Parallel Symmetries?

Exploring Relationships between

Minimalist Music and Multimedia Forms

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Introduction

Since its inception in the mid 1960s, minimalist music has often been associated with other visual media. Composers identified in the conceptual and geometrical works of artists such as Richard Serra, Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd similar concerns to their own, promoted their music in art galleries and lofts in order to draw these shared interests closer together and often drew parallels between their own approaches to texture, surface and form with those of contemporary artists working in similar spheres (see Bernard, 1993). Theatre and film also helped shape this new aesthetic. Glass's route back into composition in the mid-1960s came via his collaboration with Ravi Shankar on the film *Chappaqua* (1966), and he also worked closely at the time with theatre group Mabou Mines (Potter, 2000: 255-8). Likewise, Reich collaborated with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and composed music for Robert Nelson's experimental film *Plastic Haircut* (1964) (ibid: 161-2).

Minimalist music therefore forged links with the other arts from its very beginnings, and its ability to adapt to – and function within – a whole host of multimedia contexts is often considered to be one of its main strengths. Indeed, figures working within a broadly post-experimental and post-minimal tradition, such as Meredith Monk, Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson, have regularly combined music with video, dance, theatre and other visual media. And from the mid-1970s onwards minimalism's influence extended beyond its ancestral home in New York art galleries to mainstream culture when rock musicians such as Mike Oldfield, Tangerine Dream and Brian Eno started to incorporate characteristically minimalist techniques, such as interlocking patterns and extended repetitions, into their own film and media conceptions.

Apparently in contradiction with its inter-disciplinary outlook, however, minimalist music also emphasised extreme formal abstraction and internal objectivity. Early pieces eschewed referential or programmatic content, preferring instead to foreground generic qualities such as repetition, imitation, variation, cyclical patterns and modular forms. Compositions were accordingly given abstract titles, such as Reich's *Four Organs* (1970) and *Six Pianos* (1973) or Glass's *Music in Contrary Motion* (1969) and *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974). The aim was to explore internal musical mechanisms, and in doing so often closed off external references and suggestions. In some respects, then, minimalist music was the complete antithesis to programmatic music: it stubbornly resisted references, clinging instead to a distilled, extreme form of musical absolutism.

Yet minimalism successfully matched itself up with visual images partly because composers were directly involved with performances of their own music rather than developing cerebral or intellectual theories as was the case with much European avant-garde music. Reich crystallized his compositional methods experientially, through trial and error, and both he and Glass established their own ensembles because their music demanded skills and techniques that were in many important respects diachronically opposed to traditional Classical or current Modernist performance practices. Minimalist music also shifted the interpretative emphasis away from the composer and performer to the listener – a shift that allowed the work to remain 'open' to different reactions and responses.

Its ability to be both self-sufficient and open to outside influences emerged from minimalism's need to establish parallel analogues rather than imitative types. Its aim was to set up musical equivalences with painting, sculpture, dance or film, in order to allow it to coexist with – rather than become subservient to – these forms. Its impact upon multimedia forms is partly explained through this complementary pairing of image and sound: a minimalist composition could retain its own autonomous space while at the same time relating to a specific musico-visual moment.

Pace Robert Fink's recent study, little research has been done to try to determine minimalism's appropriateness to specific film and media contexts. By providing a more refined understanding of minimalism's relationship to moving images, such a study might shed further light on visual meaning and also help determine the meaning of minimalist music *per se*. Could musical minimalism require the presence of images in order to make its function complete, thus forming one element in a postmodern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, while doggedly reasserting its autonomy?

Theories

Some theoretical justification in establishing the dialectical relationship between image and sound in media-based minimalist works may be found in Nicholas Cook's 'Three Basic Models of Multimedia'. Cook seeks to establish a methodological framework which allows for the possibility of discussing different cross-media relationships based on a test involving similarity and difference (ibid: 98-9).

Figure 1 (see Cook, 1998: 99)
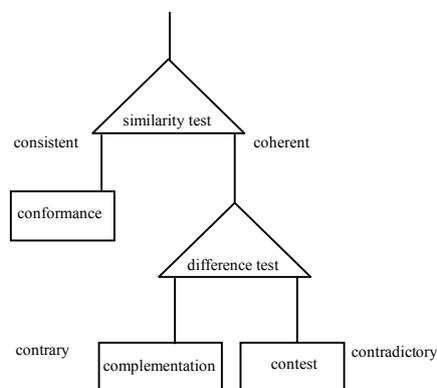
As outlined in Figure 1 from Cook's theory, the three models of conformance, complementation and contest are subjected to a test to establish similarity or difference. Consistency and coherence determine whether or not a relationship passes the similarity test. By using linguistic analogies, including metaphor, Cook sets up different levels of meaning between coherence and consistency. When a multimedia relationship is deemed consistent, then, it passes the similarity test and belongs to the conformance model.

If a multimedia relationship fails to be consistent, it is subjected to a difference test. A relationship is thus deemed to be contrary or contradictory and is placed within the complementation or contest models, respectively. Drawing on Greimas's theory of narrative grammar and the 'semiotic square', Cook states that 'contrariety might be glossed as undifferentiated difference [while] contradiction implies an element of collision or confrontation between the opposed terms'. A contest model is constructed when 'each medium strives to deconstruct the other, and so create space for itself.' A model of complementation serves as a kind of 'mid-point' between conformance and contest, wherein 'different media are seen as occupying the same terrain, but conflict is avoided' (ibid: 102-4).

Figure 2

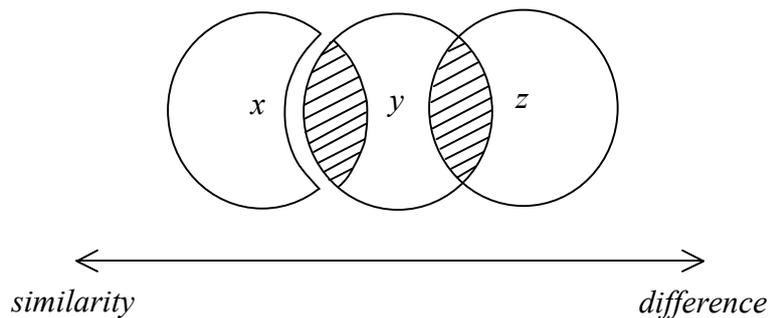$$\text{similarity} \longleftrightarrow \text{difference}$$

Figure 2 attempts to visually replicate, in basic terms, the relationship between Cook's three types. As shown here, the *conformance* model (x), denotes *similarity* between multimedia elements, and is placed independently from the two forms of *difference* models, although its relationship to the *complementation* model (y) is recognised by means of the hatched portion representing common ground or terrain. At the opposite end of the scale, the *contest* model (z) is also connected to (y) through the hatched portion.[1]

Within this pattern of conformance, complementation and contest, minimalism appears to lie mainly within the 'x' or 'y' domains. Rarely does it provide a straightforward union with an image's meaning, at least not in examples from the film repertory. This may be due to the fact that minimalism's origins lie in an 'art' aesthetic rather than in popular cultural perceptions. As a result, minimalist music has been used in films, which often set out to question, challenge and confront rather than merely attempt to excite, distract, or entertain. Its use in the area of the television commercial, where the minimalist sound has been applied to great effect, is more nebulous, however.

It's Only a Car?

One example comes from a television commercial used throughout 2006 called 'It's only a car' by the manufacturers BMW. Here minimalist music reinforces and

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[1] The relationship between (y) and (z) is understood as being closer than between (x) and (y) as both are, to a varying degree, forms of *differences*.

supports the visual narrative.[2] The music for this advert was sourced by BMW from Reggio's film *Koyaanisqatsi* to a soundtrack by Glass originally released in 1982. The music used by BMW from *Koyaanisqatsi* is entitled 'Pruit Igoe'. *Koyaanisqatsi* represents in non-narrative form a view of life in the late twentieth century by emphasising the uneasy, 'unbalanced' relationship between natural, ecological forces and those of a driven, consumerist and mechanised society in a post-industrial, post-technological age. Reggio's dehumanized images, according to Michael Dempsey, '[embody] a half-acknowledged fascination with the notion of wiping out the human race' (Dempsey, 1989: 7). Glass's 'found' musical materials, which include major and minor triads, arpeggios, and repeated chord sequences, are also reflected in Reggio's use of 'found documentary evidence'. In adopting a documentary approach Reggio's film suggests detachment and objectivity. Both sound and image are projected symbiotically into a futuristic tense often by means of the non-narrative juxtaposition of time-lapse and slow-motion sequences, which result in a kind of 'visual, musical, rhythmic, *visceral*' truth (ibid: 8). Glass's music thus acquires a 'premonitory' sheen, reflecting Reggio's concern with '[viewing] the present from the point of view of the future, as if it's over with' (ibid: 8).

It may not be entirely coincidental that the narrative used in the BMW commercial is constructed as a poem. Although diachronically opposed in a variety of ways, the small-scale form of the television advert in fact mirrors the epigrammatic nature of poetic form.[3] The commercial's transcript, shown in Figure 3, sets out an inventory of generic features found in cars, ranging from basic elements, such as 'nuts and bolts', to more sophisticated apparatus, such as 'intelligent' wipers.

Figure 3

Distribution of musical material	
A	It's only a car.
B	A car is a car is a car.
A	With nuts and bolts and leather and cogs and steel and wood and glass.
B	Intelligent wipers and head–up displays, alloy and oil, sensors and sound,
A *C*	digital mapping and satellite tracking, twists and turns and smiles, and miles and one little key.
A	A car. It's only a car.

[2] The BMW 'It's only a car' commercial was strategically introduced during January 2006. The WCRS Agency received the commission and creative artists included Leslie Ali, Yann Jones and Simon Robinson, directed by Daniel Barber. The DVD example of this commercial is taken from <www.adwatch.tv> archived under January 2006 accessed on 15/02/06.

[3] According to Guy Cook, the textual content of advertisements often falls into one of the following categories: 'poems', '"borrowed" and commissioned poems', 'jingles', 'borrowed songs' and 'the prosodic ad' (Cook, 1992: 120-7).

These metonymic features ostensibly serve to uphold the notion that the BMW model is 'only a car', but the gradual introduction of more advanced technological features into the poetic narrative is intended to convey the exact opposite. Supported by alliterative effects ('sensors and sound') and rhyme ('mapping / tracking'), the inclusion at the end of 'one little key' only serves to 'unlock' the advert's poetic meaning while simultaneously offering the kind of endless adventure the acquisition of such a car might afford.

Therefore, the description of the car heard at the very beginning as 'just a car' increasingly acquires a sense of 'false modesty'. According to Nicholas Cook's theory, the statement 'only a car' lies in contest with the underlying message of the commercial. This is in fact 'far more than a car', even possibly representing the car in an ideal form. The slogan revealed in conjunction with the manufacturer's logo at the commercial's conclusion – 'The Ultimate Driving Machine' – affirms this conflict. Modesty and understatement are used here to communicate supreme self-confidence in the product's quality and performance, which therefore clearly conflicts with the narrative.

Glass's 'Pruit Igoe', as heard in the commercial, supports and conforms to the images employed. Its use of a minor (or modal) tonality – a scale conflating transposed phrygian and 'A' harmonic minor – is distributed strophically and comprises three main elements, as shown in Figure 3. The *A* material, consisting of an oscillating pattern around a central *e* pitch, provides a solemn ostinato, the chromatic melody (*B*), and a repetitive pattern around a tri-tone interval (*C*).

The music is seen to interact at a structural level with the text, with the concluding words, 'a car, it's only a car' (a repetition of the opening statement in retrograde form) heard in close proximity with the music's *A* strophe. The poem's ABCA form is therefore reflected in the music's varied *AB*(ABA)*CA* organisation. The breakthrough of the *C* material towards the end of the commercial is of great significance due to its interaction with the text. It accompanies the words 'and miles' (emphasised by the narrator), and is represented by a new harmonic progression in order to lure the prospective purchaser with an idealised image of an open road, and the pleasurable journeys entailed therein. Its purpose is to heighten the effect of the conclusion, wherein the viewer is brought back to reality by the opening statement and accompanying theme. Therefore, the musico-textual association at this point suggests that the overall relationship between the twin components is that of *conformance* – both music and text share a cyclical pattern, which is typical of Glass's musical language.

Koyaanisqatsi

In order to identify the reason (if any) for employing this particular musical extract in the commercial, the following section will discuss the relationship between the BMW commercial and its origins in *Koyaanisqatsi*. Establishing the relationship between the commercial and the original source of the music requires consideration of the general context of *Koyaanisqatsi* in addition to the specific scene where 'Pruit Igoe' is employed.

The organisation of the musical material differs from *Koyaanisqatsi* to the BMW commercial as the former begins with an introduction (a variation of the *C* segment), juxtaposed with a cityscape scene from afar, followed by close-up shots of skyscrapers. This contrast between background and foreground perspectives is roughly analogous to the contrast between the 'atmospheric' and the 'descriptive' scenes in the BMW commercial. Following these short scenes, the remainder of 'Pruit Igoe' is based on desolate images of derelict buildings, rubble, poverty and graffiti.

Both solemn and chromatic, Glass's music *conforms* and interacts with the images conveyed in both the film and television commercial. However, *Koyaanisqatsi*'s visual depiction of a life 'out of balance' *conflicts* with the car commercial's utopian representation of cityscapes and its effortless negotiation of lonely forest roads. The meaning of the music in *Koyaanisqatsi* differs in function to the BMW commercial. If so, how can the same music be applied to clearly different ends? If both visual examples are 'in contest' with each other, how can the same music adapt itself to suit a variety of contexts?

If there is a link between both examples, then this is represented in the theme of technological advancement and its interaction or intervention with natural life. This is emphasized further through the application of the word 'machine' rather than 'car' at the end of the BMW advert. The atmospheric visual scenes of the commercial are similar to the urban and rural landscapes of *Koyaanisqatsi*: both reflect the duality of nature and civilization. Furthermore, a view of urban life from above, or even beyond, is an intrinsic part of *Koyaanisqatsi*'s visual and pictorial effect. As *Koyaanisqatsi* and the commercial share similar characteristics, while also displaying differences, it would therefore appear that their relationship to Glass's music is based on complementation. As suggested by this term, complementation allows the same piece of music to function in a wide variety of contexts, provided that some overlapping features are maintained. Given the important intertextual dimensions belonging to film and media – minimalism's adaptability to a variety of situations makes it particularly appropriate.

Carbon Trust

A different extract from the same work by Glass, the so-called 'Clouds' scene, has been employed in another television commercial, Carbon Trust's 2005 advertising campaign. Unlike the BMW advert, its aim is to 'raise awareness of the effect of climate change and encourage organisations to cut carbon emissions' by resorting to visual archived material depicting Robert Oppenheimer (the so-called 'Father of the Atom Bomb') observing the first-ever nuclear explosion tested in 1945. The Carbon Trust commercial develops at greater length the subject matter of *Koyaanisqatsi*. The testing of an atomic bomb (and the scene depicting its aftermath), pylons, cityscapes, clouds and the sea are all omnipresent visual elements in *Koyaanisqatsi*. As the title suggests, 'Clouds' focuses on the movements of clouds in the sky – a scene that is also included in the conclusion to the Carbon Trust commercial.[4]

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[4] The concluding musical segment of the commercial has, however, been derived from the subsequent scene in *Koyaanisqatsi*, entitled 'Resource', wherein a descending second inversion 'A' minor chord is repeated in triplets and in contrary motion to the bass.

Dense brass clusters heard at the beginning of 'Clouds' evoke a certain 'heaviness', which is at odds with the lightness and airborne characteristics of cloud formations. At the same time, the time-lapse sequences give the impression of vast cloud migrations across space and time, suggesting the 'awesome magnificence of nature'. In fact the oscillating tones and semitones, and rapid semiquaver ostinati of a single pitches may suggest clouds' fluttering motion. Glass's unsettling harmonic changes – alternating between A minor and F-sharp minor, and drawing out the uneasy chromatic shift between C and C-sharp – is also a reflection of nature's unpredictability. Furthermore, the placement of these oscillating chords as bottom-heavy triads in the brass section contributes to a dark undertone that enhances the visual effect by paradoxically reflecting the 'dense' nature of the clouds. Glass also sets out a spatial dichotomy in the music: the heavy brass clusters are pitted again a descending scale in high brass register. This spatial dichotomy could be seen to represent earth and sky.

Glass's description of music's function in multimedia contexts as 'going with or against the image' has parallels with Cook's concept of similarity and difference, complementation and opposition, while also drawing attention to music's multidimensional relationship with moving images in their foreground or background positioning (Glass, 1997: 137). According to Glass, music is often 'under, on top, or next to the image' in any given visual context (ibid: 137). In his description of the 'Cloud' scene from *Koyaanisqatsi*, Glass touches on an emerging dialectical relationship emerging between the two elements. On the surface sound and image initially appear to be in conflict with each other, but this opposition is synthesised on a higher level.

While the scene from *Koyaanisqatsi* and the commercial share similarities in their portrayal of clouds, which suggests conformance, Glass's music in *Koyaanisqatsi* fluctuates between similarity and difference. The underlying message of human intervention with nature forms the overall subject matter of both examples, but in *Koyaanisqatsi* the dialectical interplay between sound and image is only ultimately resolved on the level of the film's overall message.

Figure 4 provides a graphic overview of the manifold relationships that become apparent through looking at these three 'instances of multimedia', to adopt Cook's phrase. As shown in the key at the bottom left corner, different types of dotted lines distinguish the three types of relationships, while a thicker continuous line represents *Koyaanisqatsi*. Twin hierarchical levels are highlighted in this diagram: the overall relationship between Glass's work and the BMW commercial, in addition to the relationship between *Koyaanisqatsi* and the Carbon Trust, is illustrated by means of a connecting line (of medium thickness) between the three symbols, while the complex interrelationships between the various media elements are expressed by finer

Figure 4   A diagram of interrelationships between *Koyaanisqatsi*, the BMW commercial and the Carbon Trust campaign
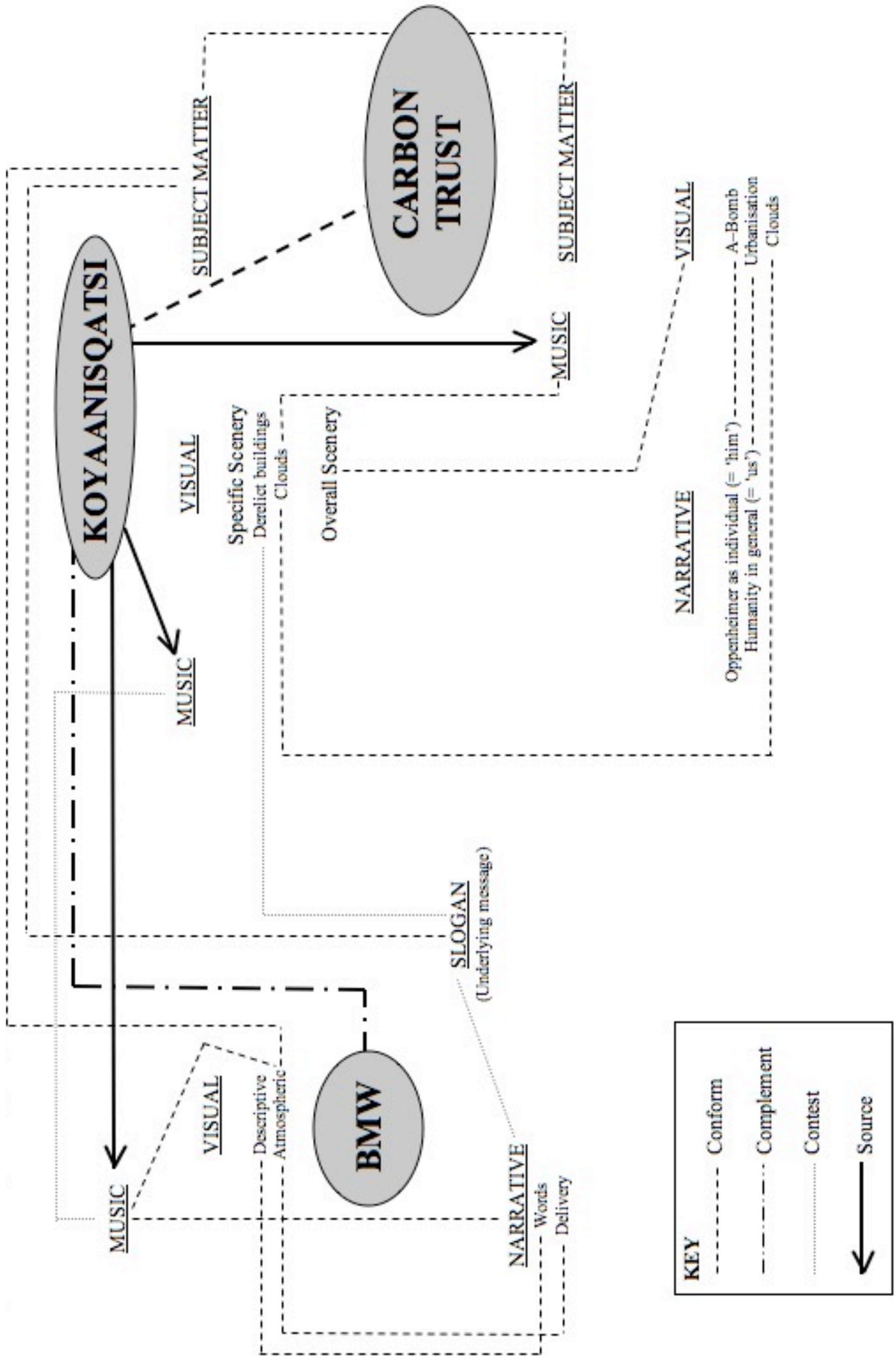
lines. The diagram reflects the fact that the relationships between *Koyaanisqatsi* and BMW are a mixture of conformance and contest (thereby creating an overall complementary relationship) while the relationships between *Koyaanisqasi* and the Carbon Trust commercial are more consistently conformant. The music in *Koyaanisqatsi* is less consistently conformant, however, often serving to contrast, juxtapose, or underscore the visual narrative, sometimes going with or against it.

Conclusion

The study of the relationship between *Koyaanisqatsi*, BMW and the Carbon Trust productions has demonstrated that the meaning and function of minimalism may vary significantly, depending on context and subject. The music in *Koyaanisqatsi* provided a different perspective in the BMW commercial, as the music in the former had no direct relevance in the latter. The music's primary context depicted a tragic situation of destruction and poverty; in its secondary context, the music became linked with images of moonlit countryside and cityscapes. The Carbon Trust commercial, however, evoked in a more direct manner the relevant scene in *Koyaanisqatsi* as both scenes employed images of clouds. Different contexts, in this case, can share similar meanings. We can conclude from these analyses that minimalist music can adapt to a variety of media contexts, particularly in film and television commercials. Minimalist music's neutrality, objectivity, malleability and colouristic aspects allow it to shift across different visual landscapes or emotional spaces. These transformations – which give minimalism a chameleon-like character – serve to reposition it in relation to specific visual moments. At times, minimalism merely underpins or supports the image, but often the music will enter into dialogue with the visual narrative by contesting or opposing it. In such contexts minimalism's relationship with media becomes increasingly dialectical, and the antithesis between sound and image can only be finally resolved due to the parallel symmetries that exist between them.

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