

# **Embodied listening and the music of Sigur Rós**

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## **Introduction**

In 1990 Susan McClary and Robert Walser appealed for a musicology which could account for the effects of rock, or as they put it: ‘a greater willingness to try to circumscribe an effect metaphorically, to bring one’s own experience as a human being to bear in unpacking musical gestures, to try to parallel in words something of how the music *feels*’ (McClary and Walser 1990, 288-9). McClary and Walser were arguing for attempts to validate ‘physically and emotionally oriented responses to music’ (287), which they saw as crucial to any understanding of rock, but uncomfortable modes of response for musicology to deal with. Around the time of the McClary/Walser article, musicologists were questioning the body’s exclusion from discourse, and theorising ways in which it might be better integrated into musicological thought (Leppert 1993, Walser 1991). Since that time much scholarly work has been produced which interrogates the role of the body in musicking, work represented for instance by an examination of the idea of gesture (Gritten and King 2006, Davidson 1993). The bodies under examination in this discourse have been those of performers, but increasing attention is being focused on how performers experience the production of music. Fred Everett Maus has recently termed this approach an ‘analytical somaesthetics’, following Richard Shusterman (Maus 2010).

This article uses facets of embodiment theory to interrogate the music of Icelandic band Sigur Rós, a group who seem to affect audience and critics alike in a way that is highly unusual for rock music. One of the questions their music poses echoes one that McClary and Walser asked in 1990, namely how we might account for the expressive effect of rock music. I will begin by theorising embodied listening, and accounting for how it might apply to rock music, before presenting readings of two Sigur Rós songs premised on interrogating how the listener is afforded opportunities for embodied participation.

## **Rock, musical expression, embodiment, and narrative.**

Embodiment has recently emerged as a central idea in cognition, emanating from a critique of the classical Cartesian mind/body binarism. It can be seen in simple terms as proposing that mind/body are not separable in the way that has conventionally been assumed. Embodiment collapses the distinction between mind and body, to insist both that the body is in the mind, and that the mind is in the body (Borgo 2005, 40-49, Fisher and Lochhead 2002). Wayne Bowman summarises the implications of this way of thinking for musicology when he writes that ‘the bodily-constituted knowledge of which music is a prime and previous instance is not different in kind from intellectual kinds of knowing. Rather the two are continuous, deeply involved in each other’s construction...’ (Bowman 2004, 31). An embodied view of perception proposes that reality does not exist as an external world processed by cognitive mechanisms, but rather that the body works to construct this external reality. Therefore the act of listening is not a passive perceptual process, but interactive and participatory in nature. Bowman puts it this way: ‘When we hear a musical performance, we do not just “think”, nor do we just “hear”: we participate with our whole bodies; we construct and enact it’ (47).

In order to think about embodied listening, we first have to acknowledge that the bodies of performers are meaningful. Physical gestures made by performers, whether directly related to sound production or not, affect how listeners interpret the performances they witness. This is attested to by a range of literature in the empirical field, which has examined the way in which gestures made by performers affect the perception of expressive content in performance (Davidson 1993). The same argument is also made on philosophical grounds by Fisher and Lochhead, who suggest, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that, ‘bodily movement is creative and meaningful in and of itself’, and thereby give credence to the importance of movements undertaken by those participating in musical activities (Fisher and Lochhead 2002, 45).

But the body is also implicated in the act of listening. Empirical research has suggested that forms of physical participation undertaken while listening to music can influence enjoyment of that music. In a 2001 study published in *Music Perception*, Sedlmeier et al. demonstrated how listeners who made specific muscle movements while listening to music were more likely to express a preference for that music afterwards (Sedlmeier et al. 2011). This kind of study also draws on a much wider literature that has clearly established the significance of body movements in terms of cognition. (Sedlmeier et al. 2011, 298) One way of interpreting the role of the body is that of mediator, functioning to decode information encoded in sonic form. Thus for instance,

Marc Leman suggests that '[T]he human body is the natural mediator between experience and physical reality. Music-driven movements of the listener are seen as corporeal articulations that reveal a mirroring (in movement) of the perceived sonic moving forms' (Leman et al., 2009, 264). For the purposes of this article, I will extend Leman's hypothesis by using the work of Arnie Cox.

Cox has suggested, via what he calls the 'mimetic hypothesis', that 'we understand sounds in comparison to sounds we have made ourselves, and that this process of comparison involves tacit imitation, or mimetic participation, which in turn draws on the prior embodied experience of sound production' (Cox 2001, 195). Cox outlines three ways in which this participation occurs: through 'overt imitation of the action of performers', 'covert and overt subvocal imitation of the sounds produced', and 'an amodal, empathetic, visceral imitation of the exertion patterns that would likely produce such sounds' (Cox 2006, 46). Cox explains such imitations like this: '[A] musical gesture motivates imitative representations that are not confined to the modality in which they are produced' (51). In exploring this hypothesis, Cox draws on empirical studies that provide strong support for this way of thinking about mimesis. As he suggests, the ramifications of this theory are far-reaching, for it describes a sense in which all listening affords specific kinds of participation, ranging from literal mappings of one gesture to another, to the deployment of conceptual metaphors.

What is critical about this framework is the different forms these kinds of participation can take. An overt imitation might take the form of air guitar or air drumming, in that the listener directly imitates (or mirrors) the physical motions required to make the sound, drawing on cultural knowledge of sound production. On the other hand, an amodal imitation might take the form of a response such as 'moshing' and 'bouncing', neither directly related to the production of sound, but closer perhaps to Leman's 'mirroring' of sonic forms. But I would also draw attention to Cox's 'covert' imitation, implying that being an embodied listener does not necessarily result in explicit participatory behaviour.

Crucial to my account is the idea that music does not offer one kind of embodied experience to listeners, but multiple experiences, as Cox suggests. This is to follow David Borgo when he suggests, drawing on work in cross-domain mapping and conceptual metaphor that, '[m]usic has the remarkable ability to evoke and reference a whole host of embodied sensitivities and encultured or symbolic qualities. In performance, these work together in extremely complex

ways' (Borgo 2005, 47). Similarly, Rolf Inge Godøy has written of the 'gestural affordances' that music offers (Godøy and Leman 2010, 103-25). Bowman sees it this way: '...music and the body extend each other "affordances", options, invitations to possible ways of embodied being that lie within certain ranges' (Bowman 2004, 40). Listeners can choose to accept some (or all) of these invitations, allowing the possibility of different kinds of participatory engagement. Similarly, as George Fisher and Judy Lochhead describe in their article 'Analyzing from the Body', 'the analyst constructs arguments by treating the physical movements and sensations of embodied human beings involved in various sorts of music making as primary sources of musical evidence. Among the physical aspects of musical experience, we include those bodily engagements that are both outwardly observable by others and inwardly felt by an individual' (Fisher and Lochhead, 2002, 44). To read music in this way is to consider a whole range of bodily gestures and implications, both overt and covert, explicit and implicit, and to consider the range of affordances that listeners are offered. This is what I think of as embodied listening in this article, a listening that engages with a network of meanings and codes.

In this article I will pay particular attention to the music videos for the Sigur Rós songs I discuss. This is to acknowledge, following Theodore Gracyck, that the rock music text is 'ontologically thick' (Gracyck 1996, 21). Thus, textual layers such as music videos and artwork are of potential importance in reading a song. What is perhaps unusual in the approach I take to these videos is that fact that I devote little consideration to the bodies of the performing musicians. That in large part is a result of the way in which the videos are constructed (the absence of any imagery of the band, in particular), and the narratives they create.

The idea of music as narrative has been the subject of considerable debate. Scholars such as Lawrence Kramer and Jean-Jacques Nattiez take the position (now widely accepted) that music cannot literally be a narrative (Kramer 1995, Nattiez 1990). In Kramer's words, 'music can neither be nor perform a narrative' (1995, 99). But this does not rule out the possibility of music creating the *effect* of narrative. In the examples under discussion in this article, music functions within the context of the music video. Normally music video is not thought of as narrative in the same way that mainstream filmic convention might understand. The reasons, as Carol Vernallis explains, are multiple, but they include the idea of the function of the video as promotional, serving to foreground the performing bodies of the band (Vernallis 2004, 3-5). What traces of narrative there are in most music videos, she argues, give us something

incomplete and patchy. But the Sigur Rós videos I will discuss are rather different. They present no imagery of the band performing, and instead provide something far closer to conventional narrative than most music videos. The function of the music in these instances approaches that of soundtrack in a way relatively rare in rock music. But this once again can be read in terms of its embodied importance. Vernallis argues that, ‘In music video, what is concealed and what is revealed serve to encourage multiple viewings by engaging the viewer in a process of reconstructing, interpolating, or extrapolating a story behind the scenes that are actually visible’ (19-20). Similarly, Lawrence Kramer writes that, ‘[E]ven at its most banal, sound-track music connects us to the spectacle on screen by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms...’ (1995, 112). Listening in this sense means attempting to make sense of the narrative hinted at through the music videos, and in an embodied way. As we will see with Sigur Rós videos, that has a particular importance.

### **Sigur Rós**

Sigur Rós formed in Iceland in 1994, and to date have released seven full length albums, their most recent being *Kveikur* (2013). Their rise to prominence, in the UK at least, came via an association with the more experimental end of rock, sometimes designated ‘post-rock’. The comparison some critics made with bands such as My Bloody Valentine and The Cocteau Twins was clearly because of two distinctive aspects of their sound; an emphasis on thick and unconventional guitar textures, and an unusual approach to lyrics. The latter is because the band’s lyrics are either in Icelandic or a made-up linguistic substitute they call Hopelandic. While translations of their Icelandic songs are available from fansites on the internet, there does not seem to be an enormous demand for them amongst Sigur Rós fans. The band have indicated in interviews that they view the engagement of non-Icelandic speakers with their music as somehow ‘purer’ than for native speakers (Lynskey 2010).

In the first scholarly article on Sigur Rós, Edward D. Miller commented specifically on lead singer Jónsi Birgisson’s style. Birgisson’s vocals employ his falsetto range extensively, and Miller suggests that ‘[t]he falsetto voice extends a male’s voice, moving beyond restraints, harking back to a boy’s voice, and reaching forward to a woman’s range without ever sound[ing] female. It is a nostalgic, improbable voice, steeped in sentiment’ (Miller 2003). As with a

number of other bands labelled as post-rock, Sigur Rós employ the electric guitar as a means not simply of articulating harmony, but generating complex sonic textures that avoid the traditional rhythmic punctuation associated with the guitar in this context. At times the layers of distorted guitar resemble conventional ‘power chords’, but in other places the long feedback-drenched guitar drones do not fulfil the rhythmic and textural function one might expect in rock. Part of Sigur Rós's distinctive sound is created by Birgisson playing the guitar with a cello bow, treating the sound with distortion and quite a considerable amount of reverberation. Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin used to use a bow on his guitar as Susan Fast has discussed (Fast 2001, 28-30, 36-40), but Birgisson is an altogether different kind of performer, and the expressive effect is entirely different from that which Page achieved. This manner of playing breaks the standard link between certain physical gestures and the production of sound on the guitar. It also serves to avoid some of the macho and hyper-phallic associations that have become attached to the instrument.

Ever since they became known on the global music scene, via breakthroughs in the United States and the United Kingdom, Sigur Rós have been associated with expressive effects decidedly atypical of rock music. Writing in the *Guardian* in 2005, critic Dorian Lynskey noted that, ‘They have a tendency to make critics lose their heads and babble on about glaciers and volcanos, or, in one particularly purple instance, “the sound of God weeping tears of gold in heaven”’ (Lynskey 2005). Behind such descriptions is the idea of place, frequently invoked in the music press when discussing the band. Sigur Rós are associated with Iceland not just as a geographically distant region, but with the idea that their music is imbued with an aesthetic that is distinctively Nordic. In a recent essay entitled ‘Sigur Rós's *Heima*: An Icelandic Psychogeography’, Tony Mitchell discusses the associations of music released by the ECM record label featuring musicians from Nordic countries, and the music of Björk, also highly relevant in this context. Mitchell suggests that Sigur Rós's music could be said to, ‘embody, express or evoke sonically both the remote isolation of their Icelandic location and to induce a feeling of hermetic isolation in the cartographic recomposition of the music by the listener through the climactic and melodic intensity of their sound’ (Mitchell, 2009, 188). Mitchell's account goes some way towards explaining the expressive effect that band's music has by exploring the way in which the listener constructs a sense of place. The account I present goes

rather further in that it engages directly with the music to understand how the idea of place is but one of a number of factors that interact in order to create a set of embodied meanings.

### **'Glósóli'**

I want to begin by discussing 'Glósóli', the second track from the 2005 album *Takk....*. My contention here will be that, across a number of textual layers (musical construction, sound mix, video production), this song encourages a certain kind of participatory embodied response from the listener. The track follows on from a short instrumental piece ('Takk...') that opens the album, formed out of synthesiser washes and sampled vocals. 'Glósóli' also formed the opening number for the band's live shows during the tour that followed the release of the album (as described by Mitchell in his article on *Heima* (Mitchell 2009)). In this sense the song has served as an important dramatic function for the band in live performance. 'Glósóli' was also released as a single, and the accompanying music video (which I discuss a little later) attracted considerable interest.

The whole song is premised around a simple bassline that establishes the harmonic sequence for the verse-type sections of the song: a I-V-vi-IV sequence (see example 1, bassline a). This bassline emerges from a cloud of high-pitched synthesisers along with manipulated tuned percussion samples. The line functions as a kind of ground bass throughout, although it is re-ordered at a couple of structural points to become a V-vi-IV-I sequence (example 1, bassline b). This version of the bassline becomes rhythmically intensified later in the song to form what is indicated here as bassline c.

#### **<Example 1 here>**

This song does parse into standard verse-chorus form, although it avoids the kind of expressive progression from verse to chorus and back again typical of the pop song. In figure 1 I have demarcated the song in such a way as to suggest an interpretation reliant on the usual formal pop song template. It will be clear from figure 1 that it is the harmonic re-ordering of the main sequence coupled with the manipulation of instrumental texture that determines the form of the song. Figure 1 also presents a layered representation of the track, showing the entry of various textural layers, formal blocks, with a waveform plot of the whole song at the bottom. The



accumulation of textural layers contributes to a goal-oriented structure, and as a result the whole song functions as an enormous crescendo.

**<Figure 1 here>**

Against this bassline is counterposed a march-like drum beat, articulating a clear four to the bar. This beat does not employ a snare drum or a generic sample, but an organic sampled sound that evokes to me the timbre of a sharp footfall on twigs. Nicola Dibben has pointed out how it is a certain characteristic of some Icelandic popular music to employ sounds that directly reference nature. Her reference to the samples of footsteps through snow on Bjork's 'Aurora' (*Vespertine* 2001) certainly raises the possibility of a connection to the marching sample on 'Glósóli' (Dibben 2009: 136).

Rather than strummed guitar chords or piano/organ harmonies that move in time with the bassline, Birgisson's bowed guitar enters some way into the song, set against a wash of sampled sounds and synthesiser parts which lack any clear rhythmic articulation. Although these upper layers articulate the I-V-vi-IV sequence, the move from one harmony to another lacks definition because of the sustained nature of these sounds and their treatment with reverberation. There is a clear textural differentiation between two layers here: the drumbeat/bassline is rhythmically regular and harmonically consistent, while the parts above float apparently unanchored to this underlying foundation. This all serves to foreground the marching drum pattern, which in turn gives the song a strong sense of inexorable forward motion.

After the second 'verse' section, the music winds itself gradually towards an enormous climax during the section I have labelled 'intensification' in figure 1. Over the second version of the bassline (b), the drums double the march beat with an insistent and gradually crescendoing four to a bar, doubled by muted, distorted guitar. The result is a typical hard rock anticipatory pattern, foregrounding a heavily articulated four to the bar. The fact that this pattern is sustained for much longer than usual in this kind of music makes it almost akin to the long build-up patterns characteristic of certain electronic dance music styles. Throughout this section considerable amounts of distortion have been used on certain elements in the mix, not only the muted guitar parts but the drums as well. The timbre of this distortion has a distinctive quality which is not quite like that produced by guitar pedals and amplifiers, but rather more as if it has been introduced by overloading a mixing desk or an analogue effects processor. In this sense, the distortion functions as an excess, suggestive of sounds that exceed the limits of technology,



resulting in a damaged timbre. At the crucial moment, when finally the release comes, the texture is engulfed by distorted guitar parts, which saturate the frequency spectrum, in what sounds like an archetypal hard rock ‘wall-of-sound’. This is easily explained through the means of a spectrographic analysis of the song, as shown in figure 2.

**<Figure 2 here>**

At this point in the song, what I will call the ‘thrash’ section results in what appears as a sudden and dramatic saturation of the frequency range. This is mirrored by the manner in which the overall dynamic level of the song flatlines at this point (see figure 2). In production parlance, this means that the overall mix is being heavily compressed: that is, the attack transients are being reduced in level so that the overall mean amplitude of the mix remains as high as possible. This level of compression is significantly higher than that generally employed on other Sigur Rós tracks, and indeed this track sounds deliberately over-compressed for effect.

This enormous expansion in texture and sonic envelope creates the peak of the song’s expressive trajectory. The effect is created not through harmonic or melodic progression, but the manipulation of texture and mix, achieved in the course of the production process. But understanding the embodied effect of this track requires more than a description of its musical and sonic facets. There are particular codes at work here, through which these changes in texture and manipulation of sound map on to cross-domain metaphors, which help in the construction of expressive effect.

In terms of an embodied listening, this sense of formal progression through a transition section to a climactic moment affords particular kinds of participation on the part of the listener. In rock music, certain physical behaviours map on to musical codes. Particularly associated with hard rock styles like thrash metal is ‘moshing’, defined by Collins English dictionary as ‘a type of dance, performed to loud rock music, in which people throw themselves about in a frantic and violent manner.’<sup>1</sup> Moshing might be described as an attempt to simulate the textural thickening that happens at these kinds of moments in rock. It is frantic and violent precisely because that is the best way to create maximum physical feedback, which the music seems to demand. This climactic section in ‘Glósóli’ is musically coded with exactly the signs we might expect to prompt moshing from an audience; the gradual intensification (that signals what is to come), articulation of a pulsing four to the bar by drums and distorted guitars, and the break into a thick

distorted guitar texture. But this is not a potential meaning, fulfilled only if a listener chooses to behave in this way. Rather, via the mimetic hypothesis we can see that the song allows listeners to participate in the feeling of moshing without necessarily performing that action. Listening to this song can prompt an embodied experience, in which the listener imagines the physical sensations associated with moshing, without actually enacting them. This experience is contributed to by the intensification that happens in terms of the mix. The metaphor that operates here maps textural and sonic expansion onto physical senses of higher/wider/louder, but is also experienced via the mix as an enormous physical intensification, which culminates in a cathartic climactic release, the sudden bursting out over and beyond a threshold. Arguably the saturation of the frequency spectrum articulates this effect most clearly of all. This is not to ignore the potential reading of this kind of expressive release in sexual terms. However, as my argument later in this article makes clear, nothing in the video imagery or artwork of the band encourages this kind of reading.

The underlying expressive code employed in ‘Glósóli’ turns out to be one that occurs elsewhere in Sigur Rós’s output. One of the embodied meanings afforded by the musical text is premised on the idea that a change in *musical* state – usually a change in texture and sometimes harmony as well – can be experienced as a change in *physical* state. This meaning is linked to an expressive progression in much rock music; that of the verse-chorus transition as a textural thickening and shift in expressive register. Many forms of hard rock also fetishise the moment at which a riff or a thrash section ‘drops’, prolonging the frustration before the inevitable. Sigur Rós display similar tendencies in their writing, but their songs plot an expressive trajectory in a slightly different way. Many of their songs work with repeated chord sequences that act as ostinato patterns, over which long, gradual crescendos are built. There are still elements of standard verse/chorus forms, but these feel as if they are buried beneath the large-scale expressive landscapes.

The meaning of ‘Glósóli’ can be read to go further and deeper when one starts to address the video and the artwork, not only from the album and single release, but that of other Sigur Rós records. The video for this song, directed by Steffan Arni and Siggi Kinski, begins with the image of a drummer boy, sitting in front of a body of water, with his foot tapping in time to the marching beat.<sup>2</sup> He gets up and walks purposefully and, as he journeys through what seems like deserted countryside, and is joined by other children, many dressed in animal

costumes (see figure 3). The emphasis on a nostalgic pastoral is undercut by the hints of the post-apocalyptic, echoed by the appearance at one point of a burned-out car which appears at one point.<sup>3</sup> After some time the children arrive at a location where they stand and face a patch of countryside leading to a cliff top. Here they pause during the intensification section of the song. The drummer boy beats the drum (synchronised to the rhythmic articulation of guitar and drums), then holds his drum stick aloft. At the moment that he lowers it, synchronised to the release into the thrash section of the song, all the children sprint to the cliff edge (filmed in slow motion). Without stopping they continue rushing out into thin air, and are then shown as flying out over the sea.

**<Figure 3 here>**

The embodied meaning described by the song is reinforced and extended by this video, which counterpoints the trajectory of the song with a narrative concerning fantasy, release, and the extraordinary. It is worth mentioning here that the band retain a considerable amount of artistic control in the production of their videos. The issue of children as the main characters of this video turns out to be a particularly important one. Other Sigur Rós videos feature adults as patriarchal figures of authority, often rather joyless, and presented in stark opposition to the child-like figures who are the central characters. In a number of instances the main characters in these videos are not actually children but behave in a child-like manner. In the 2006 video to ‘Hoppipolla’, the main characters are a group of elderly people playing childlike games and pranks, while in ‘Svefn-g-Englar’ (1999) the characters are played by a Downs Syndrome dance company. Furthermore, on none of Sigur Rós’s albums are there are photographs of the band at all, something that by itself is not particularly unusual. In the places where typically speaking one might have at least visual representations of the performers, instead there are child-like figures. The cover to *Takk...* features a drawing of a lone boy, framed by what seem to be trees, while the cover to the 1999 *Ágætis byrjun*, depicts a figure with the unmistakable features of a baby, still with an umbilical cord, and angel-wings (see figure 4).

**<Figure 4 here>**

Nicola Dibben has pointed out that in popular music a central interpretative strategy is to imagine a song’s author as its singer, and to understand the narrative and sentiments of the

song as an externalisation of interior emotion (Dibben 2006). Much album artwork by mainstream acts works to reinforce this subject position by foregrounding the figure of the artist, thus encouraging the viewer to associate artist with song. The fact that Sigur Rós have generally avoided standard presentations of their own images in such associations with their songs, might be seen simply as a way of avoiding some of the cosmetic trappings that tend to go with the presentation of major pop figures. But I suggest it is also a strategy that allows listeners to construct other kinds of subject positions from which to hear this music.

The other aspect this video raises is the idea of fairytale as a narrative theme. There are elements in this video which overtly allude to fairytale elements: the little drummer boy, the Pied Piper-like procession, and the flying scene, perhaps akin to something from Peter Pan. This much is clearly acknowledged by the directors themselves. In an piece for *Promo* magazine in 2006, Arni commented, 'It's such a simple story and it's so universal. The aspect that we really liked was that there was a sense of someone leading the children to freedom' (Knight 2006, 19).

The narrative contains elements (flying, journey, quest) that resonate with traditional Nordic myths and sagas. At the same time, the video presents an apparently idealised dream world lacking the violence or conflict that tends to permeate traditional sagas. Indeed the band's own close connection with Icelandic culture is well documented, not least through their collaboration with the *rimur* poet Steindór Anderson. What interests me here however is not so much these connections, but the way in which these videos are viewed by those unfamiliar with Icelandic culture, that is, the majority of the band's worldwide audience.

In his 1949 book on mythology *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell identifies a series of typical narrative elements and themes underpinning many myths and legends across the world. Of particular relevance here is Campbell's identification of the theme of 'threshold crossing'. The thresholds in this case are usually gateways to magical realms: beyond the threshold is 'darkness, the unknown, and danger' (Campbell 1988, 77). There are always dangers to crossing these thresholds Campbell suggests, but, '...it is only by advancing beyond those bounds, provoking the destructive other aspect of the same power, that the individual passes, either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience.' The video for 'Glósóli' balances its whole dramatic premise on what appears like a dangerous but exhilarating moment of transition, except that we are not allowed to see beyond the threshold.<sup>4</sup>

By engaging with notions of fairytale, the video encourages the listener to experience the song through a nostalgic re-imagined childhood, where acts of fairytale-like imagination become reality. The way in which the video dramatises the change of state, the crossing of the threshold between the natural and supernatural worlds, counterpoints the cathartic musical effect achieved through sonic and textural means. In this reading of ‘Glósóli’ two kinds of metaphor collide: on the one hand there is the textural and sonic thickening which codes a physical experience, often manifest through forms of highly charged motion (moshing for instance), and on the other there is the moment of flying in the video, again exemplifying a moment of intense physical activity, but this time combined with the idea of adventure, threshold-crossing and the supernatural or extraordinary. What seems striking is that these textual layers to ‘Glósóli’ create a reading that is altogether consonant: all the aspects work together as if to massively reinforce this meaning. But some of the codes that emerge here explain expressive effects in other parts of the band’s music, such as the coding of the gradual crescendos and enormous climaxes as forms of physical expression, possibly representing heightened physical states. Those changes of state are also framed in terms of a particular kind of narrative trope, here the idea of fairytale, and the linked notion of threshold crossing. The narrative strand of the video is not incidental, but is rather implicated in the creation of this embodied experience for the listener, serving as another representation of the state-change metaphor. What we see in these different sonic, musical, and visual codes are a range of afforded participatory behaviours, some overt and some covert. And we will see from the next example how consistently this approach works in the band's music.

### **‘Sæglópur’**

The song ‘Sæglópur’, also from *Takk...*, shares some traits with ‘Glósóli’ but also moves toward rather different expressive territory. As before the manner in which this song creates expressive effect is dependent on the interaction of music, video and sound mix. ‘Sæglópur’ opens with a two bar sequence played on electric piano, counterpointed by a glockenspiel. The piano chords are cushioned with a delay effect which doubles each chord in time with the piece (see example 2).

**<Example 2 here>**

Over this sequence Birgisson sings the opening section of the song, which utilises Hopelandic lyrics (I have not attempted to transcribe Birgisson's singing phonetically in example 2 for this very reason). What is significant about the opening section is that it entirely eschews conventional rock instrumentation: guitars, bass or drums. Indeed when the band perform this song live, for this opening section they begin clustered about the keyboard section, around which are arranged a selection of tuned percussion instruments, and for a few moments they appear more like a chamber group than a rock band. After this opening sequence comes a short transition in the song where the texture thins back to the piano chords, before the song launches abruptly into its main section, which the band have referred to as the 'rock 'n roll section'.

The musical contrast here is created entirely through texture and timbre. There is no harmonic shift, indeed the same sequence continues like a ground bass, but the musical texture is quite different. The piano chords are replaced with a bowed guitar texture, creating not a rhythmically articulated harmony, but a thick cloud of sound hovering over the bass line, which is itself doubled with octaves in the piano. Gone is the tuned percussion, and instead there is a drum part, not the traditional rock backbeat-based pattern, but something where the momentum is generated by work on low-pitched tom toms. Birgisson's vocal line is exactly the same here as in the opening section, but the change in texture is so marked that it feels almost like a another song. Yet these details of similarity are important; the fact that the harmonic sequence, tempo, and melody remain the same creates an important connection between the two parts of the song.

The effect of this transition can be explained through a number of factors. There is the change in frequency spectrum that this shift in instrumentation entails, which has a significant effect on our sonic and physical experience of the music. The shift from piano and tuned percussion, to bass, energetic drum part and bowed guitar means a shift from a frequency spectrum dominated by high frequencies, to one with an active and dynamic low end, a frequency profile typical of rock in other words. And this is not just an effect that we might happen to notice, but rather one we experience directly in certain contexts. Listening to the band perform this song live, I was reminded of how sound engineers (especially in live contexts) seek to mix the bass drum and bass guitar together in just such a way that they create a distinctive low end 'punch' which one can actually feel in the chest. So the shift in instrumentation has the sonic result of moving towards a musical texture that we experience bodily in a much more visceral way, in that we actually *feel* the effect of the textural change.

This notion of the shift in texture of the song as a physical experience is contributed to by the video. In this case the video was directed by the band, so we can assume a specific agency on their part. The video begins with a long opening sequence (see figure 5) depicting a boy walking very slowly into the ocean, watched by a girl close to the camera.<sup>5</sup> All of this takes place in a dreamy slow motion, and in a lighting where the figures appear black, almost like silhouettes with the sun glinting off the water. After this opening sequence, and at the exact point that the music shifts gear, the boy dives under the water, and as viewers we follow him. The slow motion is gone now, and we see him swimming beneath the water at a normal rate. This synchronisation between change of instrumentation and sonic texture and the change in physical environment represented in the video is carefully staged in order to create this link. Once again an embodied meaning is created through the confluence of metaphors related to physical activity and sensation. The change in sonic texture maps onto a change in physical state, from relative stasis to high level of physical activity, which in turn maps onto the move from slow motion/above water to increased motion/underwater. However, the crossing of a threshold is represented in this video in a rather different way to ‘Glósóli’.

**<Figure 5 here>**

In ‘Sæglópur’ there is a further shift which takes the song into a third section, and extends its expressive remit further. The main section of the song revolves around the alternation of two sections in a verse/chorus manner. The verse section employs the same C#-A-F# bassline as the opening, while the chorus section moves the same pattern upwards to E-C#-A. This section functions more as an intensification than a plateau; the manner in which bass drum and bass guitar articulate a pulsing crotchet four to a bar is the same kind of anticipatory pattern as employed in ‘Glósóli’, but without a similar sense of being goal-directed. After the second chorus section, the texture suddenly falls away, leaving nothing but a lingering bowed guitar texture which dies away over some plaintive piano chords. At this point in the song the tempo halves in an instant, the momentum here driven by what I have notated as minims (example 3). The music of the chorus section is transformed into a long ostinato pattern, the remnants of the bassline still audible in the piano part. As this passage progresses, a richly layered string section joins, drifting above the ostinato of the piano.

**<Example 3><sup>6</sup>**



Once again the video provides an important counterpoint to this musical shift. In the narrative, the boy who has been swimming underwater, becomes tangled in some weeds having been pursued and attacked by an octopus. But at the precise point of this release from the chorus section into the ostinato, his body goes limp. After he is rescued by a diver, the video ends with his companion cradling his lifeless body in the water, emerging gradually from the sea in slow motion (figure 6).

**<Figure 6 here>**

The move from the chorus into the closing ostinato section is key to understanding the effect of the shift being attempted. Unlike the ostinato passage of the opening with its two bar patterns, this is a much longer seventeen minim cycle. Because of the length of the cycle it is difficult to immediately identify it as an ostinato, and at the same time it has the effect of implying a musical stasis. There is also a persistent link to the harmony of the rest of the song, folded into this long ostinato. Harmonically the passage seems to be grounded in A major, but the fact that the sequence goes back to A on each occasion via a slide down from B minor avoids any affirmation of A major. Birgisson's dramatic vocal seems suspended above the accompaniment, hanging on three pitches, E, A, and B. The manner in which the B is always held before it falls down to A, creates a series of highly expressive 'sighing' gestures against the underlying harmony.

The effect being attempted here is rather more difficult to explain than in the previous examples, but it hinges on the understanding of rhythmic momentum as equating to physical activity. I have already suggested that this song creates the embodied sensation of a sudden increase in physical activity through a change in sonic and instrumental texture. This change in musical gear expresses a further change in state via a kind of slowing down. But this happens after the chorus section of the song that is by nature highly anticipatory. The release into this section is sudden, unexpected, and seems to counteract the tendency of the chorus to pull itself outwards. The manner in which this seventeen-beat ostinato avoids the neatness of patterning one finds in most rock is particularly significant. By not employing any multiple of four, and building in an asymmetry in terms of the length of time spent on each chord, the effect is of a kind of weightlessness.

What is being attempted here is eliding the physical experience of the final change of state in ‘Sæglópur’ with the idea or sensation of death. Death is presented in the video not as violent or particularly painful, but as serene, or as the move to a state of peace or sleep. Thus, this portrayal of death acts as a metaphor for the crossing of a threshold. What is beyond the threshold, suggested by the keening vocal, serene piano accompaniment and strings, seems elegiac and nostalgic. Nor is this the first time Sigur Rós songs have used a portrayal like this. The video for the first song from the untitled ( ) album from 2002 ends with a child, playing in a post-nuclear winter, losing his gas mask and dying, with the closing camera shot lingering on his face. These video portrayals do not encourage quite the same kind of participation as the ‘Glósóli’ video. That video implies forms of physical participation that are quite easy to elide with the idea of flying or moshing for instance. Here, the sensation of death has to be understood in a less literal sense, in terms of the cessation of physical activity and sensation. In other words it is the *lack* of physical activity that is significant, rather than a change in the kind of activity. The participation being encouraged here is to experience this passage in terms of the structure of the whole song, as the release into a calm stasis after the turbulence of what has gone before. The effect rests on an expressive progression that moves from highly dynamic/energetic to static/sonorous.

## **Conclusion**

At the outset I suggested that an embodied listening was grounded in how listeners can navigate the different forms of participation that are afforded by music. In the case of musical texts such as these songs, those affordances are articulated in a number of different ways: through videos, musical construction, the sound mix, album artwork, and so on. The music videos to these songs depict physical behaviours that have meanings in the contexts in which they are presented. The idea of the pastoral, presented in a form close to fairytale, forms part of the construction of a subject position also reinforced by album artwork. These physical behaviours represent changes of physical state (from walking/running to flying, from wading through water to diving, from swimming to death), and they are counterpointed by changes in sonic texture (articulated instrumentally and through the sound mix). There are also a series of

musical codes such as the insistent march-like beat in ‘Glósóli’, and the irregular ostinato in ‘Sæglópur’. Taken together this all serves to create a network of meanings that the embodied listener can navigate.

The listener is positioned, depending on what parts (or layers) of the text he/she has access to, and the context in which he/she listens, to accept these afforded meanings, to participate in what the text offers. The reading I am suggesting here involves not only identifying the different parts of this network, but how these codes and meanings interact. In the case of these Sigur Rós songs, what is significant is how a series of metaphors work together so consistently, so that physical state change is represented sonically, musically, and through a narrative in the form of a music video in which the music functions as soundtrack. Indeed, in the particular case of this band, the importance of the visuals, such as the way in which some of the band’s single releases include a DVD of the video for the song, help demonstrate how these different elements are part of this multi-layered text, not grafted on for promotional purposes as videos sometimes are. The consonance of these different layers of the text then, allows for the kind of reading I have been pursuing, in terms of an embodied listener.

These forms of participation implied by embodiment are plural, which means that analysing music from the body, as Fisher and Lochhead put it, does not mean pursuing one meaning, but looking at a network of meanings. That network may sometimes be disparate as opposed to consonant, and sometimes music may not as strongly promote an embodied response as this. But I hope to have shown in this article how in the case of Sigur Rós, pursuing the idea of embodied listening allows for an account which I hope goes some way to explaining the visceral impact their music makes on many listeners and critics.

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<sup>1</sup> *Collins English Dictionary, Millenium Edition*. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1999. Jonathan Gruzelier has situated moshing in relation to homosocial practices, and described the moshpit as an arena in which fans articulate their appreciation of the live band in question through specifically tailored moves. Gruzelier, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This video can be viewed online at <http://vimeo.com/3977937> (accessed 19 July 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The video for the first track from the 2002 album ( ) (all the tracks from this album are untitled, although particular piece has become known to fans as 'Vaka'), also presents what seems to be a post-apocalyptic world.

<sup>4</sup> In response to an internet debate about this video, the cinematographer Chris Soos, commented: 'the undercurrent of this film diverts the audience towards a spiritual release, a re-birth in a way, obviously open to interpretation, as it should be, sorry, no easy answers.' Responses by cinematographer to Chris Soos to questions about 'Glósóli' posted on the band's message board. <http://www.sigur-ros.co.uk/band/disco/takk-glosoli.php>, accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> This video can be viewed online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84i7zQ\\_ACnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84i7zQ_ACnU) (accessed 19 July 2013).

<sup>6</sup> It must be stressed that the lyrics displayed in this figure are a 'best guess'. Lyrics and translations for this particular song appear on a website at <http://www.alwaysontherun.net/sigur.htm> (accessed 10th August 2010). Actually fitting these lyrics to the music and the way Birgisson sings is another matter altogether.