In 2005, a multi-location exhibit was undertaken at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The exhibits purpose was to present the overlooked history of the concept of visual music in art, across mediums. The exhibits accompanying publication, *Visual music: synaesthesia in art and music since 1900*, states:

> Not to be confused with sound art or all manner of work inspired by music, visual music constitutes a distinct aesthetic tradition based on shared precepts and metaphysical aspirations. Its long-neglected history encompasses everything from abstract painting to experiments with color-organ light projectors to abstract films.[1]

The history of visual music can be traced to the late 19th century and music analogy in painting, but it wasn't until the early 20th century that its full potential began to be realized. From the beginning the connection between the various artistic forms – literature, music, painting, etc. – has been linked to synaesthesia, which is "the production of a sense impression relating to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body."[2] In more artistic or poetic language, "the union of the senses or the interchangeability of sensory perceptions."[3]

Visual music is as diverse within avant-garde and experimental cinema, this single medium, as it is across mediums. The film artists officially connected to this theoretical and artistic concept include Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, and Stan Brakhage, to name a few. Each of these artists represents a different way of utilizing the theory and concept of visual music. While these artists are traditionally connected with visual music, even within the limited scholarship that has been done, Hollis Frampton falls outside of

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[1] Kerry Brougher. *Visual music: synaesthesia in art and music since 1900*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005) 10.
[2] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Revised, 10th Edition,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[3] Brougher, 10.

this scope. Yet, his film *(nostalgia)* (1971), in its structure, evokes the theory behind the musical compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach, which he called 'inventions.' For Bach, the term 'invention' went back to its usage in rhetoric as opposed to a musical reference; it was "a conventional metaphor for the idea behind a piece, a musical subject whose discovery precedes full-scale composition."[4] The pieces themselves were structured as two voices, one in the treble and one in the base clef, as opposed to a single voice, or melody line, and an accompaniment, or chord progression.

In this paper I propose to trace the various ways that those artists who have already been connected to visual music - specifically, Eggeling, Fischinger and Brakhage, as representative of three different approaches. Utilizing both the theoretical writings of some of these artists, as well as those critiquing them, I hope to outline these three different approaches to the visualization of music within the avant-garde cinema. Ultimately, I will compare Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* to the theoretical and artistic construct of J.S. Bach's Two- and Three-part Inventions, in an effort to expand the concept of visual music in cinema to a previously unexplored realm.

Visual Music and Aural Music

From its inception, the concept of visual music has sought to explore the connection between the various senses known as synaesthesia. In an effort to explore, or experiment if you will, with this connection, various artists and engineer developed what were known as color organs. Simply put these color organs were instruments which where attached to a standard organ. These attachments would project colored light onto a white screen with the colors varying according to the different notes. According to a pamphlet from the late 19th century by

[4] Laurence Dreyfus. *Bach and the patterns of invention*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 2.

the artist and inventor Bainbridge Bishop, there were harmonics in the color spectrum similar to the harmonics in music. In his pamphlet he stated:

> It appears to me that light is the fundamental, and the three rainbows make up the harmonic series or chord; and on this foundation it is possible to evolve a new science, the "Harmony of Light," somewhat analogous to music, or the harmony of sound, and one which may be associated with music, and designated by the signs and symbols of musical harmony.[5]

The experimentation with color organs wasn't just about visualizing sound but exploring how image and sound were connected. There is clearly a phenomenological exploration occurring here, but there is also an exploration of discourse implicitly found in Bainbridge's description of color harmonics in relation to music harmonics. At the root of visual music, though, is a concept of temporality which directly links to the cinematic technology that was in its infancy around the same time as the publication of Bishop's pamphlet.

A more contemporary understanding of visual music addresses this temporality. Brian Evans in his essay "Foundations of Visual Music," describes it as "time-based visual imagery that establishes a temporal architecture in a way similar to absolute music. It is typically non-narrative and non-representational (although it need not be either). Visual music can be accompanied by sound but can also be silent."[6] According to Evans, cinema, which is a temporal medium, shares a foundation with the very concept of music. He says:

> The tenets of musical expression give us a method for moving the viewer/listener through time. With visual composition, we create consonance and dissonance. The ability to resolve dissonance to consonance provides a syntactical basis for temporal design and the composition of visual music. Our compositions can be a single shot moving through phrases. We build phrases through repetition, contrast, and variation of the many visual dimensions including direction, speed, shape, size, and color.[7]

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[5] Bainbridge Bishop, "A Souvenir of the Color Organ, with Some Suggestions in Regard to The Soul of the Rainbow and the Harmony of Light," (New Russia, Essex County, NY, 1893)
[6] Brian Evans, "Foundations of a Visual Music." *Computer Music Journal* 29.4 (2005): 11.
[7] Evans, 23.

Evans's argument that roots cinema and music in this temporality is held up by any book on music theory. Even the language used to describe music addresses some of the same concepts described above. For example, in George Thaddeus Jones's book Music Theory, he describes music as "essentially a temporal art. Unlike some other arts, traditional painting, for example, the performance (and perception) of a piece of music takes place during the passage of time. Music may be defined as organized pitches occurring in time."[8] So much emphasis has been placed on cinema's connection to the visual arts and their theories, that its connection to the theory of aural arts has been overlooked. Even, perhaps, in those early filmic explorations of visual music. The concept of temporality, which cinema and music share, lies at the root of filmic explorations of visual music.

An Historical Analysis of Filmic Explorations of Visual Music

Richter, Eggeling, Ruttman, Fischinger, Lye and Brakhage. These names represent a sample of artists who have experimented with visualizing music cinematically, meaning experimented with this concept by utilizing the medium of film. Beginning with the titles of many of their films, a connection is made between cinema and music. It is not just about the use of music with or in cinema, depending on whether the film was made in the pre- or post-sound. These filmmakers all explored the connection between the sensory experiences of sight and hearing, expanding on the experimentation begun in the late 19th century. Again this experimentation had everything to do with temporality. The very material of film is temporal. Film moves and therefore has duration, regardless of whether the film is narrative or non-narrative. Walter Schobert in an article on German avant-garde filmmaking states, "Ruttmann, Eggeling and Richter wanted to set

[8] George Thaddeus Jones, Music Theory, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1974) 11.

form, color and surface in motion. The wanted to paint with the medium of time."[9] Clearly filmmaking provided an opportunity to experiment with temporality in a way the still visual arts could not. I separate the earliest filmmakers who were experimenting with temporality into two different categories: those whose films evoke the idea of music through the use of abstract visual images and those whose films have visual images which respond to music.

The two early filmmakers who fall into the first category are Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling. Richter's film *Rhythmus 21* (1921), which Schobert analyzes as being part of and influenced by the Dadaist art movement, animated geometrical, constructivist shapes in rhythmic fashion that dealt with the illusion of depth in space but also temporality. The choice of title for the film, *Rhythmus 21*, is the first connection of the visual to the musical. The very nature of the movement of these shapes is primarily about the rhythm. The film had a syncopated rhythm similar in nature to that of ragtime, a popular form of jazz which emerged just before the turn of the 20th century, most notably the works of Scott Joplin. Ragtime, as a form of jazz, was a distinctly American genre of music, which made its way overseas. A 1913 NY Times article notes that American ragtime was being played in all of the theatres and music houses in Europe. This is still almost 10 years before Richter's film, but one can't help but wonder if ragtime was in Richter's head when he made his film of syncopated squares. The very boldness of the squares themselves and the often bright, staccato-like way in which they moved on the screen evoked a brass or horn section in a jazz band.

Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale* (1924) takes the connection between music and film a step further than Richter's simple, syncopated squares. Eggeling's filmic images were so directly

[9] Walter, Schobert, "'Painting in Time' and 'Visual Music': On German Avant-Garde Films of the 1920s," *Expressionist Film--new Perspectives*, Ed. Dietrich Scheunemann, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003) 239.

musical in nature that the visual music aspect becomes even more concrete. As Michael O'Pray points out "It is a more thoughtful and complex metaphysical form of abstraction, more resonant, as it title suggests, with ideas related to music in the fuller sense. In other words, it has a complexity akin to musical forms."[10] (O'Pray, 15-16) Eggeling's images are abstractions of a music staff and a piano keyboard, which appear throughout the film, not in their entirety but with enough presence to make a conscious connection between them. There are moments when scales and glissandos – a glissando is a quick running of a finger from one end of the octave(s) to the other on a piano – appeared multiple times, as did images which evoked were reminiscent of a clarinet or oboe and a string section, based on the shapes of the images themselves. These were abstracted images of musical notations or of the shapes of musical instruments themselves. Richter's film could be seen as evocative of jazz, while Eggeling's film was more evocative of orchestral music. Yet both these films visualize music completely through imagery. There is no sound to hear. Both films were made prior to the use of synchronized sound in filmmaking. Yet, sound, and more specifically, the traditional concept of music is evoked in these films. It is a deviation from the earlier synaethestic concept of visual music – the connection between specific colors and specific notes. It begins to broaden what the concept of visual music actually can be.

Juxtaposed against this is what Walter Ruttmann began and, I would argue, Oskar Fischinger perfected. Obviously these filmmakers' films differ from Richter's and Eggeling's films in that they were meant to be accompanied by music, or if after sound, included a synchronized musical soundtrack. Again Schobert addresses the nature of the images, Ruttmann's figures, by contrast [to Richter's], seem far less mathematical; they are more playful

[10] Michael O'Pray, *Avant-garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2003) 15-16.

and dancelike, lighter and more impressionistic."[11] Ruttmann's *Opus 1* (1921) has shapes reacting to the music, but these shapes are much more amorphous, not constructivist like Richter's nor specifically musical like Eggeling's. They are foggy, softer shapes that appear to almost dance to the music. Although the connection between the shapes and how they react to the musical score, which would have accompanied the film's presentation live, is murkier than with the works that Fischinger did later. From an historical perspective Ruttmann's film came out before Richter's film, although both came out in the same year. Clearly there was an impetus to visualize music or cause images to dance to music which resulted in two very different, simultaneous approaches to film's ability to visualize music.

Although Fischinger's titles move away from referencing the connection between sound and image, his films advance what Ruttmann began. Fischinger's images truly dance and move to the music, or so it seems. In *Kreise* (1933) the colors, the circles and the spirals move in and out like an elaborate dance. *Studie No. 6* (1930) utilized dashes in moving configurations which were interestingly reminiscent of Busby Berkeley, whose first film as a choreographer was in 1931. Fischinger's often colorful animated images responded more succinctly to the music, but the images were more concrete than Ruttmann's amorphous, foggy shapes. Fischinger's approach to visualizing music makes a connection to another art form, that of dance. Music, dance and film are all deeply rooted in exploring temporality.

Len Lye's contributions, beginning in the 1930s, build off of Fischinger's, not necessarily by direct influence, but in the connection to dance and kinetic movement. Lye was fascinated with kinetic energy and its filmic manifestations. Roger Horrocks describes how Lye's exploration of the material elements of film by drawing directly onto the celluloid helped to

[11] Schobert, 239.

visualize his interest in kinetic energy and movement:

> What had previously discouraged filmmakers (apart from a few experimenters) from employing this "direct" method of animation was the jittery effect caused by the slight differences between one frame and the next. It took a special kind of artist to regard this jitter as an advantage, as a display of kinetic energy, and as a visual equivalent of musical resonance.[12]

While much of the analysis of Lye's films focuses on his direct film process, his interest in kinetic energy and the visualization of dance places his films into the category of visual music. Lye's use of popular dance music as the accompaniment, in films such as *A Colour Box* (1935), Horrocks points out that Lye "genuinely liked the music and conceived of his visuals as a 'vicarious form of dance.'"[13] Lye's contribution to visual music ultimately had more to do with movement, but again his exploration is rooted in the concept of temporality.

Stan Brakhage's contribution to the history of visual music comes as much from his theoretical writings as it does from his films. Clearly, Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1962-1964), which P. Adam Sitney refers to as his culminating essay in mythopoeia, evokes in the titling of the various sections musical imagery, the first of which was a prelude. The filmmakers addressed thus far seem to have been trying to literally visualize music, but it seems that Brakhage's interest was more deeply rooted in a theoretical concept. As abstract as Richter, Eggeling, Ruttmann, Fischinger and Lye may have been, Brakhage takes the abstraction of music through film to a higher level. In his own writings Brakhage addresses his approach to filmmaking in reference to sound. He says:

> I now see/feel no more absolute necessity for a soundtrack than a painter feels the need to exhibit a painting with a recorded musical background. Ironically, the more silently-oriented my creative philosophies have become, the more inspired-by-music have my photographic aesthetics and my actual editing orders become,

[12] Roger Horrocks, "Reading with the Body," *Authorship and Film*, Ed. David A Gerstner & Janet Staiger, (New York: Routledge: Routledge, 2003) 183.
[13] Horrocks, 183.

> both engendering a coming-into-being of the physiological relationship between seeing and hearing in the making of a work of art in film.[14]

Brakhage's understanding of his own theoretical underpinnings is rooted in that relationship between seeing and hearing which echoes the theoretical underpinnings behind visual music.

Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* & Bach's Two- and Three-part Inventions

My first reaction to Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971) was that it reminded me of a piece of a classical music that I had played in my youth, Bach's Invention No. 13, BWV 784 in A minor. The reaction was instant, sensory and intellectual, but it initially also seemed illogical. Connecting Frampton's film to a piece of music seemed oddly out of place. In the history of visual music, I have yet to come across Frampton's name in connection with that concept. It's not that I heard Bach's composition while watching the film, but there was a quality to *(nostalgia)* which evoked a certain quality from the Bach. What I ultimately realized was that it was the structure of the images and voiceover narration that reminded me of the structure of the musical composition.

Bach's two- and three-part inventions were conceived of as pieces for two voices. These particular compositions are contrapuntal; in musical terminology counterpoint delineates the relationship between independent voices in regard to contour and rhythm and interdependent harmonically. According to Laurence Dreyfus, Bach's use of the word invention goes back to pre-enlightenment thinking and usage of rhetoric. Dreyfus explains:

> According to the traditional usage, invention denoted not only the subject matter of an oration, but also a mechanism for discovering good ideas. An orator had at his disposal an entire array of such tools – called the 'topics of invention' – and with these topics one devised or 'invented' a fruitful subject for a discourse.[15]

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[14] Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings, 1964-1980*, (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1982) 49.
[15] Dreyfus, 2.

For Bach these inventions were a discourse, in the same way that oratory and debate would have been, the manifestation and the type of voice was merely different. These are the key aspects of music theory that need to be recognized in order to understand the connection between Bach's invention and Frampton's film.

Thematically, *(nostalgia)* is a discourse on memory. In developing this theme into its unique discourse, the structure of the film cannot be separated from the subject. It is, in fact, that the subject of the discourse emerges only through its structure, not unlike the function of rhetoric utilized by Bach. Frampton's film presents a series of photographs along with a voiceover narration, which is actually describing a photograph. In the beginning, the image and the sound appear to be in discord. It is as if there are two voices – one visual, one aural – that are disconnected. As the film progresses the relationship between the photographs and the narration emerges. The narrated photographic description precedes the image that it describes, so that the narration is out of sync with the image. A similar structure occurs in Bach's inventions. In the beginning, the two voices – one in the treble and one in the bass clef – appear to be out of sync, or disharmonious. Yet calling either the film or the musical composition out of sync, though, is misleading, for in reality it is in this seeming asynchronicity that the harmony of the discourse in both pieces emerges.

For the Bach invention, the two voices begin to echo and repeat phrases throughout the entirety of the composition, not unlike a musical round. The listener must remember the various phrases of each voice and be attuned to their return. It is because of the initial, illusory discord that the harmonics of the musical composition are revealed. In a similar manner, Frampton's structure reveals the harmony between the image and sound in order to develop the subject of memory. *(nostalgia)*'s structure is actually one of three voices – the initial voiceover narration,

the photographic image, and the memory of the previous narration. In order to make the relationship between the sound and image, the viewer must remember the narration from the previous photograph while simultaneously comparing it to the photograph being viewed and listening to the narration. In other words, the viewer experiences the act of memory while watching the film. Not unlike Bach's invention, the viewer must become attuned to how the relationship between sound and image create the discourse on memory. While there are many aspects of analysis that can be applied to Frampton's film, it is this particular one which reveals a musical theoretical foundation connecting it back to the concept of visual music. The film reveals the relationship between image and sound in a structured way that is truly musical.

The relationship between the intellectual understanding of the structure of a musical composition or a film and a full sensory experience is ultimately what creates the discourse in both Bach's inventions and Frampton's *(nostalgia)*. It is a reintegration of the intellectual exercise with the phenomenological experience that underlies the concept of visual music. It is an expression, or an attempt at an expression, of our various senses so that they are not separate sensory experiences, nor separate from an intellectual understanding of structure, but a full mind and body experience. Frampton's film, a film which is a discourse on memory, would not work on the level that it does without this complete integration. By looking at this film as visual music, a deeper level of meaning on memory, film and sound is revealed in a truly artistic way.

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