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Three Key Words: Storytelling, Semiotics and symbolism

Proposed question for Independent Project: How do artists create cohesive visual branding for musicians across album art, merchandise, and other relevant visuals?

In this essay I propose to explore three key words: storytelling, semiotics, and symbolism. My focus will be on these three topics and how they intertwine within the realm of music illustration, for example artists who create posters, album art and merchandise etc. for musicians and bands. Through investigation into existing artists in this industry, I plan to uncover the links between music and illustration, gain an awareness of how they visually reinterpret and capture the meaning within songs and albums, as well as analyse the symbolism in existing art in the music industry to grasp a better understanding in this area overall. My research will be supported by relevant theorists such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Jerome Bruner and Thomas A. Sebeok. This proposal will provide me with more knowledge and theory behind my practice and will construct a question for my independent project.

Storytelling

While investigating the intersection between music and art, it is understood the two creatives share a common ground of which storytelling is present, whether they stand alone or together. Alawi states “they are both forms of creative expression that can evoke emotions, tell stories, and communicate ideas” (Alawi, 2024). Looking deeper into both creative pathways individually, the dominance narrative has had within the music and art industries for years can be understood further in these quotes presented by creative professionals speaking on their individual professions. Wood (2023) expresses the power music holds, quoting Classical musician Pablo Casals, “Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to the heart” (Casals, Unknown), in that suggesting music is a form of communication deeper than some may consider. Similarly, artist Georgia O’Keeffe had a

comparable outlook within her own work, discovering a language that was crafted from more than just words, she wrote for an exhibition in the catalogue 'Foreword', "I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way — things I had no words for" (Abrams and O'Keeffe, 1926, p.23). Both quotes utter that audibly and visually, music and art provide an outlet of comprehension superior to any written language, when combined they become a universal dialect, it is indicated "visuals in music can transcend language barriers" (Alawi, 2024).

Paul Holbrook-Phillips of True Spilt Milk Designs is a post musician now illustrator for the music industry. He gives insight into his practise in an interview podcast called *All Creatives Now* (Stephenson and Harrison, 2024) expressing when he is given complete creative freedom, he gets the best results. He states that without being given a brief, his design process is built from the elements of "musical concept, the lyrics, or the theme of the record" (Holbrook- Philips, 2024, as cited in Stephenson and Harrison, 2024), essentially the illustrations unfold from the musician's lyrical story. There are comparisons that can be made between the ways in which the artists working amongst the music industry use visual aids to support the story telling aspect within the songs they create, as well as similar techniques implemented in the work of academic practitioners and picture book illustrators. Capturing the meaning behind the music is something the illustrator creating visuals for a musician must consider, "artists can evoke powerful emotions and create a lasting impact on their audience" (System Ent Corp, 2024). Likewise, Children's book Author Petr Horacek explains in an interview the characteristics a "good illustrator" takes into consideration when aiming to convey mood and atmosphere in a picture book, stating that "facial expressions" and "body language" come into play, however these feelings can be communicated "sometimes just by the colour" ("Why picture books are crucial to child development and

education”, 2023). Sonia Landes provides academic insight to back up Horacek’s statement suggesting that, “One role of pictures in a picture book is to enhance the meaning of a story by illustrating the words” (Landes, 2019, p51). It can be inferred by looking at quotes from a variety of practitioners that an artist who is aiming to depict a certain narrative, digs deeper than the surface to symbolise true meaning through their illustrations. Holbrook-Philips emphasizes this role of accuracy in his practise, in that he strives to represent the idea of the record as accurately as possible, ultimately “communicating what the core of the album is about through the art” is his top priority (Holbrook- Philips, 2024).

Semiotics

Paul Copley (2010) provides us with a simple definition of semiotics stating that it “is the study of the sign”, here he has provided the audience with the “straight” answer in its most simple form. However, he further indicates to the reader that theorists such as Thomas A. Sebeok (Sebeok, 2001), Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 2007), and Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, 1916) brought their own deeper insights to the idea and ultimately were “key to the development of semiotics itself.” (Copley, 2010, p.3).

By using academic resources, analysing compositional elements in posters in general using semiotics, and making comparisons to posters created for musicians will all assist in a better understanding of the process artists take when developing posters for the music industry. As there is not much academic research looking specifically into the themes of music related posters, making my own discovery’s using semiotic theory will overall aid in a better understanding in this area.

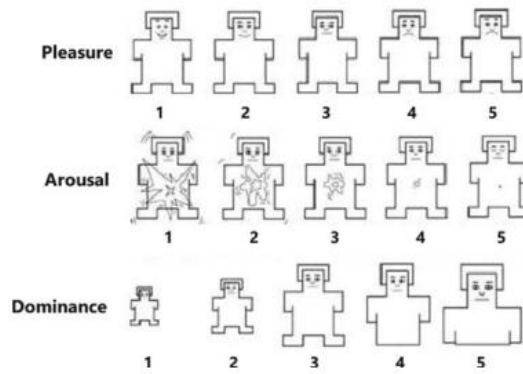


Figure 1: SAM scales for subjective ratings (Chowdhury and Varala, 2023)

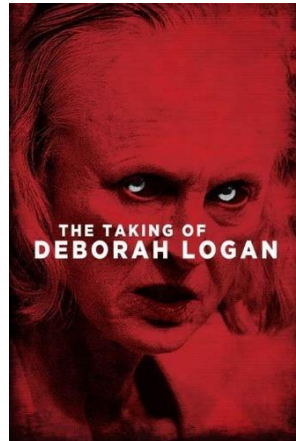


Figure 2: Poster 4 selected for semiotic analysis (Chowdhury and Varala, 2023)



Figure 3: Poster 5 selected for semiotic analysis (Chowdhury and Varala, 2023)



Figure 4: Poster 9 selected for semiotic analysis (Chowdhury and Varala, 2023)

Isfandiyary (2017) implies there is a multitude of components that are considered in the design process of a poster, in the instance the marketer is aiming to communicate a message to a given target audience. Through exploration into poster composition, a paper and study carried out by Chowdhury and Varala (2023) presented itself which guided the reader through a semiotic analysis of a variety of posters. The study that was carried saw ten selected posters that were observed by one hundred and nine randomly selected adults, they were tasked with evaluating the visuals exhibited using the *Self-Assessment Manikin Scale (SAM)* (see fig 1.) The researcher's semiotic analysis combined with the *SAM* scale investigation concluded that figure 2 expressed fear that was "achieved using human image and colour" and figure 3 was correlated with excitement "achieved using tagline and bright colours". Figure 4 was said to have expressed a "painful expression", semiotics suggests a clear examination that this image was use in a contextual sense which related to the narrative of the poster (Chowdhury and Varala, 2023, p. 224). This study has led to a deeper understanding of semiotic theory, this knowledge can now be applied to posters created for the music industry using similar assessment techniques to conclude how a given artist narrates the musician's song, lyrics and themes.

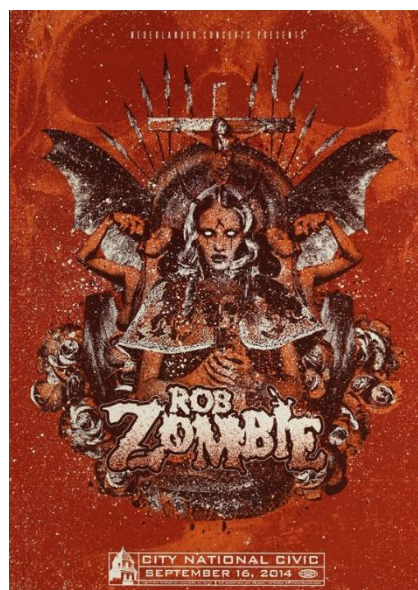


Figure 5: Rob Zombie Poster, Wilson, (2014)

Theorists have been fascinated in examining links between colour and emotional responses for years, dating back to a particularly notable thinker with Goethe (1810) and his study of the *Theory of Colours*. He wrote in a letter to Josef Stieler in 1829 that he wanted “to marvel at color's occurrences and meanings, to admire and, if possible, to uncover color's secrets” (Matthaei, 1971, p. 6). It is proven that universally around the world as humans we make the same connections between certain emotions and relevant colours, Jonauskaite (2023) states that she was involved in creating the *International Color-Emotion Association Survey* which supports this finding. When looking further into colour psychology it is believed that red is the colour that undoubtably “provokes the strongest emotions” (Cherry, 2023). It emits opposing meaning, evoking varying emotions in diverse contexts such as danger and anger, but also symbolising a feeling of love and passion (Bose, 2021). Looking at figure 2, the horror movie poster was said to have induced an emotion of fear in the subjects from their study, it can be implied through colour psychology alongside the movie plot (The Taking of Deborah Logan, 2014) that the audience’s immediate response to the film poster was due to the vibrant red colour that floods the posters entirety. A comparable case could be found looking at figure 5, we see a similar use of red being the primary colour that is present within this Rob Zombie music poster. It is questionable however did the artist choose to design with the red colour with the intentions of referencing Zombie’s music itself with a dark and intense atmosphere (Davis, 2023) or is it a homage to the cult classic movies he produced, those of which Damon Davis (2024) states he brought his “blood-soaked vision” to life? It can be inferred that the colour is an overall a representation of Zombies artist expression in both fields.

Symbolism

Theorist Jerome Bruner expresses an appropriate statement confirming the indispensable role of symbolism in art, of which is relevant and can be applied to music industry artwork. He says, “the corresponding principle of economy in art produces the compact image or symbol that, by its genius, travels great distances to connect ostensible disparity’s” (Bruner, 1997, p.65), suggesting that the many symbols we find within art are a form of communication, conveying deeper meaning to the audience by visual means.



Figure 6: Crown of Barbed wire, Tsang (2024)

Recently, rock band Metallica commissioned six artists to create posters of their visual interpretation of something that spoke to them from their newest album *72 Seasons* (Metallica, 2024). Illustrator Miles Tsang (2024) speaks on the symbolism elements he favours to include within his work in general, expressing his thoughts stating “I like loaded symbols. I like it when things mean something; if there’s an avenue where I can dive into it from that angle, then I find that attractive.” (Tsang, 2024, as cited in Chriazi, 2024), it can be

implied by his statement that imagery that carries an overall deeper meaning is more favourable, and best informs his work. Tsang (2024) Also speaks on his reasons for choosing to illustrate the Metallica song *Crown of Barbed Wire*, uttering it stuck out because its “imagistic” (Tsang, 2024, as cited in Chriazi, 2024). The Imagism Movement began in the early twentieth century founded by Ezra Pound; however, it can be argued that English philosopher and poet T. E. Hulme first developed the ideas on this poetry related topic (Poets.org, 2017). In his essay titled *Romanticism and Classicism* Hulme spoke on the language of poetry being a “visual concrete one....Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence” (Hulme, unknown, as cited in Poets.org, 2017). While this statement refers to the power poetry holds to allow the reader to conjure an image in their head from the expressive writings, Tsang’s reference to the movement is utterly relevant where illustrators collide with music. It’s the illustrator’s job to bring the music’s lyrics and images imagined while listening to a given song, to life, which is exactly what the artist did for the song *Crown of Barbed Wire* looking at figure 6. This can be proven looking deeper into the narrative of the song, Songtell (2024) describes this specific Metallica track, expressing the “lyrics paint a picture of a despotic ruler who is consumed by their obsession for the crown”, and that the song overall “serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of ambition and the downfall of those who seek power at any cost”. Analysing figure 6 its clear Tsang has illustrated the despotic ruler as a skeleton to represent the downfall of the royalty in this instance. It can also be implied the skulls that surround the throne are representative of the people the ruler has possibly killed, western culture suggests skulls are a symbol to warn or intimidate people (Give Me History, 2023). Symbolism of the lyrics in a literal sense is also present in the poster, with lines sang by Metallica such as “this crown of barbed wire”, and “Bleed as I rust on this throne”, visually we can see all elements from these words

illustrated in figure 6 and all this tells us is that symbolism is imperative for the artist when he develops his work. It is understood the artist has kept in mind composition theory to build a piece that tells a story of song. Scott (2021) breaks this theory down into two questions that could cross the mind of a creative when producing a composition, “what do you want to say?” and “How are you going to say it?”. Through previous analysis it can be concluded that Tsang’s aim was to express the lyrics to the audience in a visual sense bringing the words to life, and he did so, through symbolism hidden within the imagery he illustrated within his poster.

Through researching the three keywords, Storytelling, semiotics and symbolism, I have gained a better understanding and conceived a clearer direction in which I can take my writing when considering next years project. Exploring these topics separately, I have discovered links and overlapping relationships with positive potential of further exploration into certain areas relating to artists working alongside the music industry. Through investigation into the artistic side of this industry, it is evident that artists in this line of work can be closely compared to picture book illustrators. Comparable to an artist illustrating the words written by an author, in this instance it is the job of the illustrator to use symbolism and imagery to express to the audience the narrative of the given song or music, whether that be through the compositional aspects of the piece or visuals representative of the lyrics.

When thinking about my practice for next year I envision myself creating new promotional material and merchandise based on an existing album. Redesigning existing illustrations created for the musician already, a rebrand ensuring I am maintaining the bands aesthetics and genre and keeping a consistency throughout my designs. With my research so far, of which has led me to new thinkers and thoughts as well as the related ideas I have developed

for my practice, the question I conclude with and propose follows. How do artists create cohesive visual branding for musicians across album art, merchandise, and other relevant visuals?

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Fig. 5

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