

Automatic Synchronization: music and image in the films of Harry Smith

Harry Smith has a secure place in the histories of experimental film and animation. From the 1940s to the 1960s, Smith produced a series of complex abstract animated films that used a number of direct film techniques, such as hand painting, batik and stencils. He also animated drawn and photographic images gleaned from a wide range of books and magazines. These films have received acclaim and attention for their visual dynamism and the development of animation techniques, but the relationship of Smith's films to the music that accompanied them is less often discussed, even if it raises important questions about sound / image interaction and how audiences experience music and film when combined together. Smith's extended explorations of his films in combination with a variety of music in different screening contexts were also directly influential, or at least prescient, of a number of later developments in audio-visual media presentation.

Music was a central part of Smith's life and work. He received various honours for his musicological research. His *Anthology of American Folk Music*, originally released in 1952 on the Folkways label as a six-album compilation, is regarded as a significant catalyst for the folk revival in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and is still highly regarded today.¹ Music was a key element in both the creation of Smith's films and how music might be used for creating a continuously mutable framework for their reception. Smith dubbed a key method that he advanced throughout his filmmaking career as 'automatic synchronization', which he proposed for the particular utilisation of music to accompany his early, ostensibly silent, films (the collection released in 1965 under the title *Early Abstractions*). At its most basic level, 'automatic synchronization' consisted of taking a piece of music, playing it alongside any of his films and the rhythms of the images, and the music would 'automatically' synchronise. Although ostensibly the use of 'automatic' here refers to the idea that music will 'always' synch-up with the imagery in his films, I will argue that the term also refers to the idea of 'automation' as used by the surrealists: that chance procedures can bypass the controlling ego of the artist to connect with more elemental processes.

Early Abstractions

The development and practice of 'automatic synchronization' opens up consideration of a wide range of subsequent audio-visual practices, but has proved controversial for some film critics and scholars with regard to its overall importance within Smith's film oeuvre. One sceptic is film writer Fred Camper, who describes a seminar he attended in 1972 where Smith explained his concept of 'automatic synchronization'. After Smith invited everyone present to first smoke marijuana, in order to establish a suitable ambience, the seminar began:

At one point he (Smith) explained automatic synchronization, and, preparing to show one of his films to demonstrate it, he pointed at me, as I was sitting on the floor near a stack of records, and said, 'Hey, you, pick a record, any record.' Without looking (it's to my eternal regret that I didn't look) I passed the first record on the stack up to him. He looked at it and said, 'You idiot, not *that* record.' I handed another record up to him, and he looked at it, and said, 'You moron, not *that* record!' Finally, the third record was acceptable, and he played it while showing a film he was working on. I remained, and still remain, unconvinced of the virtue of this procedure. (Camper 1999: 1)

Apart from giving a sense of Smith's sometime curmudgeonly demeanour, this anecdote suggests that the procedure did involve some element of selection. However, for Camper and others this method was rendered highly problematic when Smith authorized the release of his *Early Abstractions* with a soundtrack drawn from *Meet the Beatles*, the Beatles' first album, as released in the United States in 1964 on Capitol Records. Camper outlines his misgivings on this particular combination:

the rhythms of the imagery are incredibly complex, polyphonic really, and the sound tends to slave certain rhythms to it, while effacing or obliterating others. It makes films that are very profound seem like happy visual accompaniment to the songs (Camper 1999: 1).

It should also be said that this particular combination of music and image is not helped by the accompanying lyrical content. Any lyric inevitably creates an additional semantic level to the music that further skews audience engagement with the visual material. At this time the Beatles' lyrics worked the romantic vein of most contemporary pop music. Songs such as 'Please, Please Me' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' contained lyrics that seemingly run counter to Smith's abstract and complex imagery. There is an increased incongruity noticeable with the introduction of figurative elements with occult significance in *Film No. 10*, combined here with the slower and more overtly romantic song 'Till There Was You'. The apparent overall randomness of the exercise is compounded by the fact that, after initial synching of start points, the tracks just run over the films: their individual distinctiveness becoming subsumed beneath the linear trajectory of the Beatles' record.

So, why did Smith make this choice? P. Adams Sitney (1979) suggests that this seemingly casual choice of music was a deliberate gesture intended to obscure the considerable achievements of Smith's animation work by merely updating the soundtrack. Smith was capable of being self-destructive as well as careless in relation to his work. Many pieces were destroyed or went missing over the years. The most authoritative account on the choice of *Meet the Beatles* comes from Smith's 'spiritual wife' Rosebud Feliu-Pettet. She relates that Smith used this particular music due to her insistence. As a dedicated fan of the Beatles she reasoned with Smith that "'It's got to be the Beatles. You're the highest art form that exists in this animated technique. And the Beatles are, of course, the greatest music in the world. So you belong together.'" So we tried it and it worked perfectly; so perfectly that the music was used forever after' (Iglieri 1996:103). This apparent indifference on the musical element belies the fact of Smith's wide knowledgeable of music. To take a more generous reading of Smith's choice, this was also a time of an increasing momentum in pop music, both as a genre and vivid manifestation of a new, youth-oriented consumer culture. Powerfully exemplified by the Beatles, this culture was being actively engaged with and harnessed by artists, most explicitly, of course, in Pop Art. Smith's direct engagement with contemporary music included producing the first album of satirical folk-rock band The Fugs in 1965. ²

Whatever the real intentions or factors behind the choice of *Meet the Beatles* to accompany the release of *Early Abstractions*, there are many recollections which indicate that Smith felt his films should be screened with contemporary music whenever possible. The screenings utilized a wide range of music, both live and recorded. In particular bebop jazz records and non-western music, the more fluid and complex cross-rhythms of which were perhaps better suited to the intricate visual rhythms of Smith's films.

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Author's biography

David Chapman is a filmmaker, sound artist and researcher based in London. Through film and audio installations he investigates the sonic mediation of the natural world, historic buildings, and the durational aspects of place. David's practice includes *Watermark* (2012, York Guildhall), *Octo: Sotto Voce* (2009, York Minster) and *Resounding Falkland* (2010, Falkland Estate, Scotland), a series of works made in collaboration with Louise K Wilson. Other site-responsive projects are the video series *Observances* (2005, Café Gallery, London), the audio-visual installations *Hark* (2005, Gunpowder Park, UK) and *Hark 2* (2007, Matrix East, London), made with photographer David Cottridge. More recent work explores historical and cultural issues. These include *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* (2017) - a multi-media installation produced in collaboration with Vivan Sundaram, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Valentina Vitali (Mumbai 2017, New Delhi 2018) that focuses on a politically charged moment of South Asian history, and the documentary video installation *Art as Problematic Waste* (2019), co-directed with Finnish artist Aimo Hyvärinen (UK/Finland 2019), which explores the overproduction and decommissioning of art. David was awarded a PhD for research on sound, place and perception and he writes on film sound and sound art. He teaches film and sound at the University of East London.

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¹ Smith's musicological work also included recordings of Kiowa peyote meeting songs and a proposed 15 LP set of rabbinical chants and prayers from Rabbi Nuftali Zvi Margolies Abulafia. The Kiowa recordings were released on Folkways as was one record of the Rabbi's material. The Rabbi's grandson, Smith's friend the poet and mystic Lionel Ziprin's, struggled to get the complete set released and his family are still trying to fulfil this aim.

² A reel-to-reel of their music apparently accompanied some screenings of *Early Abstractions* before the production of the optical print with the *Meet the Beatles* soundtrack (Iglieri 1996).