychedelic songs like “Itchycoo Park” by the Small Faces, “Crimson and Clover” by Tommy James & The Shondells, and above all “I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night” by The Electric Prunes, the chord changes and the verse/bridge/chorus distinction are placed in such a way as to foreground particular sound effects. It could almost be argued that the Prunes no longer take the stimulus-response scheme of a body- and dance-based rock and pop music as their conceptual foundation, but instead seem to take the durations involved in seeing as their point of departure: in their music, sound effects last about as long as one would normally stand before a painting in a gallery. The pace of listening begins to resemble that of seeing.

In the mid-1960s, light shows began to respond to this *visualization* of pop-music architecture. At concerts in clubs such as the Middle Earth or the UFO in London, the Matrix in San Francisco, and Creamcheese in Düsseldorf, materials and instruments as varied as color organs, found and alienated film footage, chemicals mounted on slides and subjected to heat to form bubbles and other shapes, projections, and so forth were employed to provide a visual equivalent to the contemplation on increasingly elaborate sound effects. Certain light-show groups became well known and differentiated themselves from one another stylistically. The Joshua Light Show in San Francisco worked with a range of different instruments, including color wheels and overhead projectors.<sup>5</sup> At the UFO club and other British venues, Mark Boyle and Joan Hills primarily used slides and film and had specific relationships with particular bands, for whose music and shows they developed special sets of effects. Andy Warhol designed his own patterns for the slide projections that accompanied his Exploding Plastic Inevitable show.<sup>6</sup> And how the light-show phenomenon got started specifically in Germany is described by the author Bernd Cailloux in his quasi-autobiographical novel *Das Geschäftsjahr 1968/69* (The Fiscal Year 1968/69), which is based on historical fact and in which the narrator and his friends build a highly successful light-show business.<sup>7</sup>

5 Christoph Grunenberg, “Politik der Ekstase: Kunst für Geist und Körper,” in *Summer Of Love: Psychedelische Kunst der 60er Jahre*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 11–59.

6 A famous documentary by Ronald Nameth documents the Exploding Plastic Inevitable in action, though unfortunately not with the accompanying live or recorded music but with studio recordings from the first album by The Velvet Underground.

7 Bernd Cailloux, *Das Geschäftsjahr 1968/69* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).



Contemplative listening was not foreign to the various notions of a total experience involving all the senses which were circulating in this milieu at the time, and many of the efforts of light-show designers went in a similar direction to that of experimental, so-called absolute films. Terry Riley, as a figure from the world of minimal music who sometimes operated on the fringes of pop music and who drew a remarkably sizeable audience with psychedelic inclinations in the 1960s, worked together with experimental filmmakers and in 1969 produced the videotape *Music with Balls* with the sculptor Arlo Acton and the video engineer John Conney; it wove together psychedelic images into a “rich mantra of color, sound, and motion,” as Gene Youngblood writes, into “phantasmagoric convolutions of spatial dimensions.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the image worlds of new abstract experimental films by John and James Whitney, Jordan Belson, and others who drew upon the tradition of absolute film, the famous “tunnel of light” sequence from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*—also referred to as the “Star Gate sequence”—provided the primary inspiration for numerous light shows, especially later ones, which could still be experienced in German discos as late as the mid-1970s. This sequence, in which the eye of the observer/camera races through a world of dramatic color contrasts toward the perspectival vanishing point, corresponded to the musicalized type of seeing that savored long-drawn-out but at the same time rhythmic and forward-moving sound effects and delighted in corresponding streams of abstract but powerful images. After all, as sense data, sound effects were just as powerful, just as psychotropic, and just as much in need of completion as the unique human voices that preceded them. Just as the sound of the voice demands to be completed by the image of its sexy originator, in the same way an endless wah-wah orgy calls for corresponding images that help to make it recognizable and that take something that would be an object of helpless fascination as pure sound and incorporate it into the world of the imaginary. Just as everyone who heard Jim Morrison’s voice simply had to know what its owner looked like, so everyone who heard the lengthy, “wide-screen” instrumental orgies of Cream, Love, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and many others wanted to know *what they looked like*. The answer to this question, however, no longer took the form of the images of stars’ bodies—except in the case of stars like Jimi Hendrix, whose body was completely psychedelic in all of its movements and its outfits—but of largely abstract image worlds. Although these worlds were inspired by experimental and abstract films and new video technology, they did not seek to realize a utopia of the fusion of sound and image, but initially merely sought to complete the necessarily incomplete pop-music event.

The situation is somewhat different as regards the phenomenon of the strobe light, which appeared at the same time and to some extent in the same clubs, scenes, and milieus. Instead of providing a digressive type of listening with image worlds and material for visual absorption, the strobe light focuses attention on the present moment and on the here and now of one’s own physicality. Thus, it is popular with scenes and subcultures that are interested in heightening these aspects, for example with dance and orgy scenes, in conjunction with cocaine and amphetamines. “The strobe light seemed to be just what the public had been waiting for. It loved the effect from the start, its rebellious flickering, its electrifying, liberating nature. The strobe light destroyed the old dance forms; it made them impossible.”<sup>9</sup> The effect of the strobe light was also disorienting, and in this sense it was similar to psychedelic atmospheres and functioned as a kind of stimulant, thus lending itself to musical worlds other than

<sup>8</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 293.

<sup>9</sup> Cailloux, *Das Geschäftsjahr*, 60.

the sprawling and meandering sounds of the global prog rock of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thanks to the revival of dronelike music from the 1990s to the present, but also thanks to techno culture, the strobe light has thus managed to survive until today. It also, of course, had precursors in avant-garde films like Tony Conrad's famous *The Flicker* (1966).

## Art and Graphic Design: Covers, Posters, and Flyers

But in addition to the images and image worlds that came into play while actually listening to music or dancing at concerts or in clubs, there were other images that had become even more important: record covers, which were now heavily designed. The commodity that preceded the record in the history of the music industry, the score, was also, in graphic design terms, often an ambitious experimental canvas for an ever richer vocabulary for the representation of music. Yet decorated scores contained drawings, paintings, and less often also photographs which tended to refer to the title, mood, or genre of the piece rather than to its performers, despite the fact that some of them were quite famous. For the most part, the 78-rpm 10-inch shellac records as well as their early successors in jazz and rhythm and blues still had standardized covers with the record company's logo and a bit of informative text. However, the two new formats introduced in the course of the 1950s (hence during the first pop-music decade)—the 45-rpm 7-inch single and the 33 1/3-rpm 12-inch long-playing record—would soon be lavishly designed. Two visual strategies emerged in the process that were also at work in a similar manner in pop music's other visual dimensions: the documentary appeal of proximity and precise observation, in contrast to decorative opulence.

The purpose of the first of the strategies, of course, was to heighten one's sense of proximity to singer and performer. These intentions were served by increasingly high-resolution images of the faces and bodies of the performers, and above all by photographs showing them at work, either live or in the studio (e.g., The Beatles on the cover of *Let It Be*), as well as by the ever more ubiquitous pictures of stars in fan magazines and the teen press. Moreover, beginning in the late 1960s, album covers were more and more often produced in gatefold format, which offered twice as much surface area for images. In the context of the strategy just described, but also in response to the increasing authenticity of rock culture, these images were more and more frequently tour photographs of the kind one might find in a press report or personal journal, everyday scenes of the rock-star life, with—in the case of certain bands—the additional (and often even legitimate) suggestion that the images in question depicted the real life of the band.

In the case of the hippie bands from San Francisco—for example on the first and third Grateful Dead albums, in each case on the back—we see their actual home, the communal life of the group and its friends; the first Grateful Dead live double album, *Live/Dead*, includes photographic documentation of the group's specific relationship to San Francisco. In general, the genre of the live album, which has by this point become a fixture throughout the pop-music world, is dominated by the typical photographic documents of journalistic tour reporting. And the albums, released once a year on average, are regarded, especially by the longer-lived bands, as standing for life stages that they have spent together.

The other, more decorative visual strategy, by contrast, attempts to find visual equivalents more for the feeling and the atmosphere of the music than for the lives of those who produced it. These equivalents, however, do not tend to be the kind of abstract correspondences, developed with the help of graphic

design and abstract painting, that gained currency during this period (from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s) in jazz and New Music under the influence of the New York School. On labels like Impulse! and Blue Note, an abstract expressionism broken down into pictorial “badges” or identifying signs was often successfully turned into the logo of jazz. More common in the world of the new pop music, were social and geographical places of longing: Scottish landscapes in the case of the Incredible String Band; a California beach or a Henri Rousseau-style idyll in that of The Beach Boys’ *Smiley Smile*; a 3-D image of a magic land for *Their Satanic Majesties Request* by The Rolling Stones.

Above all, however, visual artists and graphic designers discovered the new genre for purposes of their own, taking advantage of ever new folding schemes to offer an ever larger surface for creative design. It is no accident that, as soon as 12-inch record covers were introduced, Andy Warhol, who at that time was still active as a graphic designer, adorned a number of them with his highly stylized drawings for the record label Prestige: Warhol’s camp sensibility never could have found an outlet in classical applied contexts. Record covers provided photography, illustration, graphic design, and other genres that primarily flourish in the areas of advertising and public relations with a new field of activity. Instead of placing themselves in the service of the predetermined meaning of a product, here they could to a great extent generate meaning themselves, without having to restrict themselves to the anointed elites of the gallery world. This facility naturally also made record covers attractive to visual artists, and not just those who were at odds with the art gallery’s form of presentation, such as Warhol and above all his British pop-art colleagues Peter Blake and Richard Hamilton, both of whom famously contributed one Beatles album cover each to the course of world history: Blake with the cover for *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*,<sup>10</sup> and Hamilton with the cover for the so-called White Album (in addition to the white cover with the band’s name in raised lettering on the front, Hamilton also designed the accompanying collage poster).

In addition to such prominent individual artistic achievements, record covers also provided a platform for a wide range of styles and genres that, although they were widespread in the everyday culture of café painters and art classes, otherwise would never have ended up in the historical archive of visual forms. Thus, record covers have preserved an otherwise forgotten brand of hippie surrealism that was nonetheless widespread in its day and lent its stamp to countless record covers, reflecting psychedelic and later speed- and death-metal culture. Among historical surrealists, it is probably most closely (but still only remotely) related to the work of Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst. The same is true of an activist, African-American variant of this style that operated with African symbols and appeared on free jazz and funk album covers of the early 1970s. London agencies specializing in record covers, such as Hipgnosis in the 1970s and Assorted Images in the 1980s, defined the contexts in which bands like Pink Floyd and Genesis (in the former case) and new wave culture (in the latter) were received by providing powerful image worlds for bands that were now no longer performing as often as they had been in the past nor were as visible in other arenas. Comics of the most various styles were also extremely important; after all, they were as good at formulating the riddles and mysteries that were typical of pop music as they were at disseminating their solutions. Robert Crumb illustrated every song on *Cheap Thrills*, an album by Janis Joplin’s first band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, while a Dutch artist by the name of Peter Pontiac, who was influenced by Crumb, did the same for an edition of the legendary Bob Dylan bootleg *Little White Wonder*—a subset of the record-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Walter Grasskamp, *Das Cover von Sgt. Pepper: Eine Momentaufnahme der Popkultur* (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 2004).

ings that later were released as *The Basement Tapes*—which was widely distributed at the time. For the visionary Afro-futuristic funk records of his bands Parliament, Funkadelic, and the Brides of Dr. Funkenstein, George Clinton employed teeming, intricate comics that led into an endless labyrinth of branching significations.

There was hardly a single visual strategy that went untried, from fantasy escapism to every conceivable kind of attempt to use sex and violence to shock. Nevertheless, images of the artists, however they were staged, continued to be the most important constant of album covers. Nor did the iconoclastic culture of punk represent an exception to this rule. Even in punk's struggle against the stars and the embarrassingly inflated nonentities of arena rock and traditional pop, it made sense to show what someone who wanted nothing to do with them looked like. Post-punk and indie rock were every bit as fond of showing the faces of their lavish inconspicuousness as were the various factions of the so-called style wars ("The Face") that had been raging since the early 1980s. The outfits of New Romantic culture were ultimately more enduring in their influence than the music of bands like Visage and Classix Nouveaux. And indeed, a genre of dramatic pop music that emerged in the late 1980s in Japan and whose protagonists took their inspiration from the New Romantic look was quickly given the genre name "visual"; a belated effect of this culture is the contemporary German teenage band Tokio Hotel.

It was only techno culture and its efforts at anonymization, pursued in the context of a critique of great subjects and creators, that put an end to this phenomenon. Not only were 12-inch records with nondescript covers, often as white-label pressings (hence completely anonymous), for a long time the rule as storage media; even the CDs of electronic, digital techno, and post-techno music, which became increasingly important beginning in the mid-1990s, made do without photographs of the artists. Instead, techno culture witnessed the revival of an abstract brand of graphic design that no longer looked the same but nonetheless was rooted in the same cultural logic as that propelling the boom in jazz album cover abstraction in the 1950s and 1960s. In Germany, the artists include Angela Lorenz, who developed abstract design concepts for various Berlin- and Vienna-based record labels, and Bianca Strauch, who defined the look of the internationally successful Cologne techno record company Kompakt.

But whereas record covers were designed to inform the private space of the home and to lend meaning to rooms individually—meanings that had only an indirect connection with the public sphere—there were other artistic and graphical means for influencing public space directly. True, posters that advertised concerts were usually practical vehicles of an information strategy that often was locally organized, and their designs often incorporated the current album's cover. Nevertheless, at least three times in the history of pop music they developed a wholly independent life of their own, which in each case had a great deal to do with the self-conception of a specific public sphere of pop music: the first time in the hippie San Francisco of the years 1966 to 1970; then in a number of centers of the punk movement, above all, however, again in California, this time in the beach towns around Los Angeles;<sup>11</sup> and finally in the heyday of the flyer culture of the techno underground in Berlin, Ibiza, and Great Britain.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Paul D. Grushkin, *The Art of Rock: Posters from Presley to Punk* (New York: Abbeville, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mike Riemel, ed., *Flyer Soziotope: Topographie einer Mediengattung* (Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen Verlag, 2005).

In San Francisco, the scene consisted of strongly art-nouveau-influenced, psychedelic comic-book artists and illustrators with a personal connection to the bands, such as Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley, who later also designed record covers more and more frequently, for example for the Grateful Dead. Punk culture, with its informality and its inventiveness not only in the realm of design but also in the development of new formats, produced the *documenta* exhibition participant, graphic artist, and illustrator Raymond Pettibon, who has been highly regarded in the gallery world since the 1990s. Echoing Charles Baudelaire's praise of the mobile Constantin Guys, who documented fashions and the culture of everyday life, Benjamin Buchloh has celebrated Pettibon as Guys's contemporary equivalent. In the greater Los Angeles area in the decade before he became a famous artist, Pettibon's posters and photocopies advertised countless concerts by Black Flag, the Minutemen, the Nig-Heist, and many other bands from the LA punk underground.

The flyer culture was more a global phenomenon than a local one. Flyers were less often posted in public on trees and utility poles and tended instead to be displayed in trendy bars and boutiques. They were often the only available source of information about events whose individual acts were less important than the indication of place and time, especially when the events themselves were illegal. Unlike the black-and-white punk handouts and the posters of the hippie psychedelic artists, which often worked with a single spot color, flyers frequently were anywhere from multicolored to gaudy. They bear witness not only to a reception-based connection between a particular visual world and a particular musical one, but above all to a production-based connection between them: flyers and digital music were now frequently produced on the same computers, using programs with very similar user interfaces. By the second half of the 1990s at the latest, the common user interfaces of sampling and graphic-design programs came to resemble each other in their symbolic languages. Thanks to the increased capacity of computers, one could now organize music and store sound files on ordinary home and office computers.

Hip-hop culture, too, has always insisted that it is not to be identified with a musical practice alone. Hip-hop—and this point is something that all of its programmatic pronouncements have constantly repeated since the days of Afrika Bambaataa and KRS One—consists of three different disciplines: rapping/DJing, break dancing, and graffiti. Graffiti is a visual language related to urban spaces and their marking, which, as it were, actually accomplishes through direct interventions in those environments what in many hip-hop lyrics remains a claim or a demand: it establishes that a particular street corner, block, or neighborhood and its specially designated residents (e.g., the gang that calls the shots, the people who were there from the beginning, the poor) belong together, and that there is something like a privileged connection with a place beyond possession or a traditionalist understanding of what it means to be native to an area.

If one holds with authors like Walter J. Ong and Roger D. Abrahams,<sup>13</sup> such references to the artist's own place are also effects of media-related developments. According to them, television and radio have replaced the culture of written communication with a secondary type of orality, whose linguistic gestures are distinguished more by a showing and verbally taking possession of things that are immediately given than by abstract distancings. In the first

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle . . . : Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (New York: Aldine de Grueter, 1970).

phase of the hip-hop movement, the images—whether in videos or on album covers—threw their weight behind specific locales and constantly referred to concrete areas in band names and lyrics. The gesture of insistent naming (of one's own person, one's specific context, etc.)—which characterizes the content of raps, the images of the often documentary or pseudo-documentary album covers and videos, and the written images of the graffiti artists—seeks to adapt and invert the primary recognition effect of pop music: whereas sound recordings produced a kind of media deficit, which provoked a demand for the image of the artist, in hip-hop sounds and images are produced in order to confirm the artist's own existence. The deficit has migrated from the mediated nature of incomplete transcription to the reality of the politically excluded or socially forgotten figure, who seeks—with the help of answers to a question that precisely has not been asked—to confirm his or her own existence in the mode of media visibility, which of course does nothing to solve the problem of his or her political absence. With the internationalization of hip-hop culture, however—a process that has accelerated considerably since the mid-1990s—many of its localizing gestures have become empty and mobile: the focus is no longer on particular places but on places of a particular kind. In a certain sense, this shift represents the triumph of a ruse of universal reason: only by emptying local references does it become possible to make statements of general political interest.

### The Closing of the Incomplete Format: Music Videos and Pop-Music Exhibitions

When music television began in 1980 with the advent of MTV, it represented the standardization of a format that, as we have seen, already had been tried and proposed quite frequently in the history of pop music as a solution to the visual deficit of the pop-music record—the so-called video. The video is a short, self-contained film like that which in principle formed the basis of the soundies and corresponded to the 7-inch single. Also consistent with the logic of pop music was the fact that, as a rule, one could not purchase videos but only the associated songs. The pop song must be left incomplete; the recipient must and should take some action to make up this incompleteness: by realizing his or her own trendy lifestyle and its poses, by engaging in fan activities such as the collection of objects and images, by going to concerts and other relevant places, and finally also by turning on the TV set.

Thus, the video has always remained a supplement, albeit one that—in a gesture that is typical of supplements in the work of the theorist who introduced them, Jacques Derrida—gradually tended to take the place of that which it was merely supposed to complete.<sup>14</sup> At certain times and in certain musical styles, spectacular videos have been more important than the song, particularly when new artists or new poses were introduced or when important directors—Julien Temple, Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, David Fincher, and Alex Cox, to name just a few who began with music videos—produced magnificent short films. The more lyrics-based pop-music genres, to say nothing of those organized around serious musical endeavors, dispensed with music videos. Other genres couldn't afford them: hard, avant-gardist, aggressive music that did not enjoy the music industry's favor or its generous video budgets did without them. It was not until the second decade of the music-video era—the 1990s—that there emerged a music-video counterpart to the musical low-fi ethic and aesthetic of independent rock. In Germany, videos like these were produced, among others, by

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

Smoczek Policzek, a team consisting of Deborah Schamoni and Svenja Rossa, who worked for bands like Die Goldenen Zitronen and produced the classic “Crazy Music” for Whirlpool, in which the musical technique of sampling is reflected for the first time through a visual methodology using found footage: the track, which consisted of Roxy Music samples (“Editions of You”), was illustrated by footage from a Roxy Music performance on *Beat Club*.

Nevertheless, during these two decades the video format, which was tailored to the pop song, strengthened the latter against other possible musical formats: neither techno culture’s aesthetic of endlessness with its very different temporalities nor the musical ambitions and specific dramaturgies of the wide range of non-mainstream musical cultures, such as indie, metal, hardcore, Goth, industrial, and the various electronic scenes, were able to prevail against the enthronement of the three-minute standard with AABA song structure. Therein, however, ultimately lay the limits of the music video itself, which in its most accomplished instances took its own structure as its theme: Michel Gondry made fun of the uncanny looping character of the musical form by introducing a new replica of Kylie Minogue at the beginning of each new verse and sending her walking through the same city streets. For “Around the World” by Daft Punk, the same director drew from *Das Triadische Ballett* (The Triadic Ballet) by Oskar Schlemmer to establish a choreographic movement that represented interlocking circular grooves in almost the same way that image-sound utopias had dreamed of doing it a hundred years before.

Thus, in addition to its highly polished but—in cultural and economic terms—increasingly unimportant continued presence on a dwindling number of music television programs, the music video now has become more a subject of high art, particularly of experimental film, from which it has repeatedly drawn inspiration itself. Contemporary short films—and this is something one can observe in Oberhausen year after year, at the Kurzfilmtage (Short Film Festival), which has also created a special award for music videos—often make use of the structural possibilities of the song or of other musical pieces. Except that here the poles are inverted: whereas it was previously the task of the images to stabilize music and wrap it in traditional cultural conventions like narration, while the music itself dealt with other, more contemporary experiences, today it is often musical conventions like song and track that lend a reassuring frame to experimental images, a frame that helps to contain potentially disturbing new components of the visual. Be that as it may, in both directions short pop-music films help to close the constitutively deficient genre of the pop song and thus to bring it to an end historically.

For some time now, image-sound connections in pop music, like their precursors—opera, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, abstract image-sound connections in modernism, intermedia, etc.—have been regarded as a worthy subject for museums. Their history and their present are reflected in museum exhibitions. Often, such exhibitions are still the product of a specialized interest, for example in a certain historical moment (such as the beginning of German punk culture in the exhibition *Verschwende Deine Jugend*, [Squander Your Youth], at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 2002), or in the dual talents of artists who are also active as musicians or vice versa (from *Crossings* at Kunsthalle Wien in 1996 to *It’s Not Only Rock ‘n’ Roll Baby* in Brussels in 2008). Increasingly, however, the focus is being placed on the subject itself in all of its complexity, for example in exhibitions curated by bands in which all of their visual decisions (flyers, covers, videos, outfits, etc.) are presented as equal in importance to their musical decisions, as in the case of *The Sensational Fix*, an exhibition that was curated by the band Sonic Youth (in Malmö, Düsseldorf, and elsewhere in 2009). In exhibitions like these, it is established once and for all that pop music has always been an audiovisual genre; the joke is that it has always been

delivered incomplete—it is up to the recipient to assemble it and supply the missing pieces. This may be one reason for the emergence of a culture of downloading and file sharing that is once again weakening the visual component of pop music. Perhaps it will lead to the emergence of a new and interesting form of incompleteness.





- Stills from *Fun in Acapulco* (1963) by Richard Thorpe.  
© Paramount 2003 (DVD).

## Richard Thorpe *Fun in Acapulco* (USA 1963)

It is certainly somewhat surprising that Richard Thorpe, an experienced Hollywood veteran who had already been working as a director for forty years, not only shot the official Elvis Presley-fan rock film (*Jailhouse Rock*, USA 1957), but also doused this ultra-flamboyant, campy examination of glamorous rock-and-roll manhood in the gaudy colors of a spectacularly failed commercial for Mexico as a vacation spot. This film is a magnificent specimen of a series of decadent products of the crisis-ridden Hollywood of the early 1960s, which, in its battle with television, couldn't come up with anything better than piling up an assortment of shiny attractions that weren't available on television: fabulous colors, visual effects tied to the big screen, and an aesthetic of the overwhelming. Like the other films of its ilk, *Fun in Acapulco*—while it ended up being made on a more modest budget—is a smorgasbord of visual attractions, though there is one key respect in which it differs from Cinemascope Westerns, Roman epics, and 3-D movies: its principal attraction is the oiled and glistening, often scantily clad body of its star, which the camera never lets out of its sight. There is thus little interest in the story that has washed him up on the beaches of Acapulco or in the touristic clichés that get him singing—mariachi music and female bullfighters. Instead, the film is primarily interested in trussing him up like a sacred erotic pinup.

Largely disdained by fans at the time of its release, *Fun in Acapulco* went on to become a reservoir from which many of the great iconographers of pop-music history came to drink: be it Guy Peellaert in his series of paintings with short texts on pop history, ultimately published as *Rock Dreams* (1974), or Mike Kelley in his installation *Unisex Love Nest* (1999) on the history of queer pop culture, iconographers turn to images from *Fun in Acapulco* to exemplify the godlike body of the star, particularly the scenes that precede and follow his dive from a cliff into the sea. Fans who were interested more in authenticity than in glorification criticize precisely this scene for a series of continuity errors. Elvis swims to the point of his dive, gets out of the water, and his hair is combed. He dives off the cliff, pops up out of the water, and his hair is combed again. Yet even Elvis's more humorless fans take consolation in the burlesque, inhibited sexual paraphrases of the soundtrack, such as the classic "(There's) No Room to Rhumba in a Sports Car." The deeper truth within the frivolous untruth of this highlight of the anti-documentary tradition of pop-music illustration is attested by the fact that Elvis, of course, was never in Acapulco in his life.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject, see Guy Peellaert and Nik Cohn, *Rock Dreams: Rock 'n' Roll for Your Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); Eric Braun, *The Elvis Film Encyclopedia: An Impartial Guide to the Films of Elvis Presley* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1997); and Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

D. A. Pennebaker  
*Dont Look Back* (USA, filmed 1965, released 1967)

*Dont Look Back* is not the only of D. A. Pennebaker's documentaries with which the director exercised a decisive influence on the history of pop music and its visual components. With *Monterey Pop* (USA, filmed in 1967 and released in 1968), Pennebaker shot the first festival film, which in many respects established the parameters for *Woodstock* (USA 1970). The footage he shot at the rock-and-roll festival of Toronto in 1970 (including that of Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and John Lennon) became the raw material for a whole series of subsequent films. And the substantial documentation of the last concert of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust tour (the concert was styled at the time as "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide") was also directed by Pennebaker (*Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, briefly released in Great Britain in 1973 but not released worldwide until 1983). Yet with *Dont Look Back*, he invented the genre of the backstage documentary.

And indeed, Bob Dylan—on his second tour of England in 1965—was the ideal material for the thesis that the new brand of pop star finds his performative truth not so much through his production on stage as through his production behind it. This motif, which we meet in many famous Pennebaker segments—in *Monterey Pop*, for example, when he briefly shows the stagehands steadying the amplifier boxes from behind while Jimi Hendrix seems to penetrate them from the front on "Wild Thing," or when he lingers appreciatively over Bowie's orgies of makeup application—makes for the most fascinating segments of the tour film: we watch as Dylan—in dressing rooms and taxis, on walks to the stage, while fooling around with devoted fans like Donovan (whom many regarded at the time as his British counterpart), and at press conferences—tests and refines the persona with which he then finally takes the stage: snooty, scowling, surreal, and constantly performing. When Dylan is on stage, one has the impression that he sometimes allows himself a certain distance from this figure and becomes wholly involved in the music—but only until he has to tell off yet another annoying heckler who can't forgive him for electrifying folk music.

But *Dont Look Back* is also famous for something else: in its first three minutes, Bob Dylan performs his latest single at the time of the filming, "Subterranean Homesick Blues." He is standing in an industrial setting and holding up little cards that contain the rhyme word or some other prominent word from the line that is currently playing, in the same way that cue cards are shown as memory aids to TV performers by assistants standing off-camera. He makes no attempt to create the impression that he is singing or is entering into a special relationship of any kind with the music being played extra-diegetically. At the left edge of the screen, we see the famous Beat poet and great Dylan role model Allen Ginsberg in conversation with Dylan's old Greenwich Village pal Bob Neuwirth. The performance lasts as long as the song; this portion of the film has been presented separately from the rest of the film countless times (e.g., on TV music programs). It is often described as the first music video, because for the first time a song and its artist are represented by a cinematic and directorial concept rather than by a simulated musical performance or the suggestion of a narrative inspired by the song.

Pennebaker is widely regarded as one of the principal exponents of the Direct Cinema movement, an American school of documentary filmmaking—and precisely *Dont Look Back* is consistently cited as a textbook example of that school's



- Stills from *Dont Look Back* (1965/1967) by D. A. Pennebaker.  
© Sony Music 2007 (DVD).



– Stills from *Dont Look Back* (1965/1967) by D. A. Pennebaker.  
© Sony Music 2007 (DVD).

realistic strategies: a noninterventionist camera, no voiceover, and no influencing of the events. And yet it is informative to note at what points this film does in fact break with certain principles of Direct Cinema. For example, Pennebaker breaks the rules at one point by using archival material to show the young Dylan performing at an anti-racist rally in the South to support a campaign for voter registration. The “video” at the beginning also represents a break with the principle that a film should be assembled only in the order in which it was shot: the cue-card segment was not filmed until after the tour.

It is precisely at these points, however, that the film pays tribute to Bob Dylan the pop persona, which cannot be constructed purely on the basis of either his behavior or by exposing his attitudes and poses. The film pays tribute on the one hand to the changing of an image, the alteration of a persona vis-à-vis earlier versions, and on the other hand to the need to have at one’s disposal various means of expression that can be synchronized. No pop persona can be constructed on the basis of live performances alone—it also requires moments of control. Dylan himself had the idea for the opening sequence, and Pennebaker shot three different versions of it (the other two are used by Martin Scorsese in *No Direction Home*, USA 2005). The opening sequence thus functions as a kind of key: Dylan’s backstage persona becomes truly readable as a persona only when it has already been introduced in all its venerable snootiness.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject, see Dave Saunders, *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007); Heinrich Detering, *Bob Dylan* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007); Diedrich Diederichsen, “Osiris und die Götter der Performance,” in *Eigenblutdoping* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2008); and Axel Honneth, Peter Kemper, and Richard Klein, eds., *Bob Dylan: Ein Kongreß* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

Michael Cooper  
 Album cover for The Rolling Stones,  
*Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967)



- Cover of The Rolling Stones' album *Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967)  
 by Michael Cooper.  
 © Decca 2002 (CD).

When the new Rolling Stones album came out in December 1967, just in time for the Christmas rush, the accusation was almost universally made that it was modeled on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which The Beatles had released six months earlier. There was a fair amount of truth to the accusation; it's just that a copy is often not only better than the original: it also does a world of good for a band, which otherwise regards it as its mission to bask in its eternal rock-and-roll ideology of being identical with oneself, when it gives itself over to unbridled opportunism. Paradoxically, imitation so agreed with The Rolling Stones that for once in their career they were truly original, and instead of tautologically confirming their own truth as macho blues-rock bad boys, they dared to engage in wild, daring, and inventive sonic and conceptual experiments. The album cover too represented progress through imitation: The Stones were brazen enough to hire the same photographer whom The Beatles



- Cover of The Rolling Stones' album  
*Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967)  
by Michael Cooper.  
© Decca 2002 (CD).



had used to photograph *Sgt. Pepper*. However, Michael Cooper was an old friend of Keith Richards, and had come up with the idea of making a film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* before Stanley Kubrick—with Mick Jagger in the role of Alex. But whereas Cooper was under the direction of the artist Peter Blake when he worked for the Beatles, for the Stones he was not only chief photographer and stage designer but also head artist and designer.

The goal: the classical photograph of the artists not only had to outdo the truly expanded band picture on *Sgt. Pepper*; it also had to do justice to those responsible for the groundbreaking sounds on this record. Cooper flew to New York with the band, and they made their way to what was essentially the only photography studio in the world that could produce 3-D images with a substantial degree of depth. There, a fantastic backdrop was constructed of cellophane mountains and edible-looking churches and cloisters, and the Stones took their seats in front of it as timeless psychedelic fantasy preachers attired in magic hats, Robin Hood vests, and other frivolous and “effeminate” lunacy, in which Brian Jones (his last album) and Keith Richards apparently took special pleasure. They also recorded the experimental music almost entirely by themselves—with a little help from guest pianist Nicky Hopkins. The full beauty of this unique band portrait, however, can be completely appreciated only by those who own either the original release, on which it was actually printed three-dimensionally, or its reprint from 1980, after which all the masters of the 3-D photograph were definitively (and intentionally) destroyed.

In addition to this orgy of hyperbole, however, Cooper also felt the need to adorn the inside cover with additional elements, similar to those utilized by Blake for The Beatles or by Cal Schenkel for The Mothers of Invention: a richly allusive art- and pop-historical collage, an impossible maze, flowers, fruits, non-European sacred objects, and an observatory. The back cover features the personal style of another artist: the illustrator Tony Meeviwiffen added the four elements to the track list in the form of an underlay in a pseudo-Chinese style mixed with elements of art nouveau and William Blake. Here, chaos and theories of everything, which in the case of The Beatles were reined in to form a triptych of three types of images, really begin to swirl; in the end, they do not offer any ultimate message to be deciphered, aside from the fact that precisely hyperbole and competition are elements of pop music that should not be underestimated. Often, the effect of these elements is much more salutary when they are allowed to run riot than when they are fenced in and contained within concise artistic concepts.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject, see *Michael Cooper: You Are Here—The London Sixties*, ed. Robin Muir (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999); *The Early Stones: Legendary Photographs of a Band in the Making*, photographs by Michael Cooper, foreword and commentary by Keith Richards, interviews by Terry Southern, compiled by Perry Richardson (New York: Hyperion, 1992).



Ed Thrasher

Album cover for *The Grateful Dead, Live/Dead* (1969)

Most striking about the cover of this double album by the California hippie institution The Grateful Dead is not the psychedelic and vaguely political kitsch on its colorful front and back covers (the work of a certain J. D. Thomas), but the black-and-white photographs on its inside cover. In the late 1960s, live double albums surged to the center of attention. The Beatles (*The Beatles*, 1968—the so-called White Album), Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention (*Freak Out!*, 1966), and Bob Dylan (the first to release one with *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966) had all come out with important double albums that—with their longer playing times and more lavish cover designs—seemed to make a quantitative claim to the status of “artwork” for pop-music products. But the live double album, which stood for a brand of music-making unrestricted by the cultural formats of the record industry and the capacity limits of the media in use, went further and combined this claim with new sounds. The rule of thumb was the longer the songs (which were now called pieces, were sometimes grouped together into suites, or were even regarded as symphonies), the better. The Grateful Dead long held the record in this arena, which was not surprising, as they rarely played for less than four hours live. On three of the album’s four sides, each piece flows directly into the next. Thus, one hears The Dead for almost sixty minutes without interruption as they jam their way from the instrumental reverie “Dark Star,” which at times is entirely free, through “Saint Stephen” and “The Eleven” to the rhythm-and-blues crowd-pleaser “Turn On Your Love Light.” How was this presentation to be illustrated? How was one to represent the attraction of the live concert, the liberating power of the long songs, the collectivism of an ensemble that improvised without a leader and was nonetheless made up of individualists, and above all the role of the Grateful Dead as the “house band” of San Francisco’s hippie revolt, whose primary commitment was to its local audience?

The seasoned cover artist Ed Thrasher solved the problem by creating a constellation of three different types of photographs. Herb Greene—today a world-famous chronicler of the West Coast scene—took separate portraits of the band members which stressed their individual characters through body language, outfits, and poses, as if each one of them bore full responsibility as an individual artist. From Florence Nathan and Jim Marshall, by contrast, come photographs of the entire band and pictures of the audience as seen from the stage, that is, from the vantage point of the band. These images depict a completely unrestrained and uninhibited mass audience, one that is clearly situated not in a conventional auditorium nor in the sort of extraterritorial area usually reserved for festivals but in the middle of San Francisco. The formally conventional, seventeen-part arrangement—for which Thrasher used twelve separate images (one image appears in four different sections, another in two)—succeeds in linking liberated crowd scenes, the collective nature of the band, and the eccentric individualists who stand at the beginning and the end of the liberating series. Unlike the images in the photo arrangements on many other live double albums, these are not strewn chaotically across the cover in an effort to suggest the freaky communal everyday life of the band (an everyday life that includes the graphic designer’s workbench), nor do they rehearse the embarrassing gesture of the private photograph, with musicians waving into the camera. The portraits and live scenes adhere to the classical norms of the genre, and are laid out above and beside one another on a grid that recalls



- Cover of The Grateful Dead's album *Live/Dead* (1969) by Ed Thrasher.  
© Rhino 2003 (CD).

a musical score. Only in this way is it possible to illustrate what in 1969 was so unheard of as to be almost monstrous: that the *free* music of a few bohemians and eccentrics had moved the masses to take over the streets of the city.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject, see Hank Harrison, *The Dead Book: A Social History of the Grateful Dead* (New York: Links, 1973); Carol Brightman, *Sweet Chaos: The Grateful Dead's American Adventure* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998); Herb Greene, *Dead Days: A Grateful Dead Illustrated History* (Petaluma: Acid Test, 1996).



- Stills from *Gimme Shelter* (1970) by Albert and David Maysles with Charlotte Zwerin.  
© Warner 2009 (DVD).

## Albert and David Maysles with Charlotte Zwerin *Gimme Shelter* (USA 1970)

The Maysles brothers are among the pioneers of the Direct Cinema movement. Unlike D. A. Pennebaker, however, pop music was only one of many different subjects for them—when they set out to document the 1969 U.S. tour of The Rolling Stones, the only relevant item on their filmography was a documentary on The Beatles' 1964 U.S. tour. It soon became clear that the main event of this tour was the concert in Altamont, California, which had been blown up into a rock festival. And indeed, that concert, the economics and local politics involved in putting it on, and the emerging corruption of the counterculture are the most important subjects of the film, in which a great many businesspeople can be seen talking on the phone (some of them with long hair and some with thinning hair). Nevertheless, it is also a film about rock music on stage. In addition to the Stones, it features performances by Jefferson Airplane, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and Ike and Tina Turner, yet it never gets around to creating the culinary situation offered by other concert films. The live concert isn't brought to us in the movie theater the way it is by Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock* film. The concert is constantly being interfered with: both by the film's look at its questionable background and by the disturbing events that took place during the Altamont Festival, in the course of which the Hells Angels ultimately murdered the young African-American Meredith Hunter right near the stage while The Rolling Stones were playing. While we don't see the murder, we are, so to speak, there when it happens, somewhere down below in the crush of bodies.

With *Gimme Shelter*, the mistrust of megastars and arena rock was articulated for the first time in a manner that didn't distance itself from rock music's aesthetic values. On the contrary, one could argue that here, for the first time, what would later become a knee-jerk accusation was expressed in the name of that music and in a more or less understated way: the charge that those values were being *sold out*.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see *Let It Bleed: Die Rolling Stones in Altamont*, ed. Siegfried Schober, trans. Veith von Furstenberg and Siegfried Schober (Munich: Hanser, 1970); Albert Maysles, *A Maysles Scrapbook*, eds. Michael Chaiken, Steven Kasher, Sara Maysles (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2007); Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974); Jonathan B. Vogels, *The Direct Cinema of Albert and David Maysles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).