

Solange, Visual Albums, and Black Representation

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Abstract

Solange, Visual Albums, and Black Representation discusses visual albums as a medium for Black representation. Unpacking this visual album is important for understanding how music filmmaking has a unique outlet for Black representation through the specific relationship between visuals and music. *When I Get Home*, by recording artist Solange (2019), is used as a case study for understanding why the visual album medium is uniquely complex in its conventions, and in so is especially effective in how *When I Get Home* centers blackness. This paper asserts that one convention of music videos is the key factor for this visual album's effective Black representation: music as the primary determinant of the visuals. By highlighting the ways in which Black artists utilize visual albums, we can have a more dynamic understanding of how Black-created media communicates blackness to its audiences.

Throughout Black film history, there has been a prevalent relationship between visuals and music being utilized together to communicate Black identity. Examples of this include the production of original compositions by Black artists in Blaxploitation films like *Trouble Man*, the genre-bending storytelling of *Carmen: A Hip-Opera*, and even the recontextualization of popular Black songs in Jordan Peele's horror films *Get Out* and *Us*. The strength of this relationship, however, goes beyond just music used in traditional films.

As the visual album format becomes increasingly explored, equally as expansive are the opportunities for Black representation through the strategic pairing of visuals and music. Solange Knowles' *When I Get Home*, the visual accompaniment to her album of the same name, is a recent example of how the visual album medium can exhibit the intentional centralization of Black identity. For *WIGH*, the successful execution of this means of representation fundamentally rests on the complexity of exactly what a visual album is, and most importantly the way in which the music determines the album's visuals.

There are a few key terms in need of clarity for this discussion of *WIGH*. Because a visual album is "a form of transmedia — part video, part film" (Hornaday), it is crucial to understand its individual components, as well as how they function together. A general definition of visual album describes "the songs on an album accompanied by a series of videos or a single film serving as a visual vehicle for the music" (Visual Album). *WIGH* is an intricate case study because it is a series of individual music videos that, in succession, create a single, narrative film. For this discussion, when *WIGH* is described as a film this refers to the longform, 33-minute piece. When *WIGH* is described as a music video, or series of music videos, this refers to the collection of 19 individual music videos. Each of these visuals pair with one of the tracks of the sonic album. When *WIGH* is described as a visual album it will refer to how the film and music videos work in tandem. Instead of being a visual album that is just a film or just a series of music videos, *WIGH* exemplifies how the conventions of each can blend to create a single piece of media. The music video convention of music being the primary determinant of the visuals lies at the heart of this argument. This convention is crucial to understanding *WIGH* as a film, a music video, as well as a complete visual album, and is the strongest factor in *WIGH*'s success.

WIGH demonstrates how visual albums may operate as films. Elements like characters, settings, and themes help build an understanding of story despite the more abstract liberties of the music filmmaking genre. In *WIGH*, "the Holy Ghost appears, and Solange has to confront it" (Caldwell). Solange and the Holy Ghost are understood as the main characters through film conventions: they dictate camera movement, are always recognizable, and when paired together they are spotlighted (whenever they share the frame, the two are bathed in light and surrounded by empty space). Neither of them stays on screen for the entire film, yet their presences open and close the film. This implies that their intermittent appearances must be significant to understanding what is changing in the narrative. The settings for the film work in a similar way: we are constantly returning to the Rothko Chapel, a rodeo scene with a white structure resembling an arena, and the setting of Solange's real-life home, Houston, Texas. Other parts of the film take place in indistinct locations, but these three have direct ties to the prominent themes of spirituality, Black cowboys, and the idea of home (The Daily Show).

The storytelling elements mentioned above help to better construct a sense of narrative from this abstract film. The use of music mirrors film conventions as well. Like a traditional film, there is score and dialogue. In order to observe this, one must be engaging with the film *WIGH*, as the use of music to be discussed does not reveal this pattern when watching the music videos individually. As mentioned previously, Solange does not appear in the entire film. She is only prominent in about 9 of the 19 segments. However, Solange is the only character to address the camera by lip syncing. We can understand this as being her dialogue. There are also segments where Solange is visually featured but not vocally performing. Music used in these cases, as well as when Solange is not visually featured at all, indicate score. Dialogue and score neatly fit into this film's "distinct musical traditions..." (Johnson 21). A musical tradition is a broad category

defining a type of music that occurs repeatedly during a film, usually connecting similar genres. Furthermore, music traditions "create symbolic meaning via their place in [a] particular...context" (Johnson 21). Music as score is employed whenever Solange shares space with the Holy Ghost: we hear her vocals, but she is not speaking as a character in the film. This musical tradition may be described as the spiritual tradition, and thus points us to other elements in the film which call for this distinct use of score. For example, when we hear the spiritual tradition of music throughout the film, our main characters are in the Rothko Chapel. This pattern contextualizes the relationship between our main characters and that setting, all while being underscored by this specific use of music. Within the spiritual tradition, there is also a sonic understanding of narrative amongst the relevant scores (or tracks). The opening song, "Things I Imagined," transitions out with the lyrics 'taking on the light' indicating the beginning of a journey. The final chapter "I'm a Witness" punctuates the film's conclusion with the repetition of that same line. Therefore, the spiritual tradition of music also communicates an ongoing narrative about spirituality over the course of the film. *WIGH's* narrative elements and utilization of music traditions display how visual albums may stand alone as films, with the music from the sonic album playing a key role in communicating the story. The film's visual language, however, is steeped in music video conventions.

Just as *WIGH* can be understood as a film, it is crucial to analyze it as a series of individual music videos as well. *WIGH*, the film, allows us to see the carrying out of 33-minute narrative, but *WIGH*, the music videos, allows us to understand visual aesthetics that would not follow traditional film conventions. To describe those aesthetics, we can look to YouTube videos, as YouTube and music videos have a strong connection (Vernallis). Among the eight different YouTube aesthetics that exist, this analysis will feature three: Reiteration and pulse, digital swerve, and scale

and graphics. Each of these aesthetics help highlight how music determines the visuals of *WIGH*.

Reiteration and pulse is "YouTube's most prominent aesthetic" (Vernallis 184), and shares this quality with music videos. This aesthetic describes repetitive patterns (1+1+1+1), or the establishment of a pattern which is broken at some point (AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAB). This can apply to "any parameter...including movement within the frame, color, editing, and so on" (Vernallis 184). When discussing the album, Solange mentions the influence of meditation and mudra, indicating a sense of presence through the repetition of movement or actions (Ruiz). This inspiration naturally lends itself to the pulse and reiteration aesthetic. "Dreams" repeatedly uses sweeping camera motion to pendulum between two houses across the street from each other, each time revealing a brand-new set up in each of the front yards. This '1+1+1+1' pattern arises from the repetition within the song, where for the majority of the track Solange repeats the line 'dreams, they come a long way, not today.' Execution of the 'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAB' pattern appears in the editing of "Stay Flo." All of the shots are in increments of 4 beats, consistently cutting on the first or fifth beat in the song's 8-count measures. At two distinct moments this pattern is interrupted. When transitioning into the chorus there is a 4-beat break where shots cut quicker than 2 or 1 beats at a time. This visualizes the very apparent beat-break in the music. From here, shots become longer as the lyrics in the chorus are simply a repeated, drawn out "aye". The original pattern is reestablished until we see the longest shot in the entire video, lasting for 20 beats total.

Digital swerve describes a feeling of irreality or weightlessness of a piece of media. While *WIGH*, the film, grounds us to certain settings throughout the narrative, the individual music videos need not be so bound by space or even time. *WIGH* provides a sense of weightlessness through the use of slow-motion lip

sync. This is a music video effect executed by shooting the artist's vocal performance at a faster speed, and then slowing down the video to match the original speed of the song in post-production. This is used across the majority of the *WIGH* music videos which feature any human subjects. This effect emphasizes movements, making them slightly dragged and mesmerizing especially for faster paced songs like "Almeda." Irreality in *WIGH* is displayed in its use of multiple cinematography modes. While the use of high-resolution camera work in videos like "Down with the Clique" and "My Skin My Logo" establish the film's diegesis, this reality is broken up by documentary-style cinematography, like the compilation of personal videos in "Binz," or the hand-held movement in "Beltway." In "Nothing Without Intention (interlude)" we see the combination of these modes in one single video: high quality footage, and the DIY aesthetic of an actual YouTube clip. As a stand-alone music video, this mix of cinematography asks us not to make sense of where or when any of the on-screen events take place, but instead engage in visual association based on what we hear in the music.

Lastly, the scale and graphics aesthetic address the smaller screen sizes associated with YouTube viewing and how space is communicated through the expectation of viewership on items much smaller than a film screen (Vernallis 189). One way this is done is through frontality, where the subject is always recognizable and important objects take up more of the screen. Music videos like "Way to the Show" and "Almeda," feature Solange lip syncing and directly facing the camera while shots remain flat on the setup it captures. Where in film we may consider this a 4th wall break, this is a standard music video convention to emphasize the performance of the artist. Animations fall into this aesthetic category as well. 2-D animation appears in "We Deal with the Freakin' (interlude)" and 3-D animation comprises the entirety of "Sound of Rain." In the former, the narrator of the track discusses a history of blackness and connection to God, and thus the

use of 2-D style can parallel the progression of technology, where 2-D animation also represents the past. For the latter, the futuristic nature of the song paired with the computer-generated movements of Black avatars make the use of 3-D animation communicate ideas about afro-futurism.

These YouTube aesthetics each highlight the music video conventions of *WIGH*. The use of repetition and pulse are different from video to video, digital swerve is often in conflict with traditional film conventions, and scale and graphics expects for media to be anywhere but on the big screen. And yet, *WIGH* is a series of music videos that we also accept as a film, especially for its narrative elements and use of music. This overlap creates the complex nature of a visual album like *WIGH*. At the merging of *WIGH* as a film and music video, we see how music determines the visuals and how this convention of music video is the key factor responsible for how *WIGH* is able to effectively center blackness.

WIGH, as a visual album, must have its music determine its visuals. This music video convention derives from the inherent nature of music videos as promotional tools. Historically, a music video has been "a song set to memorable imagery...to promote the song or musicians" (Vernallis 182). Even now, that still holds true. The visuals of a music video are meant to point the audience to the corresponding song. Music is the necessary foundation for which the visuals are built upon. This is especially true considering a music video would not be considered a music video if there was no audio. Thus, the music is understood as having significant power in determining what is communicated in the paired visuals. Because *WIGH* is a visual album, this music video convention is also expressed in its filmic elements as well. Without the lyrics there would be no sense of dialogue for the film, and without the strategic use of score we would have a harder time understanding the theme of spirituality based on the spiritual film tradition. Thus, we see how the music's determination of the visuals has

unique implications for the content of a visual album like *WIGH*.

The same influence on content applies for distribution as well. As a film, *WIGH* should simply expect to have a theatrical run (and it did). However, *WIGH* also circulates across the internet. There are five *WIGH* music videos released individually: "Things I Imagined," "Almeda," "Binz," "Beltway," and a mashup of "Down with the Clique/Way To the Show." Although YouTube aesthetics inform the visual language of the entire film, these 5 videos especially benefit from those conventions. Clips from "Almeda," "Binz," and "Down with the Clique/Way to the Show" are used on social media as teasers to create anticipation for what, at the time, was a rumored album with no release date. After the sonic album is released, all 5 of the previously mentioned songs are the only music videos to be uploaded to Apple Music and YouTube. In this way, *WIGH* as a series of music videos, actually operates exactly as expected: the videos promote the sonic album either to preface its release, or to redirect the viewer to the music after it comes out. The inherent task to promote music lends to the ability for *WIGH* to uniquely exist both in the film and music video realms.

As just a film or just a series of music videos *WIGH* would not have the ability to successfully centralize blackness with such a significant cultural impact. Rather, this is due to the unique abilities of the visual album medium and is most identifiable through the *WIGH*'s release schedule. Focusing on the film's distribution upholds the idea that "a film is done when it's presented to an audience" (Martin 63). For *WIGH*, this allows us to understand exactly how content and distribution work together to create its cultural impact.

Like a traditional film, *WIGH* is released in an exclusive way. Where a film charges money to be seen in a limited capacity theatre, *WIGH* is similarly debuted in limitation. At its release, the film screened at 9 physical locations and simultaneously streamed online. After that night,

the film was no longer freely available, with the opportunity to rewatch only for those subscribed to Apple Music, where the film can be streamed on-demand. The film's longform run-time makes it suitable for in-person viewing, while its use of YouTube aesthetics translates easily to a home on the internet. The ability to simultaneously navigate these two distribution avenues lays the foundation for how *WIGH* centers blackness in both physical and digital spaces, thus creating such a large cultural impact through how it is presented to its audience.

Both the physical and digital locations where *WIGH* is debuted extend the significance of blackness from the visual album's subject matter into the real world. Because a visual album can be distributed like a traditional film, it is crucial to the success of *WIGH* to take advantage of the nature of gathering that is inherent to film viewership. Watching a film is intended to be a collective experience, so the location of the viewings play a key role in who is expected to participate. Solange initially premieres *WIGH* in locations around Houston, concentrating on places representing the city's Black history and identity. The film is reviewed as "a retreat, a homecoming" and Solange's ability to bring her art directly to a Black audience makes the collective viewing "culturally celebratory" (Huser). Solange's online distribution of the film displays a similar sentiment. Video teasers posted to social media sites like Twitter and Instagram have an undefined audience. There is no specific community for which those sites are aimed at. And yet, the promotion of this album asks for all different races of people to convene at one specific site for the film's premiere: Black Planet. Black Planet is a social media site intended for the African-American community, made popular in the early 2000s. Solange takes advantage of *WIGH*'s ability to circulate as music videos in order to bring those outside of this specific community into a space that is "unashamedly Black" (The Daily Show). Through both of these methods, we see the importance of Black community in this film's release, either by

increasing Black peoples' potential access to the film, or by bringing non-Black people into a space that centers blackness upfront. After its initial release, Solange does a theatrical run to cities with large Black populations (Cook). Finally, the director's cut of the film is released 8 months after its debut, becoming publicly accessible on YouTube. Surveying *WIGH*'s release schedule helps to understand the centralization of blackness in its distribution technique, as we see the release of the film start from exclusive, explicitly Black spaces and then gradually move to spaces where centering blackness is no longer the primary intention. Without music as the determinant to the visuals, this visual album would not have the reach of both traditional film viewing spaces in conjunction with digital viewing spaces — both playing key, complementary roles in the success of *WIGH* in creating a cultural moment for Black representation.

The visual album medium is complex in nature. Through Solange's *When I Get Home*, we can understand the way that visual albums behave simultaneously as both films and music videos. In *WIGH*, we see the use of music as score, like we would in a film. At the same time, lip syncing makes the music appear as dialogue, which is conventional to music videos. Music videos and their shared aesthetics with YouTube videos open the possibility of seeing visual albums easily circulate on the internet, while the long-form run times can call for a traditional film viewing setting. For artists like Solange who produce both the music and music videos for their visual album, there becomes a greater sense of power for what this type of media can do. For *WIGH*, the artist's intention is consistent both in content and in distribution. The inherent promotional purpose of music video, paired with the mutability of the visual album medium, allows for Solange's centralization of blackness to be present even in the release of *WIGH*. These factors all tie back to the way that music serves as the primary foundation of the visuals, producing the sort of cultural impact that makes *WIGH* a successful

visual album in execution. Visual albums expand how we think about filmmaking and its conventions, with *WIGH* asserting a future where Black artists continue communicating blackness through an intimate relationship between music and film.

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