

# Sound and Sight: The Political Power of Music in Visual Art

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of music and visual art as a medium for political and cultural expression, focusing on four distinct historical and sociopolitical contexts: propaganda in totalitarian regimes, the Civil Rights Movement, countercultural art of the 1960s, and contemporary activism like Black Lives Matter. It examines how music-inspired visual art has reflected and shaped public consciousness by conveying solidarity, dissent, and cultural identity. The analysis reveals shared strategies across movements, such as the emotional resonance of gospel in protest imagery, the psychedelic aesthetics of the 1960s, and the digital amplification of modern activism. By comparing these cases, the research highlights the enduring function of music-infused art as a tool for cultural resistance and political engagement, bridging historical and contemporary practices. Future research directions include exploring how digital media and transnational art networks are reshaping the visual language of music-driven activism.

## Keywords

1. "Music and Visual Art"
2. "Political Activism"
3. "Music and Propaganda"

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# Introduction

There is a widely held perception that throughout history, music and visual art have often intersected to critique and influence social and political movements. Music evolved as a vital medium for resistance, revolution, and cultural identity during the twentieth and early twenty-first century which is a period of great social, cultural, and technological transformations.

The emotional impact of music was then enhanced by visual art, which converted its symbolic force into images that could motivate and inspire audiences. This thesis investigates the representation of music in visual art across four key contexts including totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the countercultural art of the 1960s, and modern protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and aims to explore how music-inspired art has both reflected and shaped the political and social landscapes of its time through these case studies.

The subject of representing music in visual arts in order to convey political messages has been debated in various scholarly papers on Nazi propaganda illustrating how music had been utilized as a tool in favor of racial ideologies and academic studies of the Soviet Union discuss themes related to industrial development and collectivization. Similarly, work on the Civil Rights Movement stresses the importance of freedom songs in protest imagery, and work on 1960s counterculture focuses on psychedelic fashion. In more recent years, the visual impact of music on contemporary activism like murals and music videos associated with Black Lives Matter have been studied. However, much of the existing literature examines these moments in isolation. This thesis aims to bridge that gap by offering a comparative and critical evaluation across historical and contemporary movements to examine how music-inspired visual art functions as a cross-cultural and evolving form of political expression.

Case studies were selected on the basis of their historical significance and musical and visual diversities employed. Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia are classic totalitarian regimes which employed music and arts in forcing ideological conformity. The Civil Rights Movement presents an alternative vision wherein music and visual arts were employed as people power instruments. The 1960s counterculture exhibits the ways music fuelled radical visual experimentation, and movement today such as Black Lives Matter demonstrates the way these are present, yet filtered through contemporary digital culture and world view of observation. Individually and cumulatively, these pieces create the space to understand complexly the relationships between music and visual art as they appear throughout different sociopolitical realms.

Through analysing these case studies, this thesis contributes to the literature in four primary ways: first, by pulling out the interrelations between music and visual art as

political tools, second, by revealing shared patterns and oppositions over a variety of historical periods, third, by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of visual-musical methods, and fourth, by demonstrating how historical methods persist and adapt in modern activism. The underlying research question of this research is: How far has the visual depiction of music within art impacted political and social movements throughout the 20th century up until today, and what does this reveal about the evolving function of art within public debate and its capacity to influence public awareness?

# Chapter 1: Music and Visual Propaganda in Totalitarian Regimes

Totalitarian systems have been hijacking music to use for propaganda for centuries, shaping opinion, and conferring legitimacy to ideology myth. Within Nazi Germany, music had served as a robust force within Aryan ambitions toward cultural hegemony of the state. Richard Wagner and others had been touted as heroes of Germanic culture, jazz and music written by Jewish artists labeled "degenerate" (BBC Bitesize, 2016). Nazi propaganda posters often utilized music-related images like orchestras to create an illusion of national pride and unity and advance the racial or cultural agenda of the regime. The "Horst Wessel Lied" was the Nazi Party anthem that was a song which appeared to be put on posters and rallies again and again which spoke most often in conjunction with swastika imagery, marching bands, or uniformed performers who were emblems of unity and national pride (Howerton, 2023).

The Nazis, meanwhile, attempted to demonize their "degenerate music," or what they called jazz, swing, and music written by Jewish composers. They created posters for "Entartete Musik" concerts that parodied these kinds of music. They depicted them as degenerate, immoral, and threatening to German purity. They used, for example, distorted portraits of black jazz musicians with exaggeratedly unpleasant features to foster racial hate. These portraits were intended to make one think that jazz symbolized cultural decadence (Music and Politics in Hitler's Germany, p. 6).



(Howerton, 2023)

Nazi-sanctioned music festivals, such as the Bayreuth Festival, celebrated composers such as Wagner, whose music was seen as representative of Aryan ideals. The festivals were advertised extensively through propaganda, with posters advertising Wagner's operas as representative of German nationalism and cultural superiority (Music and Politics in Hitler's Germany, p. 11-12). Bayreuth Festival was the regime's effort to use classical music as a tool for creating a shared cultural identity. (Music Approved of by the Third Reich, 2025)



(Bayreuth - Wagner, 2019)

Besides public performances, the Hitler Youth utilized music in drill. Instrumental and choir groups worked to instill commitment and subordination by means of Hitler and the Reich praise songs. Drills were often explained by means of visual representation, i.e., murals of youths playing musical instruments beneath the Nazi flag that symbolized the regime with dominance over future generations (Music and Politics in Hitler's Germany, p. 6-9).

Folk music also came back as a representation of "pure" Germanic culture. Musicologist Fritz Stein advocated its use in schools to seal cultural unity and territorial

expansion. Posters and other visual materials depicted idyllic landscapes with peasants playing folk instruments, confirming the association of music, land, and nationalism (Music and Politics in Hitler's Germany, p. 8-13).

## Soviet Union: Music as a Symbol of Collectivism

Similarly, in Soviet Russia, music was used to glorify collectivism and the working class. Soviet propaganda posters frequently depicted workers singing in unison, symbolizing solidarity and strength (Blavatnikarchive.org, 2025).

Revolutionary festivals in Petrograd during the early 1920s prominently featured orchestras and choirs, which performed revolutionary anthems like "The Internationale" alongside banners and visual decorations symbolizing workers' solidarity. These festivals made music into a public activity and a common practice, and it instilled the values of unity and industrial progress (Art for the Workers, p. 180).

Mass performances, such as those held on mobile platforms such as lorries and trams, consisted revolutionary and folk songs. They were intended to reach rural and urban populations alike, combining traditional Russian music with socialist ideology. By combining popular tunes with revolutionary content, Soviet propaganda used music as a means of bridging past and future socialism imagined (Art for the Workers, p. 247-248).

Art during this area was a weapon and its biggest goal was to show the citizens how everything got better after the revolution, because of the revolution. Cheerful workers, youth, school children, sunlight, industrial successes, roses, harvests; everyone was happy and healthy and strong (Hajir AlMahdi, 2018).

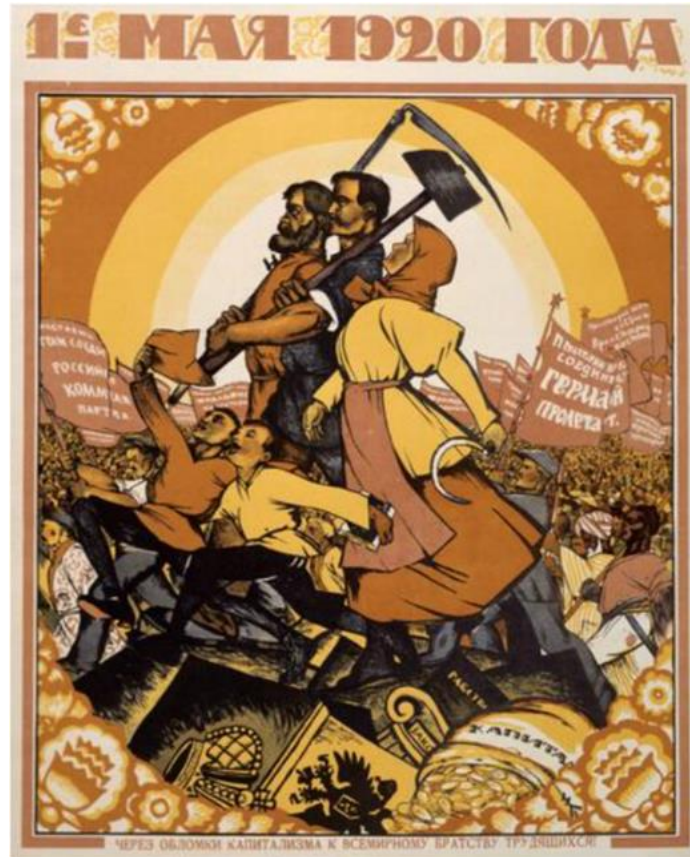
The concept of a "synthesis of arts" became the core of Lenin's ambitious propaganda plan. Music, visual art, and performance were interwoven to create immersive propaganda experiences.<sup>128</sup>

Productions like The Mystery of Liberated Labour dramatized liberation and socialist utopia by combining revolutionary music, theatrical pantomimes, and symbolic visual elements such as red banners and stars (Art for the Workers, p. 245-249).

Military music also played a significant role in Soviet propaganda. Parades often featured marching bands and orchestras performing patriotic compositions, visually accompanied by red flags and revolutionary imagery. These performances were designed to evoke national pride and solidarity, highlighting the power of the collective in achieving military and industrial strength (Art for the Workers, p. 61-72).



Through these visual and auditory strategies, Soviet propaganda emphasized the relationship between individual effort and social progress, depicting music as a morale builder and as a glue to bring together the working class.



(World History Archive, 2025)

## Comparison of Nazi and Soviet Approaches

While both regimes used music as a propaganda tool, their visual strategies reflected their distinct ideologies. Nazi propaganda focused on racial purity and cultural superiority, using music to underscore Aryan dominance. In contrast, Soviet propaganda emphasized collectivism and industrial progress, portraying music as a unifying force for the working class.

The visual styles also differed significantly. Nazi propaganda leaned towards traditional, realistic depictions to evoke heritage and order, while Soviet designs embraced avant-garde aesthetics to symbolize innovation and energy. Despite these differences, both regimes recognized the emotional power of music and its ability to galvanize support for their respective ideologies.

## Chapter 2: Music in Visual Representations of the Civil Rights Movement

The 1950s and 1960s' Civil Rights Movement used music not merely as a rallying point but even as a visual source of motivation. Protest songs, gospel songs, and jazz were the representation of the movement, their images oftentimes immortalized in album covers, posters, murals, and photos(Castellini, 2013). The present chapter examines how visual art presented the essence of freedom songs and protest hymns by bringing sound and vision together in story to exhibit the fight for racial equality.

### Gospel Music and Visual Activism

Gospel music was in the forefront of Civil Rights activism and even appeared in works of art as a means of inspiring hope and harmony. Mahalia Jackson's performance of "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned" at the 1963 March on Washington was a emotionally charged preview of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech (Castellini, 2013). Photographs and promotional material for the event had her arms raised, highlighting the inspirational and spiritual power of gospel to the cause of justice (Pereira, 2024).



(August, 2019)

Murals and album art continued to emphasize the power of gospel, with a fondness for depicting choirs, raised hands, and communal celebration scenes. The Highlander Folk School, a social activist school, used gospel hymns as part of instruction, blending traditional African American church music with modern activism (Castellini, 2013). Highlander musician Zilphia Horton popularized the song "We Shall Overcome," which became an icon of unity and determination. Graphic representations of meetings and workshops usually revolved around using music to create strength in numbers (Stewart, 2014).

## Freedom Songs in Protest Posters and Photography

Freedom songs such as "We Shall Overcome" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" were the basis of solidarity for sit-ins and marches (Castellini, 2013). Protest posters were freedom song lyrics, with powerful imagery such as clenched fists and broken chains. The graphic mix of music and protest expressed the unity of the movement, since song lyrics were used as battle cries for protesters.



(The Freedom Center of Oklahoma City, 2022)



(Black Power, Resistance and Consciousness in Album Cover Art, 2017)



(We, 2019)



(Alamy Limited, 2018)



Photographs from key events, such as the Selma to Montgomery marches, traditionally had demonstrators singing and marching with placards bearing slogans that were highly melodic (Music's Voice in the American Civil Rights Movement, 2020).



(Music's Voice in the American Civil Rights Movement, 2020)

The photos, generally seen on newspapers and magazines, carried the influence of expressing the emotional potency of music to galvanize crowds and bring together different communities (Humphrey, 2021).

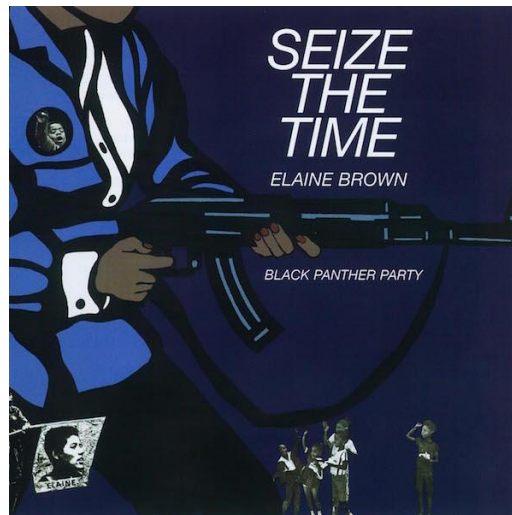
## Album Covers as Visual Narratives

Jazz, gospel, and soul artists who supported the Civil Rights Movement frequently used album covers as a form of visual activism. Max Roach's 1960 album cover for *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* was a black-and-white image of African Americans sipping coffee at the diner counter, symbolizing sit-ins as protests. The image was an open anti-segregation declaration that aligned with the album messages of freedom and protest (Humphrey, 2021).



(Black Power, Resistance and Consciousness in Album Cover Art, 2017)

Similarly, Elaine Brown's *Seize the Time* album, which was also designed by Emory Douglas, combined Black Power and feminist imagery. The fist gripping an AK-47 used on the album cover to represent resistance was also painted with nail polish on the hand to equate strength with femininity. In addition to propelling them forward with the music, the covers also communicated visually in the ways of the graphic interstices of gender, race, and resistance (Black Power, Resistance and Consciousness in Album Cover Art, 2017).



(Black Power, Resistance and Consciousness in Album Cover Art, 2017)

## Murals and Public Art

Public art in murals was a effective way to tell the story of the history of the Civil Rights movement (Civil, 2023). The murals normally had music elements with singers, instruments, and masses moving. For example, murals in urban city centers such as in Chicago consisted of images of demonstrations with an emphasis on solidarity of participants using graphical representations of masses singing and marching in lines (Huebner, 2021).



(Huebner, 2021)



(Civil, 2023)

## Highlander Folk School: A Nexus of Music and Activism

The Highlander Folk School was the hothouse of blending music and activism within Civil Rights. Activists became politicized through its training and turned folk music into freedom songs. The best use of this application is the song "We Shall Overcome," whose cover art helped to make equivalent the struggle in the past for equality with struggle in the present day against segregation (Magazine, 2023).



(Huebner, 2021)

The Civil Rights Movement took the emotional and unifying force of music and translated it into persuasive visual storytelling that amplified its impact. Album covers, murals, and protest signs put the visual vocabulary of music into a shared vocabulary of protest that belonged to culture. This chapter explores how music-inspired artwork not only conveyed the angst of the times but helped create the movement's enduring legacy.

## Chapter3: The Role of Music in Countercultural Art of the 1960s

The 1960s countercultural movement that is defined itself as the rejection of mainstream norms employed music as part of that definition in the form of psychedelic rock with its truly avant-garde music and peace and love lyrics that gave rise to a particular aesthetic of concert posters and record covers (Bahr, Gallery and York, n.d.) (Joobin Bekhrad, 2019). The movement had an effect not only on music but also on the visual arts, with music providing both the inspiration and the subject of numerous works of art. The fusion of psychedelic rock, folk, and experimental music with vibrant artistic patterns played a crucial role in establishing the appearance of this era (Hotel Ugly, 2025). Visual expressions of the counterculture through posters, record covers, and multimedia performances are the focus of this chapter.

### The Emergence of Psychedelic Visual Art

Psychedelic art coincided with the popularization of psychedelic rock music in the mid-1960s. Psychedelic art defines conflicting colors, distorted lettering, and fantasy-inducing artwork that resembles the visual impacts of LSD intoxication (Peter Max 1960s & 1970s: All-American Art, 2024). These concert posters of the musical concerts somehow broke down the boundary between visual and auditory stimulation, inviting viewers to "feel" the music in intricate patterns and trance-inducing shapes. Artists Victor Moscoso, Wes Wilson, and Bonnie MacLean codified this visual vocabulary with their poster designs for iconic concert halls like the Fillmore and Avalon Ballroom. These posters utilized day-glow hues and, sometimes, distorted typography that made band names, sometimes, hardly decipherable, in the hopes that the viewer would read slower, take in, and, in turn, decipher the message (Bahr et al., n.d.).

### Hapshash and the Coloured Coat: Psychedelic Poster Pioneers

Hapshash and the Coloured Coat was a duo of artists, Michael English and Nigel Waymouth, who played a significant role in the 1960s counterculture design movement. They created art filled with bright and lively colors, showcasing strange, surreal images that captured the imagination. Their lettering had a unique, smooth, and flowing style that was easily recognizable. This artistic approach reflected the spirit of the era, as people embraced creativity and sought to challenge and transform traditional norms and conventions. (Joobin Bekhrad, 2019).

The posters created for London's UFO Club were filled with swirling designs, shiny gold prints, and bright colors which gave people a sense of what it felt like to be at a psychedelic rock concert. They weren't just simple advertisements; the posters were

pieces of art all by themselves, capturing the essence of the music and the experience it provided. (Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, 2025).

One iconic design by Hapshash featured Pink Floyd and Soft Machine performances at the UFO Club, combining abstract shapes and optical illusions to capture the intensity of live music (Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, 2025).

Their influence extended to album covers and fashion boutiques such as "Granny Takes a Trip," which is a psychedelic hotspot on London's King's Road (Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, 2025).

## Album Covers as Countercultural Canvases

Album covers were very important in capturing the essence of the 1960s counterculture. The Beatles' album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, was an example. It mixed pop art and surreal imagery in a groundbreaking way. The cover of the album included not just the band, but a mix of famous historical figures, famous musicians, and fictional characters. They were all dressed in bold, bright, and psychedelic outfits that truly captured the individuality and vibrancy of an era. The graphics were very detailed, which echoed the experimental nature of the sound in the album that incorporated rock, Indian music, and orchestral pieces (Jones, 2019). Most album covers during this period symbolized the rebelliousness of the culture. For instance, The Rolling Stones' album "Aftermath." This album used extremely bold and harsh photography coupled with minimalist design.

These were designed to express raw, untamed energy appropriate for the mood of the time. (Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, 2025). Whereas Frank Zappa's Hot Rats and The Moody Blues' In Search of the Lost Chord took recourse to overindulgence in color and surreal images in trying to understand the spreading mindset of the music (Inboxninja, 2023).

## The Visual Impact of Woodstock

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair of 1969 was a peak in counterculture history. Posters created to advertise Woodstock, for instance, by Arnold Skolnick, contained direct and strong symbols. A strong symbol was that of a white dove resting on a guitar neck that stood for music, love, and peace. Another popular artist at the time, Peter Max, produced dynamic and vibrant work reflecting Woodstock's message of unity and

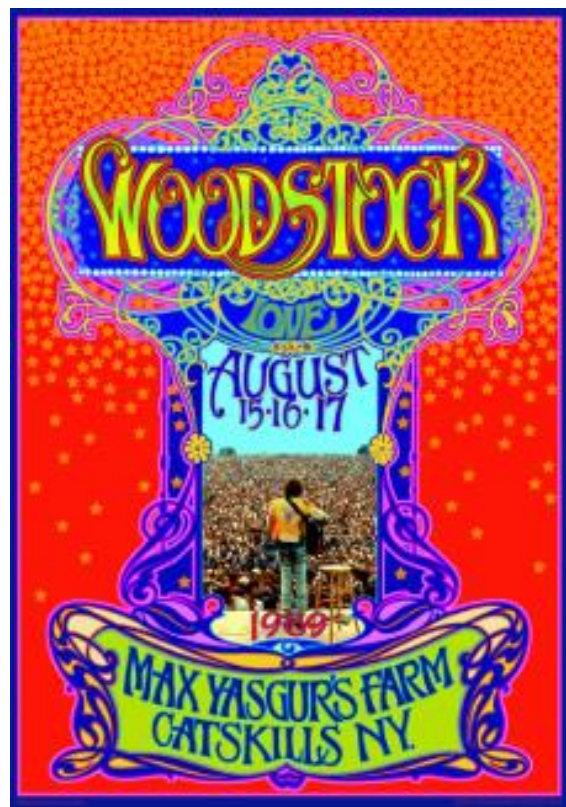


transformation. He employed whirling designs and cosmic images to convey the festival's spirit. (Baterby, 2022).

Woodstock was not a concert, it was a sensual and auditory experience. Backdrop visuals and stage lighting enhanced the psychedelic setting, further supporting the idea that visual art and music were unbreakable forms of counterculture presentation.

Woodstock festivals cemented the connection between music and visual arts even more, and promotional photos captured the freedom and communal aspect of the festival (Mathias and Mathias, 2023).

This psychedelic poster in vibrant colors of the iconic Woodstock music festival of 1969 featured bold coloration, elaborate detail, and a center portrait of a musician on stage that merged music with visual arts into an experience.



(Woodstock 45th Anniversary, 2025)

## Multimedia Performances and Visual Innovation

Counterculture art explored limits between sound and visual arts in live performance. Psychedelic rock concerts at the Fillmore, for instance, featured light shows, liquid projections, and kaleidoscopic graphics to offer multi-sensory experience. Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead, among others, collaborated with visual artists so that their concerts were as much a visual spectacle as a music concert (Bahr et al., n.d.).

Arguably the most famous example of this union of music and spectacle was the use of "Acid Tests" advocated by Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. These consisted of psychedelic light shows, free-form performance, and experimental sound, with live sound in most instances supplied by The Grateful Dead (Moore, 2012).

Moreover, the "collective effervescence" process utilized by Emile Durkheim could be witnessed at counterculture rock music festivals. People shared the collective experience of psychedelic rock festivals such that they experienced more social attachments and emotional rapport with one another, which symbolized oneness and transcendence ideals of the movement (Moore, 2012). Durkheim's "collective effervescence" process was discerned at counterculture events.

1960s counterculture embraced music as a stimulant to visual art, dissolving distinctions between sound, vision, and political resistance. Psychedelic posters, image-defining album covers, and multimedia performances were powerful means for the transmission of the counterculture message. In the hands of Hapshash and the Coloured Coat, Peter Max, Victor Moscoso, and others, the music of the time was etched in visual form that still impacts art and design today.

Through a discussion of the application of art and music to counterculture, it is obvious that the 1960s were more than a musical revolution but also a visual one. The outbreak of psychedelic imagery on posters, album covers, and live performances represented the revolutionary experimentation of consciousness, identity, and artistic form of the era.

## Chapter4: The Legacy of Music-Driven Visual Art in Modern Activism

The tradition of music as a visual and sonic protest medium has not passed on with the movements of the 20th century but continued to adapt itself to new cultural and technological realities. Contemporary activism continues to draw heavily from this tradition, synthesizing sound, visual symbolism, and social media in order to rally support and create solidarity.

The most recent examples is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which has reinvigorated the intersection of music and political iconography. Memorials in the form of murals for victims of police violence, particularly George Floyd, incorporate lyrics from hip-hop music that convey themes of protest. Lyrics from Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" ("We gon' be alright") are both rallying cry and cultural memory, publicly represented in street art across cities ("The History of Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' as a Protest Song" 2023).



("The History of Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' as a Protest Song" 2023)



(Schlachter 2020)

Apart from static murals, music videos are also increasingly vehicles of political commentary. Childish Gambino's 2018 video "This Is America" is the epitome of the intersection of music and visual activism. Through the employment of a combination of catchy hooks, sudden bursts of violence, choreographed dance routines, and religious imagery, the video presents a layered commentary on American consumerism and institutional racism. Its global scope and viral spread attest to the enduring power of multimedia protest rooted in musical narrative (Mahita Gajanan 2018).

These modern examples demonstrate that the tools hammered out in the Civil Rights movements and counterculture of the 1960s are alive and well today. Visual art based on music remains a powerful tool for expressing community grief, dissent, and the ongoing cry for justice.

## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the evolving connection between music and visual art as a political and cultural form throughout different periods and ideologies. From Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia to the Civil Rights Movement, countercultural art of the 1960s, and contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, the thesis has shown that the symbolic power of music is more than sound and continues to influence visual culture in fundamental ways.

The sources in question are informative, but also reveal some quite serious limitations. Scholarship on Nazi propaganda, for example, such as that undertaken by Howerton (2023), quite rightly displays how music was forced to serve racial ideology, but comes to understate the subtle symbolic design choices available in visual representation. Furthermore, scholarship on Soviet painting (see, e.g., *Art for the Workers*) places the collectivist values of revolutionary music first but sometimes excludes the avant-garde experimentation characteristic of Soviet poster art. Scholarship on Civil Rights activism, on the other hand, can follow the emotional resonance of gospel and freedom songs, though some authors (see, e.g., Humphrey, 2021) hazard overstating their universalism by suppressing regional or stylistic variations.

Most current scholarship on recent activism—i.e., visual reactions to police brutality and works such as Childish Gambino's "This Is America"—indicates that the visual-musical relationship continues to be at the heart of constructing public awareness. But this field is still in its early stages and tends to omit the historical background necessary to know its origins in previous protest art.

This thesis contributes to the existing literature by bringing disparate arguments together both temporally and spatially, providing a comparative model for representation of music in the visual arts. It also demonstrates that tools and mediums change but the political function of music-infused visual art does not: to instill solidarity, communicate dissent, and provide cultural resistance history. By connecting the past to the present, this research demonstrates how the tactics of art used in the past by totalitarian governments or citizen activists continue to influence the appearance of modern-day protest.

Future research should seek to uncover how digital media, global networks of art, and transnational flows of protest are reorganizing the visual language of music, projecting it out far beyond the gallery, the poster, or the concert hall.

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