



# The Concept Album as Visual-Sonic- Textual Spectacle: The Transmedial Storyworld of Coldplay's *Mylo Xyloto*

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## Abstract

This paper studies the elaboration of the concept album by means of multimodal promotional strategies that include the concert tour, music videos, books, as well as other digital and print materials. Adopting the perspective that the meaning of a concept album emerges in and through a potentially complex network of materials, we can receive and understand concept album storytelling to operate according to multimedial, intermedial and transmedial contexts. This study examines the transmedial storyworld of Coldplay's *Mylo Xyloto* concept spectacle as it is developed in and through the material content of the original album, the *Coldplay: Live 2012* (Coldplay 2012c) concert film, as well as the paraphonographic materials that extend *Mylo Xyloto* into a variety of media.

KEYWORDS: Concept album, spectacle, multimodality, intermediality, transmediality

## Introduction

In the context of the new millennial industry of popular music, artists from a variety of genres rely heavily upon current technologies and social media platforms to develop elaborate promotional strategies, thus expanding the idea of the concept album to the concert tour, music videos, books, and a range of supplementary materials. With such an approach, the concept album can be seen to extend across multiple media formats in supplementary materials and live

performances. In 2006, Tschmuck speculated that changes to the business model in which recording, concert promotion, ticketing, artist management, rights management, branding, and sponsoring are combined, “might result in the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm” (Tschmuck 2012: 195). In 2009, Patrik Wikstrom developed a model to understand the dynamics between audience, music, and media, which he coined the “audience-media engine”, explained as follows:

The links which connect media presence, audience reach, audience approval and audience action constitute a reinforcing feedback loop which plays a crucial role in the music industry dynamics ... If the firm is able to get this loop to work in its favour, only the sky is the limit. (Wikstrom 2009: 87)

The work that I have selected for the focus of this article – Coldplay’s *Mylo Xyloto* – is emblematic of this new aesthetic paradigm. Devised as a concept album, the band created a range of materials using a variety of media to extend the cultural reach of their album far beyond the level of album sales. To begin, the album was released in connection with graffiti art painted by artist Paris and the members of the band.<sup>1</sup> The graffiti wall (see FIGURE 1) became the basis of the album artwork produced by Tappin Gofton (see FIGURE 2), and the colorful style of the graffiti wall carried over into the aesthetics of the music videos (see FIGURE 3) for the singles “Every Teardrop Is a Waterfall” (Coldplay 2012f), “Paradise” (Coldplay 2012g) “Charlie Brown” (Coldplay 2012d; these three videos directed by Mat Whitecross), and “Hurts Like Heaven” (Coldplay 2012e; directed by Mark Osborne).<sup>2</sup> Extending the concept of the album into another popular medium, Coldplay released between 2012 and 2013 a series of six comic books written with Mark Osborne and Dylan Haggerty, and illustrated by Alejandro Fuentes, that were promoted by the music video for “Hurts Like Heaven”, an animated film that introduces the storyworld of the comic book series (Coldplay 2012-2013). Furthermore, the artwork influenced the aesthetics of the *Mylo Xyloto* concert tour staging and set, which was enhanced by the “Xylobands” – bracelets offered to all concert-goers that emitted brightly colored lights that were synced through radio signals to the rhythm of the music.<sup>3</sup> The concert tour was filmed and released as *Live 2012* (Coldplay 2012c; directed by Paul Dugdale, produced by Jim Parsons and released on DVD, Blu-ray, and as a digital iTunes product), including documentary behind-the-scenes interviews as well as concert footage from the Stade de France, the Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas, the Glastonbury Festival, and the Bell Centre in Montreal. The live concert film was released with a companion digital eBook, *Mylo Xyloto Live* (Coldplay 2012b), which provides background information, images, and interviews of the band, the creators, and the crew.<sup>4</sup>



FIGURE 1: Paris, graffiti wall for *Mylo Xyloto*.



FIGURE 2: *Mylo Xyloto* album artwork.



FIGURE 3a-d: Screen shots from music videos: (a) "Every Teardrop is a Waterfall" (Coldplay 2012f: 01:46; (b) "Paradise" (Coldplay 2012g: 01:23; (c) "Charlie Brown" (Coldplay 2012d: 01:03); and (d) "Hurts Like Heaven" (Coldplay 2012e: 00:19).

With this extensive gathering of media materials and artifacts, the *Mylo Xyloto* “concept spectacle” – a term that I am suggesting for this level of concept album development – is a multi-dimensional artwork that has far-reaching potential for analysis and interpretation.

## The concept album

Artistic interest in the concept album extends across musical genres, revealing its potential for artistic expression that is grounded in specific musical contexts, cultures and aesthetics. In recent times, music critics have pointed to an increase in the popularity of the concept album across a wide scope of genres (Wener 2006; Shute 2013). Popular musicologists often look to the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* (1966) as an important starting point for the rock-era concept album (Lambert 2008: 110), followed by The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* (1967) (Moore 2004: 64). During the 1970s, the concept album flourished in the hands of art rock and progressive rock bands (Jethro Tull’s *Aqualung*, 1971; David Bowie’s *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, 1972; Genesis’ *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, 1974; Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, 1979). Subsequently, during the 1980s and 1990s, the concept album rose in popularity with bands working in the genres of progressive metal (Queensrÿche’s *Operation: Mindcrime*, 1988; Fates Warning’s *A Pleasant Shade of Gray*, 1997; Dream Theater’s *Metropolis Part II: Scenes from a Memory*, 1999) and alternative rock (Hole’s *Live Through This*, 1994; Blur’s *Parklife*, 1994; Radiohead’s *OK Computer*, 1997). Moving into the new millennium, the concept album gained momentum in punk (Green Day’s *American Idiot*, 2004; Boys Night Out’s *Trainwreck*, 2005; and My Chemical Romance’s *The Black Parade*, 2006), indie rock (Death Cab for Cutie’s *Transatlanticism*, 2003; Arcade Fire’s *Neon Bible*, 2007; Florence and the Machine’s *Lungs*, 2009), as well as in more mainstream popular genres such as hip hop (Dr. Dre’s *2001*, 2001; Jay-Z’s *American Gangster*, 2007; Eminem’s *Relapse*, 2009), R&B (Beyoncé’s *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, 2008, Rihanna’s *Rated R*, 2009; Prince’s *Art Official Age*, 2014), and pop (P!nk’s *The Truth About Love*, 2012; Taylor Swift’s *1989*, 2014). Even with this brief listing of works, it is evident that the concept album has found relevance across many genres of popular music.

Treating the concept album as a song cycle within a popular music context, Martina Elicker defines it very generally as “an album by either one artist or a group which contains a unifying thread throughout the songs – be it musical, thematic, or both” (Elicker 2001: 229). Taking a fervently interpretive stance, Marianne Tatom Letts distinguishes concept albums “as artistic utterances that develop deeper insights over the course of the song sequence” (Letts 2010: 11). In connecting the conceptual approach of the popular music concept album to the compositional designs of classical music, Edward Macan likens the concept album of progressive rock to the programmatic writing of Romantic composers (Macan 1997: 58), while James Border sees Zappa’s art-rock developments of the concept album as comparable to musical modernism of the 1960s (Borders 2001: 119). Although it is nowhere strictly defined, I understand the concept album as

an album that sustains a central message or advances the narrative of a subject through the intersections of lyrical, musical, and visual content.

It is certainly to be expected that scholars in the domain of popular musicology look primarily to the song content (words and music) in order to interpret the content of the concept album at a profound level. To be sure, as they receive and interpret these works, music analysts use a variety of methods to account for musical and lyrical connections, as well as to explore the overall messages and meanings that are communicated. Elicker (2001) takes a semiotic approach to the analysis of Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986). Kaminsky (1992) also analyzes *Graceland*, assuming a structural-analytic approach to the compositional coherence of the album based on a study of pattern completion and the association of lyrical content with musical progress. Kevin Holm-Hudson (2008) analyzes the psychological narrative and religious elements of Genesis' *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* detailing the embedded musical references that suggest connections to a host of classical and popular works. Letts (2010) adopts a dynamic approach to the analysis of Radiohead's concept albums by analyzing the agential or subjective perspectives that are invoked by the musical materials, distinguishing concept albums as falling into narrative or thematic categories (2010: 23). With his study of Willie Nelson, Stimeling (2011) demonstrates how the extended narratives and forms of progressive rock could transfer to the country music concept album, with the purpose of challenging traditions and experimenting with musical genre expectations. The attention to musical structure, including form, harmony, and voice leading is paramount in O'Donnell's (2005) analysis of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, Spicer's (2008) analysis of Genesis' *Foxtrot*, and Lambert's 2008 analysis of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*.

Although the musicological inclination is to place the greatest analytic emphasis upon the music of the concept album, the extramusical content of the concept album is vital to the production of meaning: for instance, Smolko (2013) spends considerable energy on the lyrical content, artistic packaging and live performances of Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* in order to offer a more thorough examination of the concept album materials. Taking that approach even further, Rose (2015) analyzes Pink Floyd's concept albums as multimedia artifacts and applies a range of theoretical techniques from literary, film, and psychology studies, in order to illustrate how the album materials work together to promote meanings and messages. As a scholar in the field of communication studies, it is to be expected that the media parameters of a concept album would figure predominantly in Rose's research imagination, with musical elements playing a lesser role, however he aims to account for all of the elements in a holistic approach (Rose 2015: xi).

What remains under-theorized is the elaboration of the concept album not only in and through the album and its live realizations, but also across the promotional materials that extend the work to other media. With this article, I aim to present an interpretive approach to the multidimensional materials that shape the concept album spectacle. Working with Coldplay's *Mylo Xyloto*, I will illustrate how the modalities of music, word, and image interrelate concretely to create an extensive transmedial storyworld that works to communicate a social message in the cultural sphere.

## Theoretical Approach

In his model of intertextuality, Gérard Genette would understand these materials to be the “paratext,” materials that “surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text’s presence in the world” (Genette 1997: 1). Serge Lacasse (2000) transfers Genette’s concept of the paratext to popular music production, coining the term “paraphonography” to account for the materials that exist outside of the album itself. Just as Genette considers the ways in which the paratextual elements serve to mediate the work, Lacasse considers the paraphonographic elements to work at the level of mediation. As we interpret the meaning of a given concept album, this question of mediation is of paramount importance. Of course, paraphonographic practices are a critical aspect of the reception and promotion of any popular music album, however in the case of a concept album, the paraphonographic materials can be considered as integral to the mediation of the conceptual theme, narrative, or persona of the work.

Paraphonographic materials can take many forms and can function in relation to each other in a variety of ways. We can consider the artwork, graphics and texts that are available in print and digital media: album covers and liner notes, promotional materials and booklets that document the concert tour associated with the album, comic books and graphic novels, posters and clothing that feature images and graphics related to the album and tour. We can also include the film media that are developed for the concept album: music videos, concert footage, and documentary footage from the production of the album, video, or tour. In an expanded consideration of paraphonographic materials, I would also include the stage materials and design of the concert tour as an important vehicle to mediate the concept album.<sup>5</sup>

Adopting the perspective that the meaning of a concept album emerges in and through a potentially complex network of materials, we can receive and understand concept album storytelling to operate according to multimedial, intermedial and transmedial contexts. With that list of terms in play, a few definitions are in order.

In their study of media-based narratology, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon offer some crucial distinctions for these terms. They begin with multimodality and intermediality:

Through *multimodality* (a term that is currently replacing multimediality; see, e.g., Kress and Van Leeuwen [2001]), different types of signs combine within the same media object – for example, moving image, spoken language, music, and sometimes text in film – while through intermediality, texts of a given medium send tendrils toward other media. (Rajewsky [2010] cited by Ryan and Thon 2014: 9-10)

With these definitions, we can understand multimediality to comprise the artistic integration of multiple semiotic modes within one media text,<sup>6</sup> while intermediality is a relationship that exists between different media texts. In an intermedial relationship, the pertinent texts might be multimodal, generating potentially complex and multidimensional relationships. For instance, in the case

of *Mylo Xyloto*, the songs of the album are multimodal (words and music) and they have an intermedial relationship to the album artwork and to the music videos that are also multimodal (words, music, and images). In addition, the songs and videos have an intermedial relationship to the multimodal live performances of the concert film as well as to the multimodal texts of the comic book series. This degree of intermediality inspires another level of understanding.

Indeed, Ryan and Thon invoke a further level of mediation – transmediality – at which multidimensional texts can be received. Their understanding of transmediality derives from Henry Jenkins' concept of "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2006) and Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's concept of "transmedial worlds" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004):

According to Jenkins, "[a] transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" [2006: 95-96]. While Jenkins tends to emphasize the coherence of the transmedia story, favoring a logical understanding of the concept of storyworld, Libeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca [2004: 409] propose to understand transmedial worlds as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms", favoring an imaginative understanding of the concept of storyworld. Whether we follow Jenkins or Klastrup and Tosca, whose respective concepts may best be thought of as complementary rather than contradictory anyway, the steadily growing phenomenon of the transmedial representation of storyworlds is a highly productive field of study for the project of a media-conscious narratology. (Ryan and Thon 2014: 15)

The references here to storyworld invoke the field of narrative theory, where the term can be situated within a literary context. David Herman's understanding of storyworld is grounded in his broader conception of narrative:

I characterize narrative as (i) a mode of representation that is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling. This mode of representation (ii) focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events. In addition, the events represented are (iii) such that they introduce some kind of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc. The representation also (iv) conveys what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses undergoing the disruptive experience at issue ... for convenience of exposition these elements can be abbreviated as (i) situatedness, (ii) event sequencing, (iii) worldmaking/world disruption, and (iv) what it's like. (Herman 2009a: 9)

Herman thus brings forward four crucial elements of narrative (situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking/world disruption and what it's like).<sup>7</sup> In his detailed exegesis of the third element (worldmaking/world disruption), Herman offers a very clear definition of the term storyworld:

Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly

mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to whom, when, where, why, and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds (Herman 2009a: 106-107).

In other words, the reader or receiver of a narrative goes through the process of identifying textual elements and shaping them into an understanding of the society (storyworld) in which these the story takes place. In this regard, Herman identifies worldmaking practices to be of critical importance to any interpretation of cultural practices.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of a transmedial storyworld has the potential to take the concept album to a new level of mediation, as a larger narrative is developed within and across a range of media texts. Under the umbrella of transmedial storyworlds, individual texts can be multimodal (the modes of music, text, and image working together in a music video) and they may “send tendrils” (Ryan and Thon 2014) to each other (for instance, the concert spectacle embedding the screening of a music video during the live performance of the song), thus transmediality encompasses multimodality and intermediality. A transmedial storyworld provides a tremendous breadth of scope for the concept album to spectacularize its cultural reach and to oil its audience-media engine (Wikstrom 2009).

My aim in this study is to examine the transmedial storyworld of Coldplay’s *Mylo Xyloto* concept spectacle as it is developed in and through the material content of the original album, the *Coldplay: Live 2012* concert film (Coldplay 2012c), as well as the paraphonographic materials that extend *Mylo Xyloto* into a variety of media. I analyze the intersections of music, word, and image across these media to examine the central aesthetic and cultural conception of the work. *Mylo Xyloto* integrates songs, artwork, video treatments, and spectacular concert staging to communicate a story about the power of art as a social vehicle. Coldplay’s comprehensive web of paraphonographic materials provides the opportunity to explore the aesthetic and structural interconnections of music, words, and image in a dynamic context. I interpret how Coldplay integrates these expressive domains and communicates musical and cultural messages through a transmedial visual – sonic – textual spectacle.

Given the potential scope of such an undertaking, I will focus my attention on selected materials from the *Mylo Xyloto* concept spectacle. More specifically, the song and music video “Charlie Brown” is well-chosen for its central contribution to the overall *Mylo Xyloto* storyworld, and its illustration of multimodal, intermedial, and transmedial effects. Herman’s conception of narrative storyworlds in combination with Ryan and Thon’s conception of transmediality can be productively applied to the narrative that is communicated through the materials of *Mylo Xyloto*. The storyworld emerges in and through the totality of the materials, as individual parts focus on specific elements of the narrative. We do not receive the full narrative by means of the songs on the album, nor do we receive the complete story by means of the videos that were released or the comic book series. These parts of the whole work together, and rely upon multimodal, intermedial and transmedial storytelling strategies to build the complete

storyworld of *Mylo Xyloto*. As Jenkins would understand the relationships, each element makes its own “distinctive and valuable contribution” to the overall artistic expression (Jenkins 2006: 95-96).

## The contexts of *Mylo Xyloto*: shaping a release timeline

Alternative rock / post-britpop band Coldplay has featured the consistent line-up of Chris Martin, Jonny Buckland, Guy Berryman and Will Champion, with manager Phil Harvey, since 1996. Although their first two LPs were released on the independent label Fierce Panda, they have since been contracted with Parlophone. For their fifth album, *Mylo Xyloto* (2011), Coldplay worked with Brian Eno and Markus Dravs to create an expansive and colorful sound that was treated to mixed reviews due to the pop and electronic leanings (see Eells 2011; Petridis 2011; Roberts 2011). The album was presented and received immediately as a concept album, with the band vaguely describing its story about two characters (Mylo and Xyloto) and their struggle to find love in a difficult situation (Bychawsky 2011; Corner 2011; Sisario 2011). The full concept only emerged, however, with the complete collection of materials, as they were released gradually between June 2011 and July 2013.

The album’s carefully staged release history is summarized in FIGURE 4. We can begin tracking the activities 20 weeks before the release of the album, with the first single on 3 June 2011, “Every Teardrop is a Waterfall” (track 7 of the album), and the 26 June EP release of that track with B-side “Major Minus” (track 5). The video for “Every Teardrop,” released on 28 June, is set at the historic Millennium Mills in London and features the brightly colored graffiti and neon lights that were to become emblematic of the *Mylo Xyloto* spectacle.<sup>9</sup>

3 June 2011	First single: “Every Teardrop is a Waterfall” (“ETIAW”)
25 June	Glastonbury Festival Concert (including 7 tracks from <i>MX</i> )
26 June	EP release: “ETIAW”, “Major Minus”, “Moving to Mars”
28 June	Video: “ETIAW”
12 August	Artwork and album title release
12 September	Second single: “Paradise”
17 October	Video: “Paradise”
19-25 October	<i>Mylo Xyloto</i> release: EMI, Parlophone, Capitol
19 October	Steve Jobs Memorial: closed set with “ETIAW”
26 October	<i>Mylo Xyloto Tour</i> , first concert in Madrid
14 November	Third single: “Charlie Brown”

3 February 2012	Video: "Charlie Brown"
13 April	Fourth single: "Princess of China", feat. Rihanna
21 April (record store day)	Limited edition single: "Up With the Birds" (7" vinyl)
2 June	Video: "Princess of China"
27 July	Fifth single: "Hurts Like Heaven"
9 September	Live performance at the London 2012 Paralympic Games, closing ceremony
8 October	Video: "Hurts Like Heaven"
13-14 November	<i>Coldplay Live 2012</i> ; cinema screenings
31 December	<i>Mylo Xyloto Tour</i> , last concert in NYC
January – July 2013	Comics 1-6 released
20 April 2013 (record store day)	Limited edition album, comic 1, 7" vinyl "Hurts Like Heaven" and "Us Against the World"

FIGURE 4: *Mylo Xyloto* release timeline.

Continuing to generate excitement for the album, Coldplay released the artwork and album title on 12 August 2011. Jonny Buckland explains the origin of the visual concept:

Buckland says the band had a mental image of rays of color shooting through concrete: "That was the starting point of the whole thing, this splash of life and color and passion in a bleak, gray place", he confirms. "Everything else kind of grew out of that one image". (Shetler 2011)

The *Mylo Xyloto* artwork offers a bright palette of luminous colors that are close to neon tones, accented by black and white. The concept transfers nicely to the concert lighting design, which features brightly colored lights against a black background with graffiti painting of the set floor, backdrop, gear, and musical instruments.

The release of the second single, "Paradise" (12 September), and its video (17 October), immediately preceded the album release, the performance at the Steve Jobs Memorial Concert, and the launch of the official *Mylo Xyloto Tour*. Following the tour launch came the release of the third single and video, "Charlie Brown" (13 February 2012), the fourth single and video, "Princess of China," featuring Rihanna (2 June 2012), and the fifth single and video "Hurts Like Heaven" (8 October 2012). This last video release also served as a preview for the first installment of the comic book series, not officially released until 28 January 2013,

but announced at the San Diego Comic-Con on 13 July 2012 and previewed in the music video. Sean Michaels (2012) identifies the comic series release as the moment when “Coldplay will finally explain the meaning of *Mylo Xyloto*, elaborating their fictional story in a series of comic books”.

A final artifact that must be mentioned from the *Mylo Xyloto* materials is the concert video and documentary, *Coldplay: Live 2012* (released on 13 November 2012; Coldplay 2012c), with its companion digital eBook, *Mylo Xyloto Live*. The latter features interviews with all of the key contributors to the project: Dave Holmes, manager; Dan Green, co-producer of the album; Mat Whitecross, videographer; Jason Regler, creator of the Xylobands; Paris, graffiti artist; Mark Osborne, author of the *Mylo Xyloto* comic series; Misty Buckley, set designer and Art Director of the Paralympics Closing Ceremony; as well as their technical staff.

From the first concert at Glastonbury (25 June 2011), to the filming of the video “Paradise” in Cape Town and the FNB Stadium Johannesburg (8 October), to the performance at the Steve Jobs Memorial in Cupertino, California (19 October), to the opening of the official tour at the Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas in Madrid, to the closing of the Paralympics at the London Olympic Stadium (9 September 2012),<sup>10</sup> the *Mylo Xyloto* Tour was strategically planned to succeed on the world stage.

## The storyworld of *Mylo Xyloto*

At the broadest level of storytelling, the message of the *Mylo Xyloto* concept spectacle is based in the ideal of subjects overcoming oppression through resistance. In keeping with the original graffiti artwork and also with Buckland’s description of the originating idea of light in a bleak place, several lyrical passages give narrative shape to this concept. The track “Hurts Like Heaven” sees a protagonist finding strength in his community (“the streets are ours”) to resist an unnamed power. The means of resistance is not force or aggression, but rather art, as the “concrete canvas” receives the marks of an artist with a “spraycan soul”. “Charlie Brown” takes a similar stance, as the protagonist steals a car to meet friends downtown, where they will “run wild” and “glow in the dark”. “Every Teardrop” is a celebration of light and the power of music to bring the community together. “Major Minus” explores the dark threat of oppression as “one eye” watches, however strength is again located in community. Even this cursory summary of selected lyrical cues is sufficient to suggest resonance with Herman’s four elements of narrative, summarized earlier: our protagonist is *situated* within an urban setting in which he feels threatened by oppressive forces; *events* are described that reveal the protagonist to be confronting his oppressors; there is a sense of *world disruption* as the protagonist and his community must attempt to stay safe, mobilize their own power, and resist harm; and the lyrics capture the *experience* (what it’s like) of the oppressed community.

The lyrics of these songs connect very powerfully to the contents and storyline of the comic book series. Writer Mark Osborne describes the dystopian plotline as follows: “It is the story of Mylo, a young Silencer on the front lines of a war against sound and color in the world of Silencia” (Osborne 2012). As the story is

elaborated, we learn that Mylo's parents, Aiko and Lela, founded a resistant faction known as "the car kids". A love story develops between Mylo and Xyloto, and as Will Champion states, "They fall in love and try to escape together, the songs following what happens. 'Charlie Brown' is about running away while 'Paradise' is about feeling lost. The ending is very powerful and about love conquering all" (Corner 2012).

One of the challenges for the interpreter of the *Mylo Xyloto* concept spectacle is that there is no single narrative expression of the story. Each song can be seen to have its own narrative, as does each music video and performance. Rather than searching for an overarching narrative, it is more productive to work with the concept of a storyworld in which individual song, video, and performance narratives combine and intersect to suggest larger values and social constructs. The individual materials or texts "send tendrils" to other materials or texts to create intermedial connections. The network of linked texts creates a larger transmedial storyworld. The song "Charlie Brown" is a central piece of the *Mylo Xyloto* storyworld and an excellent example of multimodality, intermediality, and transmediality.

## Analysis: "Charlie Brown"

"Charlie Brown", the third single from the album, is one of the high-energy tracks on *Mylo Xyloto*. In the concert tour and concert film, it follows "Viva La Vida" (2008), maintaining and building upon the high-energy of that very popular Coldplay song, and precedes "Paradise" in the final set before the encore. Its lyrical, musical, and visual story connects strongly to the comic book series and to the fifth single and video, "Hurts Like Heaven". I will begin with an analysis of the song and video, and then proceed to a consideration of how "Charlie Brown" is presented in live concert; finally, I will examine how it connects to the story of the comic series.

### *Lyrics*

The lyrics of "Charlie Brown" suggest a dark, urban setting, in which the subject seeks liberation from implicit restrictions.<sup>11</sup> The first-person narrator tells the story of an outsider who, seeking freedom, steals a car in order to head downtown to meet "the lost boys". His fear of disciplinary power is evident in his "scarecrow dreams" but his bravery ("cartoon heart") helps him to override that fear. Light is a thematic symbol of his quest for freedom, in which he seeks and gains support from a community. The address shifts from first person to third person in the refrain and this communal voice remains for the duration of the song. The expression of freedom peaks in the bridge, where the social group is "all that matters" and together they achieve both solidarity and transformation. As we consider how the discursive choices represent the world of "Charlie Brown", we can take special note of how the story reveals the workings of power: the described actions reveal clandestine but strong gestures, creating the impression of an energetic resistance to disciplinary social power. Herman's four elements of narrative are in evidence: the subject's oppressive situation, the events that lead to

a sense of worldmaking and world disruption, and the expression of how he perceives his experience.

### *Music*

In the musical domain, I will begin with a summary of the sonic flow of the album track, which explores an expansive sound stage with striking contrasts in musical space and dynamic expression. FIGURE 5a reproduces the waveform of the track, aligned with an analysis of the form, and FIGURE 5b offers a summary of the sonic flow, which I will describe here:

**INTRO AND HOOK.** The song intro creates an altered sense of space and time with its ambient atmosphere featuring pitched-up vocals [00:00]<sup>12</sup> and a gradually emerging guitar hook [00:12].<sup>13</sup> During the first two statements of the phrase, the guitar increases in dynamic intensity, leading to a burst of energy for the third statement [00:26]. In this statement of the phrase, which comes to serve as the song's hook, a dense rock texture offers depth and layering with bass, four/floor kick drum, prominent jangly lead guitar doubled by a higher pitched synth. The fourth statement [00:39] maintains the heavy texture and introduces the additional layer of Martin's falsetto (F4).<sup>14</sup>

**VERSE.** The lush, reverb-laden vocal, multi-layered texture and wide sonic spectrum of the hook is contrasted with an intimate space for the verse, characterized by a compressed, fairly dry vocal [00:53] with stripped down acoustic accompaniment and a more centred mix, with the doubled guitar split left and right to set off the centred vocal. A very faint electric guitar in the right channel serves as a reminder not to forget the ambient world of the intro.

**HOOK, VERSE 2 AND REFRAIN.** The heavy statement of the hook [01:18] creates a link to the second verse [01:32], which offers the first statement of the refrain ("...glowing in the dark") [02:02]. On the way to that refrain, back-up vocals enter at "cartoon heart" [01:45] split left and right, creating a sense of depth, breadth and distance. The intensity builds into another statement of the hook [02:04] that incorporates the refrain [02:15], and features Martin's voice again in falsetto (F4 – G4) [02:22], backed by the band's backing vocals.

**BRIDGE.** The increase in intensity continues into the bridge [02:29], which takes the track to a new level on a number of fronts: Martin's doubled voice, doubled guitars, rich back-up vocals, and high synth pad build momentum for a registral climb at the lyrical allusion to the spinning room [02:49] (invoking a fleeting reference to electro-pop), and a very rounded synthetic bass becomes grainy and distorted (with a saw-tooth effect) [02:56] at the end of the section before the texture cuts back to the ambient sounds of the opening [02:59], including the sampled vocals.

**INTRO REPRISE AND HOOK.** The intensity level of this intro reprise is slightly higher than the very opening of the track, and although the effect of quiet ambience is achieved, a strobing filter effect [03:02] allows the club setting to carry over. The return to the intro material is complete with a return to the hook, including Martin's vocal falsetto in the fourth statement [03:37]. This time, however, he extends to an even higher falsetto "Ah" (A4) to initiate the outro section of the song [03:50]. His final lyric passage proclaims the soaring effect of the collective experience and offers the last statement of the refrain, and one that finally – after

every other statement has landed on a dissonant C4 – resolves to a tonic B $\flat$  [04:03]. The recording effects on Martin’s vocal during this line shift from a reverberant staging on “soar” [03:51] to an intimate, dryer sound at the end of the phrase [04:03].

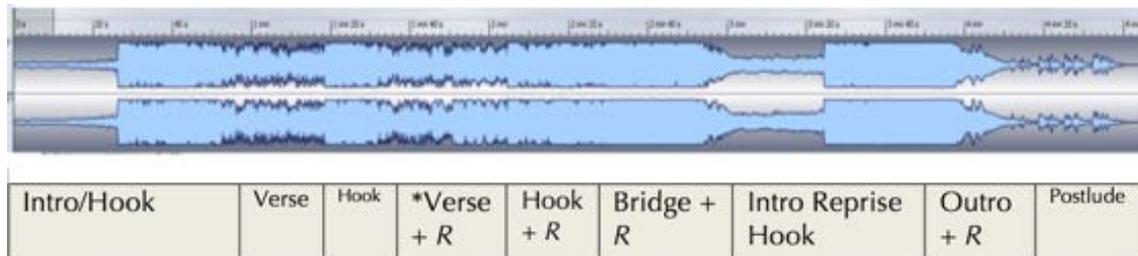


FIGURE 5a: “Charlie Brown”, waveform and musical structure.

INTRO [00:00]: <i>ambient atmosphere</i> : sped-up vocals, gradually emerging guitar create altered sense of space and time.
HOOK [00:26]: <i>heavy rock texture</i> : depth and layering with bass, kick drum, prominent lead guitar doubled by higher synth; centered, vocal falsetto opens registral space.
VERSE [00:53]: <i>intimate space</i> : compressed, dry vocal with stripped down acoustic accompaniment and centred mix; doubled guitar split L & R to set off the centered vocal; faint electric guitar heard in R channel.
Hook [01:18]
VERSE 2 AND REFRAIN [01:32]: back-up vocals split L & R create sense of depth, breadth, distance.
HOOK AND REFRAIN [02:04]: refrain with backing vocals; increase in intensity leads into bridge.
BRIDGE [02:29]: <i>“alternative” space</i> : doubling of voice and guitars, back-up vocals, additional synth sounds, registral expansion, distorted bass at end of section.
INTRO REPRISE/HOOK [02:59]: <i>ambient atmosphere</i> returns; heavy rock texture of hook returns [03:24].
OUTRO + REFRAIN [03:50]: higher falsetto range; final statement of refrain shift from reverberant staging to intimate, dryer sound at end of phrase.
POSTLUDE [04:11]: <i>distance</i> : muted piano creates effect of nostalgia; synth tone clusters in high register sustain dissonance.

FIGURE 5b: “Charlie Brown”, summary of sonic flow.

POSTLUDE. The final 8 bars of the song comprise a postlude [04:11], delivered on a muted piano with synthesizer harmonies that float above the piano chords. Although the song proper closed with a tonic cadence in both bass and voice, resolving all previous dissonances, this postlude reissues the sense of dissonance and unrest: the harmony alternates from B $\flat$  to E $\flat$  until it ultimately closes on E $\flat$  with the synth sustaining both the dissonant ninth (F) and the tone cluster C-D-E $\flat$ -F in the high register above a low piano E $\flat$  [04:38].

FIGURE 6a provides an analytic summary of the structural features of the song, and FIGURE 6b maps the formal structure in relation to that content. Interpreting this content, we can understand “Charlie Brown” to offer a non-formulaic musical structure. The material which forms the basis of the hook and verse is an 8-bar phrase that parses into two 4-bar harmonic patterns, labeled as *a* and *b*: Gm7 - E $\flat$  - B $\flat$  - B $\flat$ , followed by Gm - E $\flat$ M7 - E $\flat$ M7 - Cm7. In the first pattern, *a*, the move to E $\flat$  is metrically marked by a 2/4 bar in the context of the otherwise consistent 4/4 meter. The 8-bar phrase undergirds the majority of the song, with contrast offered in the refrain, the bridge, the outro and postlude. The contrasting patterns, *c* and *d*, create harmonic tension through the Fsus4 chord, presented in relation to the E flat harmony.

KEY: B flat; METER: 4/4; TEMPO: 136 bpm; Lyrical refrain (R): “We’ ll be glowing in the dark”
Hook and Verse based on 8-bar phrase (a + b)
a = 4 bars: Gm7   E $\flat$ *   B $\flat$   B $\flat$ [* = 2/4 bar]
b = 4 bars: Gm7   E $\flat$ M7   E $\flat$ M7   Cm7
c = 4 bars: E $\flat$   E $\flat$   Fsus4   Fsus4
d = 4 bars: Fsus4   Fsus4   E $\flat$ 6   B $\flat$
R = 4 bars: E $\flat$ --

FIGURE 6a: Structural features of “Charlie Brown”.

Another strongly marked formal gesture occurs in the first three statements of the refrain. At the close of the refrain statement, the vocal cadence elides into the beginning of the hook; in other words, as the refrain ends, the hook begins. In the formal plan in FIGURE 6b, the bold font indicates these formal phrase elisions from the refrain (**R**) to the beginning of **a**. In these three statements, Martin leads the refrain lyrics to cadence on C4 that, with each elision into the hook, creates a dissonance with the harmonic support (Gm7). The fourth and final statement of the refrain, however, extends the phrase to cadence consonantly on B $\flat$ , supported by tonic B $\flat$  harmony.

00:00	00:53	01:18	01:32	02:04	02:29	02:59	03:50	04:11
Intro/Hook	V1	Hook	V2+R	Hook+R	Bridge	[Intro]	Outro	Postlude
ab X 4	ab X 2	ab X 1	abac <b>R</b>	ab[ <b>R</b> ]ab	dd' <b>R</b>	ab X 8	aR	B b → E b 9

FIGURE 6b: Formal summary.

The dissonant elision that occurs three times can be interpreted in relation to the lyrical narrative of the song. Each statement of the refrain is emblematic of the subject's outsider status, which is eventually resolved through the empowering experience of the community gathering. The final statement of the elision occurs at the end of the bridge, leading to the reprise of the ambient intro, thus connecting the song's peak of intensity to the very quiet ambient return. It is noteworthy that the height of the bridge is achieved with the musical reference to electro-pop, taking us into the realm of the dance rave. The subsequent postlude communicates a sense of closure, a resolution of the intense excitement of the rave, however it is not an absolute sense of closure: while the vocal resolution of the final refrain statement suggests firmness, the postlude goes on to sustain a sense of irresolution as the synth hangs onto the dissonant cluster.

In brief, "Charlie Brown" offers an alternative musical structure that is strategically designed to communicate a narrative of resistance to convention. The musical structure amplifies the lyrical narrative of resistance to oppression, leading to a sense of communal power in the face of societal forces.

### *Music video*

The London setting of the "Charlie Brown" music video (Coldplay 2012d) contrasts the city streets at night (FIGURE 7a) with a neon-lit warehouse concert space (FIGURE 7d). The "outsider" subject of the video transgresses social boundaries: we see him jumping out of his apartment building (FIGURE 7b), stealing a car (FIGURE 7c), meeting his girlfriend in order to arrive at the warehouse, where they enter seamlessly (FIGURE 7d) and interact with the audience and band members in a porous communal space (FIGURE 7e). There is no barrier between the audience and band members. This representation of the performance is not as "fictional" as it might seem, but rather reflects the reality of their concert tour performance during the first encore of "Us Against the World" in the midst of the audience (Coldplay 2012c: 01:07). The bright lights, Xylobands, and dancing suggest high energy within a positive social space. Our connection to the subject is voyeuristic as we observe him in his actions, with no direct address to the camera. Direct address emerges through Chris Martin's singing (FIGURE 7f), which is captured throughout the song: the singing is never heard as voice-over, but rather the camera links us to Martin and, in the back-up vocal moments, to the band, creating the effect that what we see is linked to what we hear.

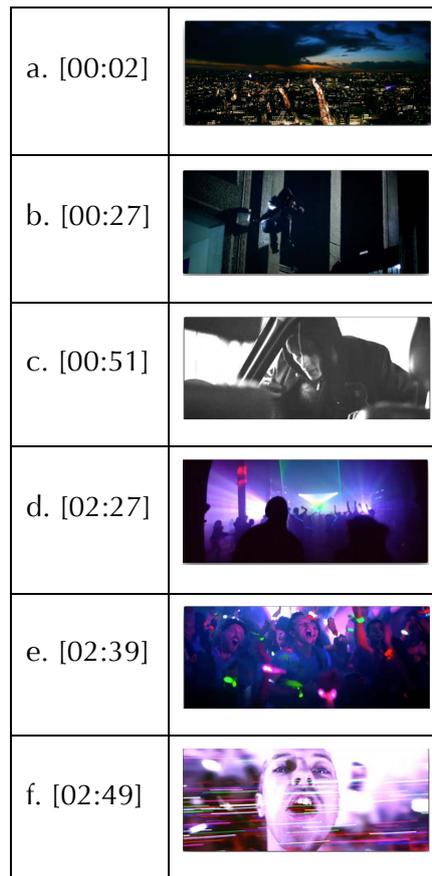


FIGURE 7a-f: “Charlie Brown” music video screenshots.

The style choices and gestures reflect the urban “outsider” theme: the dark clothing and night setting are a foil to the neon lights, graffiti, and Xylobands of the concert setting. The video features *Shameless* star Elliot Tittensor and *Misfits* star Antonia Thomas (Curtis Brown 2012). The subject’s gestures include a series of *parkour* movements. *Parkour*, sometimes referred to as freerunning, is a style of movement, performed by a *traceur*, that is derived from military obstacle course training (Parkour Generations 2014). It involves climbing walls, vaulting, jumping, and navigating between obstacles. These actions have found their way into popular culture through street performance, film, television and video games. The subject of “Charlie Brown” is a *traceur*, someone who transgresses physical boundaries and claims his urban space in and through his own physical power. When the subject and his girlfriend arrive at the concert, the physical gestures are those of ecstatic audience members: dancing, spinning, and singing. The musical event is shown as a site of communal power and social liberation, an age-old theme for popular music, to be sure, but one that is given a new millennium context through the representation of technology and contemporary dance culture.

In its multimodal expression of words, music, and images, the music video for “Charlie Brown” develops the settings, subjectivities, social values, and power relations of the *Mylo Xylo* storyworld. It is not only multimodal in its internal content, but also intermedial in its strategy of pointing towards the live *Mylo Xylo* concert tour. As I discuss the concert film version of “Charlie Brown,” I will

examine how the live performance connects to the concert presentation that is embedded in the “Charlie Brown” music video.

### *Concert Film*

The *Coldplay: Live 2012* concert film performance of “Charlie Brown” (Coldplay 2012c) captures the song in its stadium setting, using the full scope of the stage and lighting design, and emphasizing audience outreach and engagement. The performance of “Charlie Brown” at the Stade de France is placed after the Glastonbury performance clip of “Viva La Vida” and before the Stade de France performance of “Paradise”. These three songs offer the closing section of the official setlist, before the encore portion of the concert begins. During the intro of “Charlie Brown,” Martin communicates with the audience to build energy and invite participation: lying flat on the floor at the end of a lengthy catwalk, he calls out, “Everybody put your hands in the air ... OK, Will, switch them on, let’s go” [55:33], at which point the Xylobands light up, creating a spectacular array of lights in the arena (FIGURE 8a). The enormous circular screens feature Martin and band members (FIGURE 8b), creating the effect of intermediality, a live concert strategy described by Jem Kelly as enhancing “a sense of theatrically structured intimacy, paradoxically realized through an enormity of visual scale and auditory impact” (Kelly 2007: 111). The audience not only connects via the larger-than-life screens, but also physically via the LED wrist-lights (Xylobands) worn by each audience member. Bassist Guy Berryman remarks upon the importance of audience engagement in the *Coldplay: Live 2012* documentary footage:

I think everyone is part of the show, the way that we’ve designed it. We were building this idea that it is about everyone ... it’s about getting everyone involved ... It’s all about the communal spirit, really ... We always wanted to make everyone feel part of the show ... The wristband idea is just a progression of that thought that everyone can be a part of the show. We can make every single person a part of the lighting production by having a little light on their wrist ... I think my anticipation of Charlie Brown in the show is heightened because I know that the wristbands are going to go off (Coldplay 2012c: 53:04).

During the live performance of “Charlie Brown,” the effects of the band members’ high-energy actions are enhanced by the animated lights on stage and the animated neon running figure to the left and right of the stage, whose actions can be received as a representation of *parkour* (FIGURE 8b). For the viewers of the concert film, the energy level is further enhanced by the fast pace of editing and post-production techniques that animate the screen. For instance, the *parkour* figure is seen on the surface of the image, an effect added in post-production (FIGURE 8c). The fast pace of editing also breaks down the apparent barriers between band members and the audience. For instance, the images of Martin’s guitar playing in close-up (FIGURE 8d) and the dancing fans (FIGURE 8e) are seen in direct juxtaposition, creating the visual effect that Martin is performing in the midst of the fans, just as the concert experience was portrayed in the “Charlie

Brown” video, and just as the concert performance was actually staged for the encore presentation of “Us Against the World”.

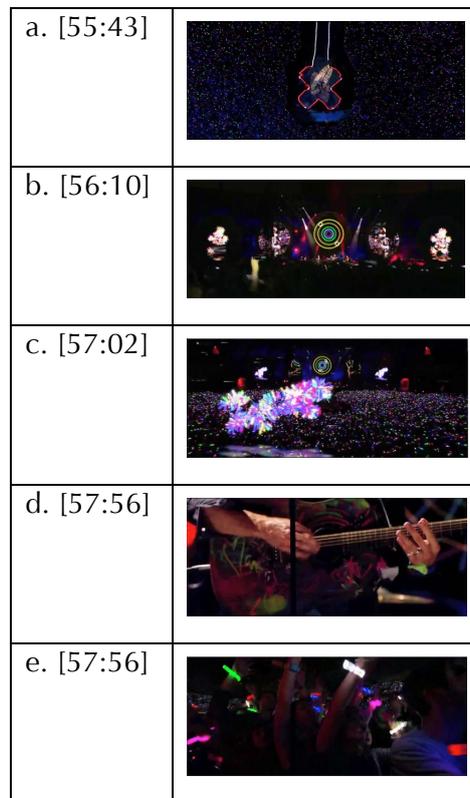


FIGURE 8a-e: Screenshots from Coldplay 2012c, “Charlie Brown” performance.

The live concert thus connects to the *representation* of live performance in the “Charlie Brown” music video: in this concert performance, Chris Martin breaks down performer-audience barriers by encouraging participation and generating excitement around the Xylobands.

### *Comic Book Series*

The comic books were launched through the “Hurts Like Heaven” music video, an animated film that served as the preview issue for the series (Issue 0, “The Car Kids”). In this first issue, graffiti and parkour (as seen in FIGURE 9b) are contextualized as part of the battle of “the car kids” against the powerful oppressor who wishes to silence their music and light. Light, color, and graffiti art are portrayed as tools of collective power and resistance against the dominant force. The images and narrative of the comic book give material form to the oppressed youth, the urban world in which they live, and the evil forces that pose a real danger to their survival (FIGURE 9c). The bright lights in a bleak dark space (FIGURES 9a and 9b) are emblematic of the *Mylo Xylo* concept, creating an intermedial connection to the originating graffiti art, to the mobilization of these effects in the music videos, and also in the live concert footage.

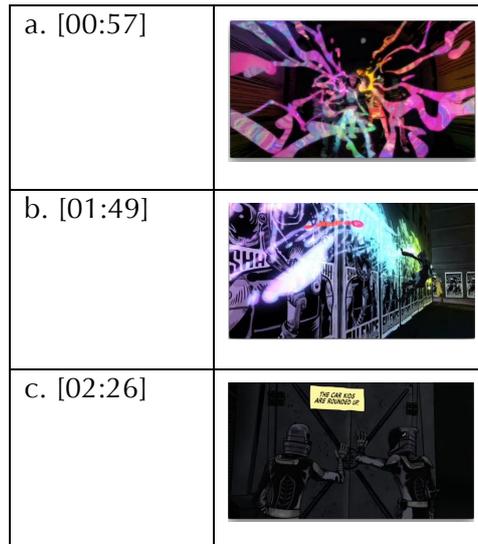


FIGURE 9a-c: Screenshots from “Hurts Like Heaven”, preview video for the comic book series.

Although the comic books do stand alone as texts that are presented within the conventions of the genre, they also participate in the transmedial storyworld of the concept album spectacle. Indeed, in their design as serial texts with their own settings, subjectivities, and storylines, the comic books provide certain contexts and narrative extensions that the other media cannot, thus they offer their own unique contribution to the larger transmedial storyworld. When we receive the comic books and their fantastical stories about the power of light and color, we understand more clearly the social and political commentary that is on offer in the *Mylo Xyloto* spectacle. We can transfer our understanding of the comic book narrative and images to our experience of the concert, the music videos and the original album songs. We receive the swirling lights and *parkour* figures in the paraphonographic materials with a greater understanding of what these symbols are meant to portray within the storyworld.

## Conclusions

To conclude I will reflect on what we can learn from this transmedial analysis of the concept spectacle. In the close reading of “Charlie Brown”, we are able to tease out the attributes of each domain – visual artwork, lyrics, music, video images, live concert performance, comic book – that contribute to the shaping of the *Mylo Xyloto* storyworld. Each parameter has the potential to yield cross-domain insights and to develop a multimodal interpretation. The story of a lyrical subject who is searching for cultural community outside of hegemonic norms emerges in and through the lyrical, musical, and visual strategies across a range of media. Musical content connects to the video treatment; the video narrative connects to design elements in the live concert performance as well as to the visual narrative of the comic book issue. The network of individual texts coalesces to affirm the cultural meanings suggested by the lyrics and music of the original

song: this is the story of a *traceur*, someone who navigates the urban setting to search for a sense of social empowerment. Coldplay's intentional development of audience engagement in the concert setting is evidence of their commitment to that story, and the material attributes of the performance comprise an embodied enactment of those ideals. Through their multimodal and intermedial storytelling, Coldplay persuade their audience to share in these values by mobilizing the new aesthetic paradigm of the multi-dimensional spectacle and transmedial storyworld.

Ryan and Thon capture the cultural significance of storyworlds that develop across media when they make the following declaration:

The explosion of new types of media in the twentieth century and their ever-increasing role in our daily life have led to a strong sense that "understanding media" (McLuhan) is key to understanding the dynamics of culture and society ... The proliferation of the term "media convergence" (Jenkins) ... has created the sense that media are currently entering a new phase of control over culture and over our lives, capturing us in their increasingly thick web. (Ryan and Thon 2014: 2)

As narratologists (Ryan and Thon 2014; Herman 2009b) examine the media landscape upon which storyworlds are constructed, they illuminate the expressive power of these cultural forms. In the music industry, artists who adopt this approach to the transmedial concept spectacle are mobilizing the full potential of media convergence to convey their social messages. Returning to the new millennial aesthetic paradigm explored by authors such as Tschmuck (2012) and Wikstrom (2009), we can reflect on the power of transmediality not only at the level of cultural and social impact, but also at the level of industry success. With the extensive transmedial concept spectacle of *Mylo Xyloto*, it is abundantly clear that Coldplay found a way to oil the audience-media engine and magnify their cultural reach. Ultimately, their narrative of an outsider who transgresses oppressive authority through the power of art, light, and music, takes shape across a multimedial, intermedial, and transmedial aesthetic platform.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An interview with the artist Paris on 1 April 2012, and a full image of the wall are available on the band's website: [www.coldplay.com/newsdetail.php?id=927](http://www.coldplay.com/newsdetail.php?id=927).

<sup>2</sup> These videos are all available on Coldplay's Vevo site, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ColdplayVEVO>. It is worth noting that the colorful aesthetic has carried over into Coldplay's most recent album, *A Head Full of Dreams* (2015), and is especially evident in its associated videos "Hymn for the Weekend," and "Birds" as well as the titles of some of the songs ("Everglow," "Kaleidoscope," and "Colour Spectrum").

<sup>3</sup> The staging and set design is described in Parry 2012 and the Xylobands are described on Xylobands 2016. See: <http://www.xylobands.com/coldplay-wristbands/>.

<sup>4</sup> The concert film was shown at select cinemas in over 50 countries. The band's website announced the screening of the live concert film on 29 October 2012 (Coldplay 2012a).

<sup>5</sup> Recent studies of live performance and media spectacle include Corbella 2015; Idelson 2010; Leante 2007; Kärki 2005; Kelly 2007; Radia 2014; and Richardson 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Recent writings on multimediality in music include Cook 1998; Machin 2010; and McQuinn 2011.

<sup>7</sup> With the dimensions of worldmaking/world disruption and what it's like, Herman makes an important contribution to narrative theory. In these two categories, Herman is influenced by the field of philosophy and specifically the term *qualia*, which refers to the experience of a subject in a particular situation (Herman 2009a: 14).

<sup>8</sup> Although Herman (2009a) does not write about transmedial storyworlds, he does discuss multimodal storyworlds in Herman 2009b.

<sup>9</sup> In its homage to this historic site and related video and cultural contexts, the "Every Teardrop Is a Waterfall" video clearly claims its post-britpop heritage. Millennium Mills is a derelict building in East London that has been the site of other important videos by indie britpop artists: The Smiths, "Ask" (1986), The Arctic Monkeys, "Fluorescent Adolescent" (2007) and Snow Patrol, "Take Back the City" (2008). The location is also the site for UK TV series *Ashes to Ashes*. The video by Snow Patrol has a great deal in common with Coldplay's "Every Teardrop" video, sharing the stop-motion camera effects, the band performance setting, and a studied contrast between the bleak setting and bright lights. Both videos also lead to the transformation of the building – a reclaiming of the space – using post-production techniques, as Snow Patrol's video twists the shape of the structure and Coldplay's video paints the walls. The Arctic Monkey's video (directed by Richard Ayoade) treats the historic location as the site of an urban brawl in a gritty and violent series of images that represent a life of crime and regret.

<sup>10</sup> A summary of the closing ceremony is described in Batty 2012.

<sup>11</sup> For the lyrics for "Charlie Brown", see <http://coldplay.com/song/charlie-brown>.

<sup>12</sup> Please note that the timecodes listed for the song are derived from the official "Charlie Brown" track on the album.

<sup>13</sup> With this ambient intro, "Charlie Brown" connects to U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name" (*The Joshua Tree*, 1987, produced by Daniel Lanois and Brian Eno) and Arcade Fire's "Half Light I" (*The Suburbs*, 2010 produced by Markus Dravs). Coldplay's links (through producers Eno and Dravs) to these particular songs connect us, in turn, to a host of cultural meanings that emerge from those songs and albums. Without exploring these relationships in detail, a cursory glance at U2's lyrics reveals the spirit of a subject on the outside, searching for belonging, invoking the wasteland of the urban streets and the desire to find a flame that will lead to a sense of belonging. Arcade Fire's song explores similar themes, with a young subject searching for a new place and for recognition in the "half light" of dusk.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the analysis, I will refer to specific pitches according to the pitch classification standard in which C4 designates middle C on the piano.

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