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Research in Practice

Keywords: 'Aesthetics of Music,' 'Mainstream Consumerism,' and 'Joy'
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I will be exploring three keywords with the expectation that my research will inform my final year independent proposal. The keywords I will be discussing are: the 'aesthetics of music', 'mainstream consumerism', and the concept of 'joy' in art and design. My research will be supported by images and theorists relating to these terms.

Aesthetics of Music

The role of visuals in music advertising is expansive, including campaigns, music videos, tour posters and billboards. I will be focusing on album artwork. Album artwork could be considered 'art' in its own right. However, it is not free-standing as it is a marketing tool indicating to a body of work. An image used as album artwork is a representation of a collection of music, which therefore means that signs within the artwork act as symbols pointing to something beyond the image. Album artwork is generally an audience's main point of entry to experiencing the album. It precedes unconscious questions such as, "What is this going to sound like?" and "What will I experience if I purchase this album?"

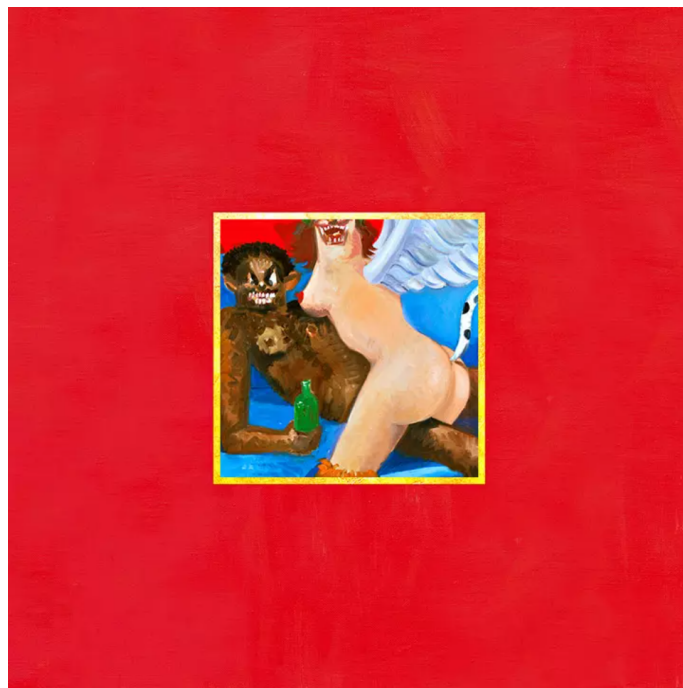


Figure 1 - Painting by George Condo for Kanye West
(West, 2010)

Kanye West commissioned contemporary artist George Condo to paint the album artwork for his fifth album, "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy." Condo stated that West intentionally wanted "something that will be banned" as a publicity stunt (Tomkins, 2011). In the finalised

artwork, West is depicted laying naked with an armless creature sat on him, similar to a nude woman. West was successful in his marketing strategy, as the artwork acted as a discussion point that resulted in its censorship from several stores. The album then debuted at No.1 in the USA and later won the award for Best Rap Album at the Grammy Awards in 2012. This perhaps speaks to the power that striking imagery has to generate discussion for the purpose of marketing.

Perhaps visual aesthetic is at its most important during the early stages of an artist's career. It is in these formative stages that audiences quickly discern an artist's identity and message based on image, not simply the music alone. The album artwork for Lady Gaga's "The Fame Monster" (2009) was shot by French fashion designer and photographer Hedi Slimane (Gaga, 2009).



Figure 2 – Cover for "The Fame Monster" (Gaga, 2009)

The artwork shows Gaga in an avant-garde angular wig with a shoulder-padded black coat. She covers most of her face with the collar of the coat, only revealing a glare.

Having previously worked as the creative director for Dior Homme, and being known for collaborations with Karl Lagerfeld, David Bowie and Vivienne Westwood, Hedi Slimane has an esteemed reputation in the fashion industry for his photography and style. Most audiences will not have this context when reading this image, but his background in fashion is felt through the use of fashion editorial conventions; a black and white image, bohemian costume, sans-serif typeface similar to that of Dior. This image does not lend itself to a conventional 'pop' album of the 2000s. The artist's mysterious image may also generate public conversation. Moreover,

collaborating with someone with a level of prior ‘success’ in the arts goes a long way to elevate the status of a new artist. Thus is the power of visual communication.

In the pre-digital era, audiences would skim the shelves of record stores to purchase albums with little ability of ‘trying before buying.’ The importance of the visual for an album was elevated as the image may determine whether it would be ignored or purchased.

Nowadays, album artwork is mostly viewed as a 1080 x 1080 pixel image on a smartphone once the album is being played. This is a result of streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music. Subsequently, it could be considered that the visual representation of an album is no longer necessary or relevant (Reginald, 2017). However, I would suggest this is untrue. This was recently illustrated by artwork for the posthumous album, “Shoot for the Stars Aim for the Moon,” (2020) by deceased artist Pop Smoke.



Figure 3 – Virgil Abloh’s artwork for “Shoot for the Stars Aim for the Moon” (Wolf, 2020)



Figure 4 - Replaced artwork for “Shoot for the Stars Aim for the Moon” (Smoke, 2020)

Virgil Abloh is a contemporary artist, architect, and designer who was commissioned by Pop Smoke to create his album artwork prior to his death. Upon its release, the artwork gained much criticism from fans who felt it was disrespectful to the deceased rapper. A petition to have the artwork retracted gained over 20,000 signatures and led to Abloh’s work being replaced by that of another designer (Wolf, 2020). This speaks to power that aesthetics in music can have to

cause a reaction. The outcry at how the music was being visually represented shows that the visual aesthetic of music is just as important as the music itself.

Mainstream Consumerism

There are some artists who seek to celebrate, parody or appropriate popular culture iconography in their work. PC Music is a London based record label whose artists take musical influence from electronic music and 2000s pop stars such as Britney Spears (Ducker, 2014). The artists under the PC Music label create heightened maximalist songs that have been considered to “tow the line between sincerity and parody” of commercialist pop culture (Canovas, 2020). As a result, their style has been met with polarized views (Zoladz, 2015). Furthermore, their work is often accompanied by a recognisable visual aesthetic. Visual artists contributing to this genre include photographer Hannah Diamond and graphic designer Timothy Luke. Consider the similarities in aesthetics between a promotional image of Britney Spears in 2000 (Figure 5) and self-portraits by Hannah Diamond in 2019 (Figure 6 & 7).



Figure 5
Britney Spears
(The Onyx Zone, 2009)



Figure 6 & 7
Hannah Diamond, self-portraits
(Diamond, 2019)

When discussing the influence of consumerist pop culture, it may be worth considering to what extent is the work ironic or celebratory. In an email correspondence on 14th April 2021, PC Music graphic designer Timothy Luke stated:

“I’m more interested in picking out and celebrating different gestures that are the most interesting or most magical about these cultures [...] some people interpret different parts of PC [Music] as cynical, when really from the inside everyone is really pretty earnest about their appreciation of things.” (Luke, 2021)

Mainstream consumerist culture can be celebrated in more exaggerated ways. “Hey QT,” is a song released in 2015. Its artist, QT, is fictitious and was solely constructed for this song. QT is portrayed by performance artist Hayden Frances Dunham at live events. The music video for “Hey QT,” imitates advertisements and product placements; a fictitious energy drink “DrinkQT” was created for the video, and the video closes with the slogan, “Looks fizzy, tastes bouncy, feels QT” (Bradley & Pablo, 2015).



Figures 8, 9 & 10 - Stills from “Hey QT” music video
(Bradley & Pablo, 2015)



Figure 11 - Taken from “Dismaland” by Banksy (Brown, 2015)

Appropriating pop culture is not always so vibrant. Banksy’s “Dismaland” (2015) is a grotesque example of taking popular mainstream imagery and exaggerating it into something dark. Dismaland was an exhibition located at a disused lido in Weston-super-Mare that took recognizable iconography from the Disney franchise and distorted them into obscure installations. Banksy stated, "I guess you'd say it's a theme park whose big theme is 'theme parks should have bigger themes'," (2015).

When addressing consumerism, graphic designer Julian Naaier goes as far as to compare visiting Lidl supermarkets to attending a church; a space that is open and inclusive for all people – rich and poor. He created “Lidl is My Religion” when studying at Cibap School of Design in 2018. For his end of year exhibition, he used the Lidl branding to design stainedglass windows, custom-made bags, and an altar where people could bow to pray. During a phone call with me on 10th May 2021, Naaier stated that the project was in fact about consumerism and that all his work is done “with a little humour.” Despite this, Naaier did not intend for “Lidl is My Religion” to be necessarily funny. He challenges the relevance of religion; in the same way that some attend a church on a Sunday morning, some want to “go to Lidl in the morning and they’re happy for the whole day after that.” Appropriating consumerism can at times be controversial.



Figure 12 – Stained glass window
(Naaijer, 2020)



Figure 13 – Lidl poster
(Naaijer, 2018a)

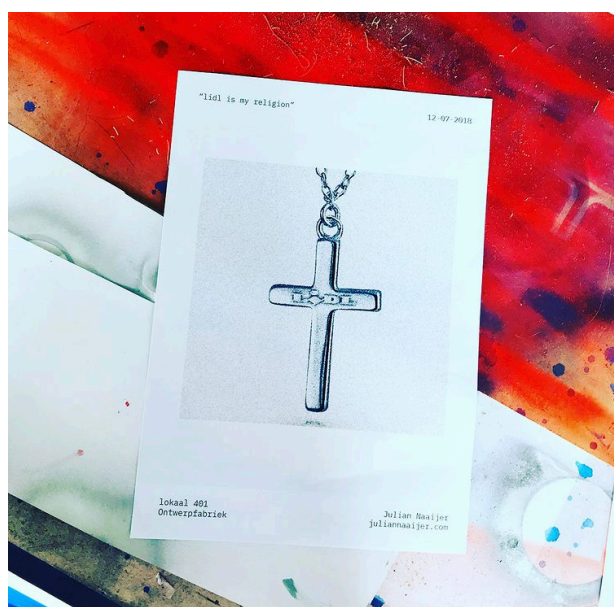


Figure 14 – Lidl poster
(Naaijer, 2018b)



Figure 15 – Lidl shrine
(Naaijer, 2018)

These examples all show how mainstream consumerism can be used to create something new and impactful. I have established that I am interested in design that takes references from popular culture to generate a response that is playful, outlandish and controversial at times.

Joy

Artists and designers have the powerful capability to elicit emotional responses from their viewers. As such, an artist is able to craft a piece of work with an intended emotion in mind. I am particularly interested in joy as an emotional response to design, the recognisable attributes of 'joyful' design, and the role of the designer in bringing joy to society.

Whilst many pieces of art or design may be appreciated by a viewer, others are capable of causing a powerful visceral affect. In his book, "Camera Lucida," (1981) literary theorist Roland Barthes differentiates two responses or "affects" when looking at photography. Upon looking at most photographs, Barthes states:

"What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect...I believe this word exists in Latin: it is *studium*, ... a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity. It is by *studium* I am interested in so many photographs." (p. 26)

Here, Barthes refers to the general appreciation of an image. Comparatively, Barthes goes on to write that the second affect an image can have is that it breaks or "punctuates" the 'studium.' He states, "This time it is not I who seek it out...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me." (p. 26) Whilst most images will simply "please or displease," few have the capability to "pierce" (Barthes, p. 27).

When considering emotions as affected by 'piercing' here, feelings of negative connotation such as grief, shock or sadness may be associated. However, I propose that a response of overwhelming joy is just as plausible. If an image has the capacity to "punctuate the studium" with forms of grief, then it also has the ability to do so with joy.

Ingrid Fetell Lee is a designer and author who has undergone research into the relationship between surroundings and human emotions. Although much of Lee's ideas relate to interior design, I believe her concepts are applicable across many creative practices. From her research, Lee coined the term "aesthetics of joy" to refer to recognisable design attributes that evoke measurable feelings of joy (2018a). These aesthetics are categorised into ten themes: Energy, Abundance, Freedom, Harmony, Play, Surprise, Transcendence, Magic, Celebration, and Renewal (2018a). I will not be exploring all of these themes, however, I will highlight some

examples as part of my research. Some attributes of joyful design may include the use of negative space to create a sense of freedom, S-shaped curves to suggest expansion, and vibrant colours to communicate energy.

Furthermore, Lee believes that colourful expressions of joy in Western society are often dismissed as displays of childishness or immaturity, resulting in the repression of joy in Western civilisation (2018b). This cultural bias against displays of joyfulness, such as the use of bright colour, is evident in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Theory of Colours," (1840) where he writes:

"...it is also worthy of remark, that savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colours; ... that people of refinement avoid vivid colours in their dress and the objects that are about them, and seem inclined to banish them altogether from their presence." (p. 130)

This suggestion highlights ethnic, colonialist and classist prejudices within Western art and design. Goethe's words also exemplify how art is often taught through a predominantly white European lens that determines what is deemed "good" or "bad" (Khandwala, 2019). If artists are to inspire joy through our work, perhaps it is worth investigating how joy is displayed and perceived in design across cultural lenses other than the white European. Could decolonising design lead to further acceptance of different styles and expressions of joy within mainstream Western culture?



Figure 16 – Black joy (Branch, 2020)

Photographer Marcus Branch demonstrates ‘black joy’ through his photography. He “revels” at the ability of the black community to find “joy, light and celebration amidst the darkness ... joy is a power,” (Branch, 2020).

Rather than dismissing exuberant displays of joy, I would argue that the power of joyful design is that it can be used as a force for good. This seems particularly significant in the current political and environmental climate.



Figure 17 – Burrill’s installation (Fulcher, 2020)



Figure 18 – Love, Hope & Joy (Fulcher, 2020)

For example, Anthony Burrill was commissioned to design a four storey high installation across a building in Covent Garden in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. He used letterpress wood type to promote “Love, Hope & Joy” in bright colours against a white backdrop. It was available for public viewing from June til October 2020, with the intention of saying something that would be “life affirming” and in doing so remind the public of the “positive human qualities” needed during the pandemic (Fulcher, 2020). His installation can also be examined in the context of Lee’s ‘aesthetics of joy.’ ‘Abundance’ is communicated through repeated pattern and a multi-coloured palette. The circles are akin to balls or balloons which would be considered ‘Play.’ The amplified scale and proportion corresponds with ‘Surprise’.

Upon seeing the installation, Burrill stated that he “gasped” (PA Media, 2020). His emotive response suggests more than a general appreciation, and perhaps affirms the point that joy can result from an image punctuating the “studium” as much as grief or distress could. In today’s climate, society may rely more heavily on designers to ‘pierce’ them with joy.

Upon exploring my three keywords, I realise I have covered quite a diverse range of themes. However, I believe a common denominator across all three is that each include examples of art

and design that are playful, controversial or 'larger than life.' Several examples have stimulated wider public conversation.

Of the three key areas, there are unanswered questions I would like to investigate in the area of joy. There is the potential to look at how brand identities for festivals create expectations of joy, how decolonising design could encourage joy, and the use of design to tackle depression in deprived areas through street art. I would be interested to look at the chemical effects that joyful design has on the brain.

Consumerism and aesthetics of music could potentially be considered subtopics when looking at joy. For example, I could consider the power of humour in commercial advertising or examples of joyful design in the music industry.

Some questions I'd be interested in researching would be, 'To what extent does the general mood in society affect the aesthetics of music?', 'What role has graphic design played in positively influencing public mood during times of difficulty in the 20th and 21st centuries?' and 'How can graphic design be used to promote joy as part of societal wellbeing?'

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Figure 1 - West, K. (2010) My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy. Album. Def Jam, USA.

Figure 2 - Gaga, L. (2009) The Fame Monster. Album. Interscope Records, USA.

Figure 3 - Wolf, C. (2020) 'Virgil Abloh designed Pop Smoke's album cover. Now he's redesigning it', GQ Magazine, 3 July. Available at: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/virgil-abloh-pop-smoke> (Accessed 11 May 2021)

Figure 4 - Smoke, P. (2020) Shoot for the Stars Aim for the Moon. Album. Victor Victor, USA.

Figure 5 - The Onyx Zone (2009) *Nigel Parry Set 3* [Online] Available at: <https://theonyxzone.com/displayimage.php?album=4924&pid=23107> (Accessed 11 May 2021)

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Figure 12 - Naaijer, J. 2020. *'Back in 2018, This Digital stained glass window was part of my "Lidl is my religion" project. Which consisted of 3 screens combined with 50 spray painted shopping bags click this hashtag to see more -> .'* [Instagram]. 7 June. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBIWQdARr8/> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

Figure 13 & 14 - Naaijer, J. 2018. *'Some poster tests. "Lidl is my religion" 12-07-2018'* [Instagram]. 5 June. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bk2lVIPjn0a/> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

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