

Listen to the Music: A Multimodal View of Albums and Their Covers

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Have you ever thought about the relationship between an album and its cover? In this article, Borland dives deep into the many ways that different modalities convey meaning including how album art can add to a listener's deeper understanding of the album in its entirety. Specifically looking at Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, Borland addresses the meaning derived through multimodality and how representation and socialization both play large roles in the life of this iconic album.

Heartbeat

—Pink Floyd, "Speak to Me"

Think of your favorite album. What comes to mind? A song? Guitar solo? Bass drop? Maybe you think of the track list or a featured artist. Maybe you think about the first time you heard the album or how it makes you feel to listen to it. But how high up on your list is the album cover? Do you associate it with the music, or have you forgotten what the cover looks like? For many people, whether they realize it or not, the cover is intimately tied to the music of the album. Whether you see the image in your mind's eye when you listen to it or you own a T-shirt with the cover or logo on it, the cover is part of the experience of the album.

Does anyone even look at albums covers anymore? They might be a foreign concept to many people because it seems that album covers have gotten less attention in recent years. The music industry is such a quick and saturated market that often, an album has fallen off the charts before audiences have the chance to even see what they look like. The number of people walking through record stores or looking at physical copies of the

music is nothing compared to the number that are exposed to digital music. Today's generation can just download music on their phones and search songs by name instead of finding the album and going through it until they find the one song they wanted to hear.

What, then, is the purpose of an album cover and why even bother talking about it? For those who take the time to look at an album cover, their value is obvious. Boring, easy, and obvious covers aside, an album cover functions not just as a recognizable sign of the music, but as part of the album as a whole. Whether you realize it or not, an album cover is working to influence the way that you understand the music from the first moment you see it. In this article, I hope to remind you and impress upon you the value of album covers, not just as the recognizable sign of an album, but as a part of the entire work of art of the album that adds to the meaning. Of course, talking about "meaning" can get messy because music can mean so many different things to every person who hears it. When I talk about meaning here, I'm not referring to a secret, "right" meaning of a work, I'm talking about *meaning making*, how each person understands the music and how the cover adds to that meaning for each person. Meaning making doesn't imply that there's a correct answer that everyone should understand; it refers to the fact that music means so many different things to everyone and the album cover adds to everyone's meaning making process.

How Does Album Art Work?

To say that an album cover is just a marketing tool to sell music would be to grossly underestimate the power, influence, and draw of the visual medium. But with millions of albums in existence in the world, it's fair to say that many of them are formulaic, boring, or bland. Often, artists (or their management) choose to go with the most profitable and/or unproblematic option—a portrait of the artist or band. It's simple, leaves no room for confusion on whose album it is, and is often quick and easy to produce. These covers are just the middle ground, though, which means that there is a large list of covers that are worse. Whether they are confusing, done in poor taste, artistic to the point of conveying no actual meaning, or some other failed attempt, there is a legitimate reason for playing it safe with just a portrait as the cover. If bad, forgettable, or boring album covers make up most of what you encounter in the world, then why take the time to design covers at all? The answer is simple: because when an album cover deviates from the norm in a way that is meaningful or artistically unique, the results are not only more visually interesting but allow for new meaning making and layers to the album.

In their book *The 100 Best Album Covers: The Stories Behind the Sleeves*, professional designers Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell assemble the best album covers while providing context and “behind the scenes” information on the creation of each. Both Thorgerson and Powell founded design company Hipgnosis in 1968 and have extensive resumes of designing album covers for famous artists. In fact, some of the artwork in the book is of their own creation which, “other designers (kindly), and other sources, like *Rolling Stone*, (unknowingly) suggested including” (Thorgerson 15). In their introduction, they describe the importance of album artwork and how it becomes closely associated with the music it represents. Often, the best album covers are the visual representation of what the music means. They can add a new layer, a filter, a window through which to see what is going on in the music within their sleeve. They are often the first impression that you get when you discover an album for the first time, and they prepare you for the journey you’re about to take with the music. They are the logo, the welcome mat, the grand entrance into the world that the artist has created.

All of this gets a little messy when you consider how much pressure this puts on the twelve-inch by twelve-inch album cover to accurately represent the music within. Trying to represent such a complex, changing, emotional, and beloved art form on such a small, flat surface is nearly impossible. That’s why great album covers strive to “depict what the product means, not what it physically is. Cover designs attempt to represent the imagination, the passion, and the artistry of the music” (Thorgerson 10). An album cover is a hint of what is to come, a visual partner to the music that provides context, outside meaning or references for the story within. They work with the music to help tell a complete story or convey meaning.

An album in its entirety is a **multimodal** form of composing. It makes meaning through a combination of visual art, aural music, and alphabetic lyrics. All these modes work separately to make meaning, but the full scope of the work can only be understood by combining them all together. Here though, I am chiefly concerned with the **visual** (what you see) and the **aural** (what you hear) modes as they live in and move through the world differently than written texts. Lyrics on their own tend to be the focus of most studies because working with written text is much more comfortable and easily accessible. The aural mode provides greater artistic depth through a combination of sung words and performed music. The use of these two modes together to convey the artist’s thoughts and feelings allow the listener to walk away with a larger and clearer understanding of what the song and/or album means. The visual mode is a rich source of information as well (like they say, a picture is worth a thousand words). The combination of the visual stimulant with the aural meanings showcase something that can’t be

conveyed through just words. If you've ever tried to explain a song without singing it or playing the music, you understand what I mean.

Grasping the concept of multimodality becomes much easier when you look at it through the lens of music. Music is universal. You don't have to understand the language that is being spoken to find meaning in a song. Music can express joy, grief, the feeling of falling in love for the first time, all without the use of words. I know that for myself there are certain familiar pieces of music that spark emotion without the use of lyrics (for example, the guitar solo in The 1975's song "The Sound" creates a sense of happiness and warmth in me that the lyrics just don't). Music is a huge influence in our lives and yet we seldom consider the album covers that go right alongside the albums. Why study the use and meaning of album covers? Well, it's like Thorgerson and Powell say: "People like music. People like album covers. People sometimes remember album covers even when they don't like the music" (9).

Representation and *The Dark Side of The Moon*

Representation focuses on the ways in which the creator(s) of a work conceptualize and plan it. It functions as part of the **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** model that the ISU Writing Program uses (called PCHAT) to explore the aspects of the writing, creation, distribution, and reading of a text. Often, not even a small piece of an album is arbitrary, and each portion works both independently and as a part of the collective to convey meaning. Space-wise, albums are small creations—they are (typically) twelve-inch records encased in a twelve-inch square sleeve, they can only hold about twenty-two minutes of music per side, and each song itself is another small creation. Songs only have so much room for lyrics, so much time to convey meaning or messages before the track changes and the listener finds themselves starting over at the beginning of a new song. With such a small margin for error, representation plays an important role in an album. What concept has the artist created and how do they plan to make it in such a way that their message is heard, that the audience reaches the end of the record and has even a small inkling of what the artist was trying to say? Each small part of the album must be utilized and carefully planned in order to fully represent the substance of the work. Sometimes meaning making is much deeper and more complex than other times but still each aspect of the album works together to create a cohesive whole.

It's fair to assume that many bands aren't too hands-on in the production of the album artwork. They hire a reputable designer, give them a synopsis

of the album, and then smile and nod when the designer brings back something that seems representative of the band’s vibe. Some bands however, take great pains to work with the designers to craft something special and complementary to their creation. Pink Floyd is one such band, and their album covers are considered among some of the best of all time. It’s no wonder that the visual representation was important to the band who was known for their light show in their live performances. Many of their album covers are so detailed and thought out that it is hard to conceive how they would stand alone without the music and how the music could stand without them (ah-hem, *Wish You Were Here*) (Figure 1). Pink Floyd’s psychedelic rock pushed boundaries and the band made it a point to always work with the best and most up-to-date sound equipment. With such care put into every single aspect of their music, it follows that their album covers would be no different. They were strange, provocative, and sometimes intriguing in their simplicity. The pinnacle of this is of course *The Dark Side of the Moon* which they released in 1973 (Figure 2).



Figure 1: *Wish You Were Here* album.

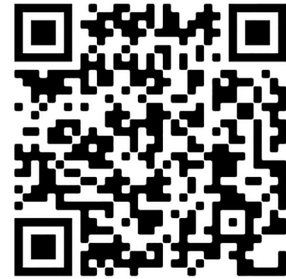


Figure 2: *The Dark Side of the Moon* album.

Pink Floyd knew they wanted to get away from the pictorial imagery of their past album covers and requested a “cool graphic” from Hipgnosis (remember them from before?!), the design company that they worked with for this album (Thorgeron 46). What resulted was the now iconic prism design. Simple enough, the design is a textbook example of what happens to white light when it passes through a prism—it forms a spectrum. Some artistic liberty was taken of course, with the usual white background changed to black, a decision the designers made because “black is cool” (Thorgeron, 46). The prism was enhanced for depth and the colors of the spectrum heightened to what they saw fit (they eliminated indigo from the spectrum to heighten the contrast between blue and purple). When shown the final product, the band “thought that the prism design managed to powerfully represent both the conceptual power of the lyrics and the clean and seamless sound quality of the music” (Thorgeron 46). When presented with a handful of rough ideas for the potential cover, it took the band less than five minutes to grab on to the prism. Pink Floyd had a clear idea for the representation, the conceptual meaning, of their work—it was a conceptual album and the cover had to do just as much work towards their themes and meaning as the music itself did.

Look and Ye Shall Find (Meaning)

Most often, when you think about an album you first think about the music itself. If you are more than just a casual listener, you may even start thinking about the ways in which the songs on the album are organized to tell a story or you may start picking up on recurring themes throughout the album. If you become familiar with an album, you can probably start telling your friends, coworkers, classmates, and anyone who will listen what you think it *means* through an analysis of lyrics, composition, and mood. But do you ever consider the ways in which the album cover plays a part in this meaning making? Better yet, the question might be *Do you realize that the album cover is subconsciously playing a role in the ways that you make meaning from an album?* Whether you realize it or not, the visual medium that comes plastered on the front of an album goes a long way in shaping your opinion of the music even before you hear it. Before this world of digital media, an album cover was one of the first aspects of music that you would encounter.

Sure, you'd hear a song on the radio and have absolutely no idea what the album looked like. But if you liked that song enough that you wanted to listen to it on your own time, you would have to go out and buy the physical album. This is important because unless you are the kind of person who buys an album and exclusively listens to one song and makes sure to skip straight to that track every time, the image that you see when you pick up the physical album becomes inextricably linked to the entire product. You make assumptions and judgements of the album before you even hear the opening track. This is why representation is so important and why many artists chose portraits for their album cover—it is hard to mess up meaning when the cover only serves to remind the listener of who is making the music. Pink Floyd understood this importance and chose an album cover that was not only attention grabbing but alluded to the themes and sound quality of the music within. The designers of *Hipgnosis* were very deliberate in their design and carefully crafted an image that was symbolic of the themes of the music in multiple ways. This is how album covers are windows to their music—they provide context, hint at meaning that only becomes clearer the further into the record that you listen, or they provoke thought. All this primes the listener for aural meaning making of the album.

Since the album cover is usually the listener's first impression of the album, it is obvious why design is so important, especially for a conceptual album like *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Pink Floyd explore themes of conflict, greed, death and insanity in this album. With the album cover and a poster which was included in the sleeve of the record,

the designers included images of the pyramids—symbols of vaulting ambition, greed, and megalomania. These were themes touched upon in the lyrics. The triangular outline of the pyramid also linked it to the shape of the prism on the front cover. (Thorgerson 46)

The triangular shape becomes important for this album, and with the combination of the prism and the picture of the pyramids, the audience starts thinking about the relationships between science, ancient architecture, and symbolism. This also draws in the **spatial** (the layout and positioning) mode. Not only is meaning making happening through the visual and aural modes, but the actual layout of the album cover makes meaning too. The use of the pyramid draws parallels to science, architecture, and symbolism and this begins to prime the listener to start making connections with these ideas and what they will hear in the music. Some of the difficult musical concepts are conveyed more easily in the visual medium of the cover graphic.

“Yeah, I Like Good Music, I have *Dark Side of the Moon* on Vinyl”

The album received critical acclaim when it was released in 1973 and has since been considered one of the best albums of all time. If you ask anyone who claims to like good music how they feel about *The Dark Side of the Moon*, you’ll probably hear nothing but positive remarks. Honestly if you ask anyone at all about the album, you’re sure to find more who know it than those who don’t. It has left quite a lasting impression on our culture since it came out almost half a century ago.

Here though, the question is whether the album itself is what is famous today or if it’s the album cover that lives on. Unquestioningly, the music is still alive and well (on Spotify Pink Floyd has 11.6 million monthly listeners). But in what ways is this pop culture icon operating in our world of nostalgia? Similar to the vinyl it was released on and the record players it was spun on, the album cover of *The Dark Side of the Moon* has become an aesthetic. The iconic prism has become something in its own right, something separate from the music of the album. Much like a lot of very popular albums, it has gone far beyond the original representation of what Pink Floyd and the designers of Hipgnosis intended. The ways in which culture picked up the imagery and molded it into something new has changed its meaning forever.

Within PCHAT, the process of **socialization** is when listeners pick up the album, interact with it, and interact with others who are also interacting with the album. The ways they talk about what they liked, what they didn’t

like, and what they think it means, all come together to create a cultural understanding of the album that can be a far cry from the artist's original concept. It's both a conscious and an unconscious rewriting and transforming of meaning. Pink Floyd wanted the design of the album cover to represent the clean sound quality of the album but what they unintentionally got was a simple enough design that allowed it to be recreated, to be spread throughout culture, and to be taken up as a symbol for psychedelic rock in general. Whereas the music of the album was conceptual and provoked deep thought, the album cover was so straightforward that it burned through 1970s rock and roll culture like wildfire. As time went on, the famous prism was no longer only associated with the ten tracks of *The Dark Side of the Moon*. It has taken on a life of its own and become one of the most easily recognizable graphics in our culture.

Nowadays, the music scene has moved away from rock and roll, and new genres have emerged that make the style of Pink Floyd's psychedelic composition a thing of the past. Why then, is the prism graphic still so recognizable? While styles of music have changed, the aesthetically pleasing nature of the graphic has not. The ways in which listeners are socializing with the album cover are a far cry from 1973. The visual of the album cover has become a sort of symbol for classic rock. You don't have to have heard the album to appreciate what the prism and spectrum on a black background means. It has become a part of most record collections and any store that sells albums is sure to have multiple copies in stock. For those who claim to like "good" or "classic" music (whatever on earth that means), having *The Dark Side of the Moon* as part of their collection is a given. And it's not just *The Dark Side of the Moon* that has undergone this transformation of cultural meaning—most people in today's culture will also recognize the Rolling Stones' logo (Figure 3), the famous cover for the Beatles' *Abbey Road* (Figure 4), and Nirvana's bright yellow smiley face (Figure 5). All these symbols of music from the past have become a part of pop culture in ways that are independent of the music they were designed to represent.



Figure 3: Rolling Stones T-shirt.



Figure 4: *Abbey Road* album.



Figure 5: Nirvana's bright yellow smiley face.

From Conceptual to Commercial

We are living in a time that is immersed in nostalgia—fashion is currently calling back to that of the 1990s, some of the most successful television and movies are heavily relying on 1980s nostalgia to sell (looking at you, *Stranger Things*), and any bar frequented by college students can be heard blaring 2000s “throwbacks.” Point being: nostalgia sells. And our iconic prism is no exception.

A quick Amazon search for “Pink Floyd Dark Side of the Moon” pulls up the digital album, four T-shirts, a rubber keychain, and a sticker all on the first page of results. A Google Shopping search of the album name provides links to Kohl’s (Figure 6) and Target (Figure 7) to purchase T-shirts and links to Etsy where you can purchase canvas art, stained glass, engraved lighters, clocks, prints, buttons, phone cases, earrings, and underwear all with the famous prism design on them (Figure 8). This is one example of the way that socialization can change a work into something that the original creator(s) could never have dreamed of. This conceptual album that utilized a “cool graphic” to visually represent the music’s themes has become a symbol for classic rock that has unlimited commercial potential.

Our nostalgia culture has all of a sudden made these albums, bands, TV shows, and movies of the past relevant again today. Can you assume that the person you see across the Quad wearing their *The Dark Side of the Moon* grunge T-shirt likes the album or has even listened to it before? No, you can’t. But that’s not what matters today, that’s not why that person is wearing the T-shirt. What matters is what embracing 1970s classic rock nostalgia says about you. Sure, it could mean that you like the album but it could also mean that you like the music genre or that you like the style and vibe of the decade or that you like the idea of groundbreaking and conceptual music or that you just think the design is neat and the shirt looks cute cropped and worn with your boyfriend jeans and black Converse sneakers. Whatever it may mean for you, it doesn’t mean the same thing that it did in 1973.



Figure 6: Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon* T-shirt.



Figure 7: Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon* onesie.



Figure 8: *Dark Side of the Moon* Earrings.

Reprise

Album covers and the music that they represent are inextricably tied to one another. Pink Floyd commissioned a graphic that could encapsulate the style of music and convey the conceptual aspect of what they were making. No one could have predicted the ways in which the art takes on a life of its own and means so many different things, most of which have absolutely nothing to do with the music that the graphic represents. Although the band put so much hard work and effort into the making of this album, meaning is ultimately up to each individual person who interacts with the work. Understanding representation is important to know why a work was created in the way it was, but it is through socialization that a piece takes on life in popular culture. Both the meaning that the band intended and the meanings that the listeners conceive are true and right. Music, while universal, is really a unique and individualistic experience. Pink Floyd chose the prism design for their groundbreaking album because they interpreted it as symbolizing their themes and styles. But for others, the prism means an infinite amount of possibilities. Modes in and of themselves allow individual interpretation and when you combine multiple modes, like with the visual/aural/alphabetical modes present on an album, the potential for interpretation multiplies exponentially. Regardless of what meaning you may make of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, the multimodal aspects are all working together to point you toward something more.

“There is no dark side of the moon really
Matter of fact it's all dark”
Heartbeat
—Pink Floyd, “Eclipse”

Appendix A

Figure 1. Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* album cover

Hipgnosis, 1075. *Wish You Were Here*, Harvest and Columbia Records, 1975, album cover. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wish_You_Were_Here_\(Pink_Floyd_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wish_You_Were_Here_(Pink_Floyd_album)).

Figure 2. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* album cover

Hipgnosis, 1973. *Dark Side of the Moon*, Harvest Records, 1973, album cover. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dark_Side_of_the_Moon.

Figure 3. Rolling Stones t-shirt

The Rolling Stones Neon Tongue Logo T-Shirt, <https://www.hottopic.com/product/the-rolling-stones-neon-tongue-logo-t-shirt/12222736.html?cgid=band-merch-shop-by-artist-rolling-stones#start=2>

Figure 4. The Beatles' *Abbey Road* album cover

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbey_Road

Figure 5. Nirvana's Logo

Nirvana Logo Smile Smiley Face Music Rock Band Embroidered Patch Iron On (3.5" x 3.8"), <https://www.amazon.com/Nirvana-Smile-Smiley-Music-Embroidered/dp/B07Q2DJQDS>.

Figure 6. Pink Floyd T-shirt from Kohl's

Men's Pink Floyd "The Dark Side Of The Moon" Band Tee, <https://www.kohls.com/product/prd-2097966/pink-floyd-the-dark-side-of-the-moon-tee-men.jsp?prdPV=3>

Figure 7. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* baby clothing

Baby Boys' Pink Floyd Short Sleeve Bodysuit-Navy, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/AWV13JO_OlkaY0qUiM1DxPuAndb-hHmcFfQQoomb4K3qExUCco_SApiW8ya6tazNy5C_A8UyCbPpiY1QxCTUipk/?nic_v2=1a4BsjMYg

Figure 8. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* earrings

Pink Floyd Earrings (*Dark side of the moon*), https://www.etsy.com/listing/264073360/pink-floyd-earrings-dark-side-of-the?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=pink+floyd+dark+side+of+the+moon&ref=sr_gallery-1-32&organic_search_click=1&frs=1.

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