

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HEARING *HEIMA*: ECOLOGICAL AND ECOCRITICAL APPROACHES TO MEANING IN THREE ICELANDIC MUSIC VIDEOS

BRAD OSBORN

Múm's "Green Grass of Tunnel" (2002), Björk's "Triumph of a Heart" (2004), and Sigur Rós's "Glósóli" (2005) are music videos composed by Icelandic recording artists in the last decade. Each of these pieces, in very different ways, offers a commentary on the Icelandic ecosystem.¹ By examining concomitantly the cinematic and musical elements of these three Icelandic music videos as they relate specifically to a place-centered, ecological view of Iceland, this essay hopes to demonstrate one way in which analysis of music videos reveals far more than can be gleaned from recorded music alone.

Although the analysis of music videos has not received much attention in the music-theoretical community, Nicholas Cook, following Goodwin and perhaps more surprisingly, Schoenberg, has argued successfully that music videos should, in their essence, be interpreted as musical entities:

A 'musicology of the image' [Goodwin's term] would seek to interpret the music video as, before anything else, a 'musical entity' [Schoenberg's term]...it would understand it as making music with the media of the video...it might be possible to work from fairly basic music-theoretical concepts toward an understanding of the relationship of music to words and pictures.²

My approach, like Cook's, will be fundamentally driven by analysis of the music, but with an additional toolset outside the bounds of what he would

consider “basic” music theory. Drawing on recent work in the fields of ecomusicology and ecological perception will uncover fundamentally Icelandic elements in the music videos.³ Prior to the analysis, a brief introduction of ecologically inspired music criticism will help to situate this work within what appears to be a rapidly expanding field of scholarship,⁴ and a terse history of the modern Icelandic popular music scene and its relationship to Iceland’s physical and socio-economic landscape will provide context for these works.

Ecological approaches to music and music analysis have only been emerging in the last two decades, and could be placed in two broad categories.⁵ The first, often called “ecomusicology” or “ecocriticism,” tends to concern itself with approaches to analyzing music that situate said music within a particular place, as well as that place’s attendant cultural milieu. Though one might argue that this has been a concern of music historians for a long time, ecocriticism received significant attention in the wake of the New Musicology movement, and Denise Von Glahn’s 2003 book has certainly stood as a benchmark for the field.⁶

The second involves a relatively new field of music psychology known as “ecological perception.” Pioneered by J.J. Gibson, who was concerned with visual perception, several articles on auditory perception that adapted his work to sound appeared in journals in the 1990s, and Eric Clarke’s 2005 book forms the *locus classicus* on the topic.⁷ Allan Moore, in his adaptation of Clarke’s theory to popular recorded song, sums up the approach nicely: “invariants afford through specification.”⁸ Invariants are the inherent properties of a sound, both physical (i.e., by nature of material construction) and cultural (i.e., the use of drum in ritual) that specify either the sound’s source or its reference to a specific group of listeners. In Clarke’s view:

...just as sounds specify the invariants of the natural environment, so too do they specify the constancies or invariants of the cultural environment. The sounds of a muffled drum being struck with wooden sticks *specify* the materials (wood, skin) and physical characteristics (hollowness, damped vibration) of the material source—the drum; and they also *specify*⁹ the social event (for instance, a military funeral) of which they are a part.

By analyzing invariants and the sources they specify, ecological perception aims to account for what interpretations of meaning these sounds afford and, perhaps just as importantly, which interpretations they do not afford. Put together, these three concepts help us to solve a perennial problem involving the meaning of a given piece of music: how

do we account for the fact that, though each of us has our own unique interpretation of a piece, there seems to be a commonly accepted range of meanings shared between many listeners? Put differently, how do we find a middle space between, on one extreme, pure, unbounded subjectivity among individual subjects, and, on the other extreme, a single, inter-subjective “encoded” meaning waiting to be “discovered” for each piece of music?

Though one could theoretically apply these modes of analysis to any body of music, Icelandic popular music—specifically its inextricable link to modern conceptions of Icelandic culture and the Icelandic natural landscape¹⁰—suggests the need for a more active link between ecology and analysis. A landmark 2005 documentary *Screaming Masterpiece* documents this integral link between the country’s musicians and the natural features of the land.¹¹ Three recurring themes mentioned by musicians interviewed throughout the film seem particularly poignant in this regard: (1) the geographical isolation of Iceland from neighboring continents is isomorphic to the cultural isolation of the nation’s popular music when compared to mainstream US or European styles; (2) the geological wonders of the country, including geysers, glaciers, volcanoes, mountains, geothermal hotpots, and vast lava fields marked by deep fissures and deposited volcanic rock, are a continual aesthetic inspiration for Icelandic artists of all disciplines; and (3) the relatively high amounts of cold and darkness the country receives most of the year contribute to the highly practiced and contemplative nature of the experimental art its residents produce as they spend significant time indoors with only artificial light. This sense of linking Iceland’s musical identity to place is further reinforced by a 2007 film made by Sigur Rós themselves. The film, entitled *Heima* (literally “home”), follows the band around the country as they perform a series of free concerts, not only in cities, towns, and small villages, but also in natural settings such as caves and open fields, most of which were recorded live to imbue the film with the acoustic signatures of those places.

Though Icelandic popular music was initially influenced a great deal by British rock music in the 1960s, it has, especially in the last 15 years, gained a distinctive and influential voice.¹² The success of the Icelandic popular music scene is undoubtedly bound with the immense international success of Björk and Sigur Rós in the 1990s, which carved a space for newer acts such as Múm, Mammút, Apparat Organ Quartet, and others in the 2000s. Iceland’s impact on the modern experimental rock scene can be gleaned best from the import of its yearly festival, Iceland Airwaves,

which, though it draws acts from around the world, highlights emerging Icelandic rock artists. As evidenced by the festival's 2012 lineup, many of these artists are in fact so new that they have yet to release a full-length record, and some do not even have record contracts. Seen internationally as a hotbed of new, groundbreaking, experimental artists, major media outlets flock to Reykjavík each year to broadcast from the festival.¹³ This overwhelming international recognition has not only changed the face of Icelandic music, but the music has in fact profoundly changed the current social, political, and cultural climate of the country. As Dibben notes:

The success of Icelandic popular music abroad has a number of consequences for national identity. First, the internationalism of Icelandic popular music works against the idea of Iceland as a 'peripheral' nation within a world context and demonstrates that it has a distinctive contribution to make. Some Icelanders directly attribute their pride in the Icelandic nation to its increased international profile within the popular music industry... Second, the success of popular music has had direct benefits for Iceland's export economy, and indirect benefits for the tourist industry... The cultural industries in Iceland are now a significant part of the Icelandic economy, responsible for 4% of GDP, of which music accounts for a quarter...As a consequence of this, state support for the music industry increased with a reduction of tax charged on recorded music (from 24.5% to 7%) in March 2007, and the creation in the same year of the government-sponsored International Music Export...

With a view toward exposing how they contribute to this perceptible link between Iceland's popular music and the Icelandic ecosystem (which, again, should be taken to stand for: the interactions of all organisms—both human and non-human animals—and materials both natural and human-made), I shall now undertake an analysis of the musical and visual elements in three music videos by Björk, Sigur Rós, and Múm. The first of these videos comments more directly on the artist's interactions with the Icelandic socio-cultural landscape, while the other two artists eschew self-inclusion in their videos altogether to comment exclusively on the Icelandic physical/geological landscape. Even between these last two, we will observe a profound dichotomy between, in one video, the Icelandic ecosystem as *pastoral/lush*, and in the other video, the Icelandic ecosystem as *imagined/harsh*. Dichotomies such as these illustrate, and are borne out of, the volatile and extreme geological contrasts that define and shape the island.¹⁴

Time	Musical Form	Time	Cinematic Form
0:01–0:27	(video introduction not heard on <i>Medúlla</i>)	0:01–0:38	SCENE A1 (home)
0:28–0:38	INTRODUCTION	0:39–0:53	TRANS (driving)
0:39–1:10	VERSE 1	0:54–1:22	SCENE B1 (bar, bored)
1:11–1:42	CHORUS 1	1:23–1:42	SCENE B2 (bar, happy)
1:43–2:24	REHEARSAL	1:43–2:46	SCENE B3 (bar, rehearsal)
2:25–2:57	VERSE 2 (live)	2:47–3:05	SCENE B4 (bar, party)
2:58–3:24	CHORUS 2 (live)	3:06–3:29	TRANS (walking)
3:25–4:02	BRIDGE	3:30–4:24	SCENE C (road)
4:03–5:25	CHORUS 3	4:25–5:25	SCENE A2 (home)

Example 11-1, Musical and Cinematic Form of Björk, “Triumph of a Heart” (2004)¹⁵

Example 11-1 depicts the basic formal outline of Björk’s music video for “Triumph of the Heart” from her 2004 album *Medúlla*. Note that, in this type of representation, I have provided formal cues for both the musical and cinematic elements of the song. Accounts of musical form here are informed by recent theories of rock form, including Summach’s work on conventional forms, and my own work on more recent post-millennial formal designs.¹⁶ In order to relate the cinematic form of the movie more closely to ecological theory, I emphasize *place* as the visual parameter most responsible for delineating form. For example, scenes A, B, and C in “Triumph of the Heart” occur in three different spaces (a home, a bar, and a road, respectively), while variations on those cinematic units can be further defined using numbers. These numbers may be applied for two different reasons, as demonstrated in Example 11-1. In scenes B1 through B4, the physicality of place is continuously present, but the ecological interaction between humans and said physical space differs from scenes one through four. In the case of scenes A1 and A2, the presentation of a single physical space (the protagonist’s home, first shown in A1) is separated in time by two sequential intervening spaces (the bar, then the road), thus the arrival of A2 can be viewed as a cinematic recapitulation.

A brief plot synopsis will help to situate the analysis. At the beginning of “Triumph of a Heart” we find the protagonist, played by the actress/musician Björk, at home with her cat. The protagonist (hereafter “Björk,” though a discernable complication will arise from this) is

noticeably bored, and perhaps irritated by her companion, as evidenced by the ennui imparted by her facial expressions. She leaves the home in frustration, the cat's human wardrobe and judging glare while standing in the doorway now suggesting a more domestic relationship between the two. At the end of Scene A, Björk drives from her small pink home in the middle of a vast, uninhabited grassland toward the city lights of Reykjavik.¹⁷ Scene B1 shows her arriving at a bar in the early evening, sitting down to drinks by herself, and remaining noticeably bored until being joined by others in Scene B2. A complex "behind the scenes" shift ensues from scene B3 to scene B4 involving the rehearsal of "Triumph of a Heart," which will be discussed in detail later. Björk becomes increasingly happy and intoxicated throughout the night into scene B4, climaxing in her sprint from the bar out into the streets, where she promptly falls onto her face. Bleeding from the head, she initially finds this amusing, but when her mood turns downtrodden, she walks along the dimly lit streets from the city toward her home, only to faint in the grass before she reaches her destination.

Scene C opens with Björk awakening to sunshine, having spent the evening outside. She begins to continue her walk home, pink hearts now inexplicably emanating from her mouth as she sings. The cat-partner, still at home, sees the floating pink hearts from the window, and, seemingly understanding that they must be coming from Björk, drives a car toward their source. The cat pulls up next to her, still walking the road that has now changed to dirt (apart from the main "ring road" that circumnavigates the island, a very small number of roads in the county are paved), picks her up, and drives her home. Upon returning home in scene A2, Björk remembers her fond feelings for the cat, who, after receiving a kiss, grows into a human-sized housecat who nonetheless is wearing a two-piece suit.¹⁸ Via computer animation and live-action, the couple dances for nearly a minute in what has to be the campiest ending even compared to the artist's notoriously campy videos (e.g., "It's Oh so Quiet" and "Human Behaviour").

A closer reading of meaning in this music unearths two particularly salient commentaries on the Icelandic ecosystem. The first, and most obvious, may be the composing-out of the pastoral–urban–pastoral motive in the video. Formally speaking, "Triumph of a Heart" is cast in a modified compound AABA form,¹⁹ meaning that it features two verse/chorus pairs, a contrasting bridge, then a recapitulatory chorus. As analyzed in Example 11-2, the motivic contrast between the verse and chorus, as well as between the verse/chorus pair and the contrasting

bridge, reveals a structural similarity to sonata forms. Both initially pit two themes against one another in a dominant/tonic relationship (e.g. the Bb/Eb axis between Verse 1 and Chorus 1),²⁰ contrast those two themes with a developmental section, then return to one or both of the original themes. Hermeneutic interpretations of this macro-formal structure, germane to many western art forms, involve the narrative of [home-journey-return].

The image displays four staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff is divided into two sections: 'Verse 1' and 'Chorus 1'. The second staff is divided into 'Verse 2' and 'Chorus 2'. The third staff is labeled 'Bridge'. The fourth staff is labeled 'Chorus 3'. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals, illustrating the structural relationships between these sections.

Example 11-2, Compound AABA Motivic Structure in Björk, “Triumph of a Heart” (2004)

Rather than interpret this with unbounded hermeneutics, drawing visual evidence from the Icelandic ecosystem in the video grounds this interpretation within social practice. The music/video pair both compose out a dichotomy between Iceland as timeless [unspoiled/natural/pastoral], and modern-day Iceland with its urban development and attendant cultural scene. Part of this newly developed urban cultural practice revolves around a Dionysian nightlife in Reykjavík that promotes massive amounts of alcohol consumption.²¹ The opening frame of the video is not of Björk or the cat but of the home itself. Nestled in the rolling green hills, butted up against the rocky, mountainous interior (if this is believable walking distance from Reykjavík—a long walk indeed—the camera must be pointing either east or north toward the uninhabited interior), we barely see any other human settlements, revealing the extraordinarily low population density of the country.²²

Just as the hard urban dance-beat enters at 0:27, Björk darts out the door toward her car. Recall the concept of invariants and specifications from ecological perception. Specification is to ecological perception as signification is to semiotics. Sounds do not “signify” meaning by complex semiotic processes, they instantly specify the invariant physical and cultural meanings afforded to competent perceivers. For listeners familiar with popular music, a four-on-the-floor dance beat instantly specifies a host of cultural meanings, all of which involve [urbanism] in some way. Further specifications may involve subjective experiences with these sounds, including [sweat, alcohol, dance, sex, etc.]. Analysis of timbre here reveals an immediate contrast to the first 26 seconds, in which the perceiver only hears chanting by human voices. Specification is both physical and cultural here. Our instant perception of the physical invariants specify its source [human voice], and our awareness of the cultural invariants of chanting specify a host of meanings including [old, timeless], afforded more strongly by the depictions of the geologically unspoiled, undeveloped Icelandic landscape.

From 0:27 to 3:24, Björk interacts with the urban ecosystem. Undertaking wild adventures, she becomes liberated from her oppressive and unhappy domestic situation (with the cat), but then longs for the countryside. Returning home, she is happy to awaken in the lush volcanic grasslands, and even happier to be reunited with her partner. As can be seen from the Example 11-1 formal chart, this narrative structure in which a protagonist leaves the home, departs on an adventure, then returns home, aligns with the exposition/development/recap scheme that compound AABA forms share with a host of other western art forms, including sonata forms. The motivic sketches in Example 11-2 reinforce this sense of journey in a manner quite *uncommon* to sonata forms. Björk’s voice constantly makes an upward semitonal journey rising from the Bb/Eb axis in the first verse/chorus pair, up to the B/E axis in the second verse/chorus pair, and finally reaching up to the F major ending prepared by the bridge heading into the final chorus.

Another quintessentially Icelandic element in the music stems from its notable exception to the standard narrative flow in this medium. Music videos typically present the album version of a piece (or a slightly different mix of that recording) uninterrupted from beginning to end, accompanied by a moving image of some sort to accompany the music. While cinematic interpolations of various sorts are not unheard of in this genre (the most famous example being Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”), the interruption of *Medúlla*’s recorded version, spanning roughly 1:43 to 3:25,

is especially self-referential. Instead of hearing the recorded versions of verse 2 and chorus 2, the viewer hears newly recorded versions of this material in which Björk is accompanied a capella by the mostly amateur performers seen on the screen. In Scene B2, while the heard music is still that of *Medúlla*, these humans are initially seen interacting with the protagonist (played by Björk) as drunken bar compatriots. But in scene B3, those same humans are now heard as performers rehearsing the parts for the live recording (Björk's management put out an open call for the audition). More complex still, some of the on-screen performers are professional a capella musicians who actually *do* appear on the *Medúlla* version of "Triumph." Furthermore, the viewer can hear, at different times, both the *Medúlla* version of the studio-recorded a capella performance by Japanese beat-boxer Dokaka, as well as the live version he re-recorded at the bar.

Along with these "extras," the protagonist's persona shifts greatly when this fourth wall is broken. Though characters may never escape the associations of their actors, we can view the human actor, Björk Guðmundsdóttir, as portraying a fictional character through Scene B2. However, when Scene B3 arrives and we see the actress/musician leading a rehearsal for a performance of her own composition, we are forced to confront the idea that the actress Björk and the protagonist of the story are one and the same (or at least that the sovereignty of those two personas has been greatly compromised).

An ecological interpretation of this performer/participant conflation emphasizes its commentary on the Icelandic socio-cultural landscape. Having much to do with the fierce sense of national pride Icelanders have cultivated since their liberation from Denmark in 1944, music—especially group singing—is a highly celebratory and participatory event. Björk interacts with the urban Icelandic ecosystem by leaving the isolation of the artist, inviting all to participate in musical creation at the bar. But this is no ordinary bar. *Sirkus*, which closed permanently in 2007, was the downtown hotbed for local music—truly, a musicians' bar.²³ Steinunn Jakobsdóttir's memorial of the fabled bar for *The Reykjavík Grapevine* read:

But although its walls, covered with music posters and artwork, might collapse any minute, they've witnessed an essential part in the city's culture, as for years, Sirkus has been a hotbed of everything related to any grassroots genre in art, music, fashion and filmmaking. Here, local bands have taken their first steps and new talents have been discovered. In

between touring around the world, groups such as GusGus, Sigur Rós, Múm have gone to Sirkus to relax.²⁴

When the densest city in Iceland is under 200,000 people, it is nearly impossible for even the country's most celebrated international celebrity to hide. (Björk "sightings" at bars in downtown Reykjavik are remarkably common). Adaptation depends on interacting with an ecosystem in the most efficient way. Thus, the radical participation seen and heard in "Triumph of a Heart"—both between performer/participant and the "behind the scenes" rehearsal at B3 to which we as viewers are privy—demonstrates an ecological connection to the (urban)²⁵ Icelandic socio-cultural landscape.

Moving on now to the remaining two videos by Sigur Rós and Múm, they contrast sharply in their depiction of the Icelandic ecosystem in that they depict no urbanism whatsoever, and are devoid of adult human interactions. Almost singularly focused on the geological landscape, "Green Grass of Tunnel" includes a flock of birds, and "Glósóli" depicts a small troupe of human children with a palpable degree of animism—itself a commentary on the "human" interaction with the otherwise mineral and flora-focused environment of the video. Despite these cinematic similarities, I hope to show in the following music-driven comparative analysis that they depict entirely different attitudes toward the Icelandic geological landscape. Since neither song is structured using *sections, per se* (they both instead develop a single theme), formal graphs such as Example 11-1 will be of little musical merit here. Instead, the following paragraphs of musical and cinematic description will serve to frame the analysis to follow.

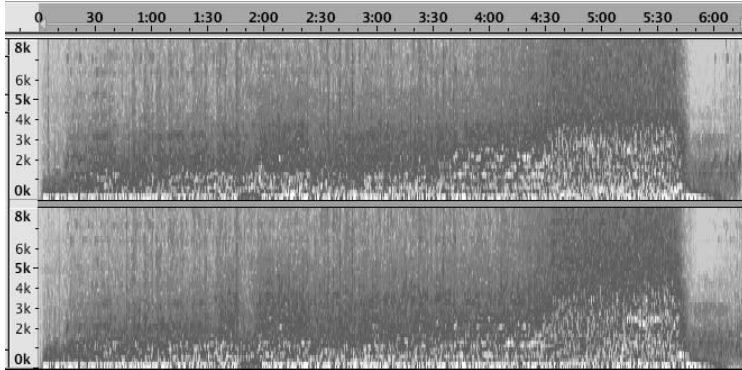
Unlike "Triumph of a Heart," which features a standard rock formal structure (despite its unique pitch ascent), Sigur Rós's "Glósóli" is structured more through its development of a single motive. It is also perhaps the most explicit example of a rock form structured solely by a dynamic process. The electric bass progression [G–D–E–C], which accompanies singer Jón "Jónsi" Þór Birgisson as he steps through a [G4–A4–B4] trichord occasionally neighbored on either side, unifies the song.²⁶ The climax is the result of a crescendo spanning the entire track, announced by Jónsi's heroic ascent to D4 at 3:49.²⁷ In addition to the volume crescendo, the piece also utilizes an overarching rhythmic crescendo. The bass and acoustic percussion begin by playing march-like quarter-notes until 3:49, where they accelerate to eighth-notes en route to the volume climax at 4:40. This type of form, which I have elsewhere deemed a "Monothematic Form,"²⁸ owes its shape to these two

simultaneous processes applied to a single theme. The cinematic and narrative content of the “Glósóli” video reveals many connections with the musical form I identify. Note especially the striking visual parallel between the track’s upward dynamic and spectral curve (Example 11-3) and the slope of the cliff that coincides with the growth of these processes at the video’s climax (Example 11-4).

As the video begins, we see a small boy with a military side drum sitting alone on the beach, staring across a vast Icelandic sea. Marching to the song’s quarter-note pulse, he wanders through the pastoral grassy, rolling landscape, summoning other small children with the pulse of his drum (which, as one might imagine, matches the pulse of the song). More children are added to the group in a linear accumulation paralleling the gain in amplitude throughout the song. Just before the shift to eighth-note pulses at 3:49, the children lie down on a rock to sleep for the night. They wake in the morning to bright sunlight (Glósóli means “glowing sun” in Icelandic), and as they all gaze up a large hill, the drummer boy begins to tap his new eighth-note pulse. The volume rises, the children’s facial expressions grow more intent, and at the onset of the musical climax, the boy points his mallet like a sword as the children race up the hill. As they approach the hill’s crest, the camera pans out to reveal that the assumed hill is actually a sheer cliff face, the children running toward it like lemmings. Throughout the pounding climax, the children fly off—literally, as birds—the cliff with bright smiles on their faces, as if it were a carnival ride of sorts. Just as the last chord is struck, one last sheepish child attempts to fly, but instead cannonballs off the precipice down into the water. The fate of the fallen child is left to the viewer’s imagination as the track fades out.

Nowhere in their entire discography does the comparatively relaxed sound of Múm bear any resemblance to the climactic gestures at the end of “Glósóli.” “Green Grass of Tunnel,” the second track from their 2002 record *Finally We Are No One*, exhibits a fairly uniform timbral and dynamic profile. Except for the sparse valleys where the electronic percussion momentarily drops out, the overall volume profile of the track is exceptionally level. While this is not a notable feature in and of itself (the extraordinarily high level of compression in modern pop recording processes ensures this), the quietness, inactivity, and general sense of “mellow” maintained over the course of the track is notable in its lack of anything resembling a climax. Timbral analysis of the recording supports this reading as well. Almost entirely electric/electronic, it is devoid of any acoustic sounds besides the occasional appearance of singer Kristín Anna

Valtýsdóttir's childlike and airy soprano, which does not enter until the track is halfway over.²⁹ Only the mineral-esque “tinkering” noises (to be discussed in closing) interfere acoustically with the keyboard pads and soft synth leads in the opening two minutes.



Example 11-3, Spectrographic Image of Sigur Rós, “Glósóli” (2005)



Example 11-4, Video Still from Climax of Sigur Rós, “Glósóli” (2005, 4:36)

Múm's video, entirely computer-generated, also contrasts sharply with the sharp images of the Icelandic countryside in "Glósóli." (Although the analogy is certainly imperfect, it seems fitting that electronic instruments pair with computer animation in the former, while acoustic instruments pair with live action in the latter). Depicting the iceberg-filled lagoons in winter, bordered by the sea on one side and the mountainous interior on the other, the lush green color one might expect in "Green Grass of Tunnel" nonetheless only appears once: crayoned underneath a rocket ship in a child's drawing hanging on the wall of an abandoned shed in the whitewashed coastline (2:46). The camera pans upward from the ground shortly afterward to reveal the actual rocket ship—the one depicted in the drawing—slowly shooting skyward. Puffins and other birds, who have been circling the icy cliffs since the video's opening, are now drawn to the homemade dirigible. Retroactively, we realize that the child's drawing was in fact *set* in this location—one can now see the shed in which the drawing was hung, as well as the nearby lighthouse, underneath the purview of the hovering rocket, and this entire scene equivocates the drawing in the shed.³⁰ A reasonable interpretation might be [escape], as it is presumably the author of the drawing who is now piloting the rocket away from this deserted place, or perhaps the pilot simply wishes to commune with the birds and mountain peaks. The video ends with the pilot leaving the island flying toward the iconic *aurora borealis* viewable throughout the island. Though seen from just about any remote location in Iceland, the northern lights do indeed originate from the north, and based on the angle of the coastline relative to the aurora, we can deduce that the "scene" of the video is now the northwestern fjords near Ísafjörður.

Comparing the two songs, both ostensibly representing the Icelandic geological landscape, one can sense the contrasts, contradictions, and dichotomies so germane to the island. Particularly salient are two contraposed pairs, each of which maps onto the Sigur Rós and Múm pieces, respectively: *growth/stasis*, and *flora/mineral*. An ecological analysis of the musical elements in these two pieces will illuminate the very different ways they depict the Icelandic geological landscape. I will first begin with the compositional elements of the music, and then close with a brief discussion of the recorded sonic landscape itself.

Example 11-5 shows the opening vocal statement in "Green Grass of Tunnel." This selected passage is representative of the entire track's vocal-melodic profile in its arpeggiation of the C major tonic triad and its dedication to the pentatonic collection. Never articulating either member of the B/F tritone necessary for truly *tonicizing* C major, the melody only

reinforces this tonal center by its aforementioned arpeggios and alternating phrase endings on E4 and C4 over the tonic bass note. The commonly occurring bass progression derives from a “gapped fifths cycle,”³¹ which of course makes it a subset of the complete fifths cycle in the pentatonic voice collection. Compare Múm’s pentatonicism with the clear tonality expressed by three repeated vocal patterns in “Glósóli,” transcribed in Example 11-6. Lower (F#4) and upper (C5) semitonal neighbors around the G/B dyad more actively reinforce a sense of tonality than the pentatonic collection in Example 11-5. Furthermore, the presence of a tonic triad unfolds gradually. We first hear F#4 as a lower neighbor to G4 (6a), C5 as an upper neighbor to B4 (6b), and finally, C5 as a passing tone to the climactic D5 at the arrival of the title lyric (6c).

The image shows two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of two staves: an upper staff for 'Alto' and a lower staff for 'Synth Bass'. The music is in 4/4 time. The first system has the lyrics 'Down from my ceiling drips great noise.' The second system has the lyrics 'It drips on my head through a hole in the roof.' The Alto part in both systems features a C pentatonic melody with triplets and other rhythmic patterns. The Synth Bass part provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with sustained notes.

Example 11-5, C Pentatonic melody in Múm, “Green Grass of Tunnel” video (2002, 1:54)

By recognizing the lyrical narrative, which personifies the sun and the process of its growth over the course of the track (see translation in Example 11-6), we can see how this gradual unfolding of the tonic triad works concomitantly in our search for meaning. Though there are many ways to arpeggiate a G major triad at the keyboard, most of us would feel in our fingers a sense of growth as we rise from G to B, and then a sense of completion as we reach up to D. True as it may be that “Green Grass of Tunnel” also thrives on arpeggiated tonic triads, it lacks the process of growth that characterizes “Glósóli.” This is undoubtedly due to the absence of tonal neighbors, with their attendant push and pull toward members of the triad, as well as the manner in which the Múm melody seems to be treating the members of said triad as undifferentiated scale steps in a pentatonic collection.

6a: 0:48 ("Now you are waking up, everything seems different")

Counter-tenor
Bass guitar

Nú vak-nar þú allt virð-ist ve - ra breytt.

6b: 2:58 ("She runs endlessly and climbs out thus")

Counter-tenor
Bass guitar

Hley-pur enda-laust hún og kli-frar sv - o - út.

6c: 4:25 ("And here you are, glowing sun")

Counter-tenor
Bass guitar

Og hér ert þú gl ós - ó-li Og hér ert

Example 11-6, G Major melodies in Sigur Rós, “Glósóli” video (2005, 0:48, 2:58, 4:25)

In the videos, this dichotomy between tonal growth and pentatonic stasis plays out as two very different commentaries on the Icelandic landscape. Rich with lush greens and vibrant flora, Sigur Rós depicts growth in perhaps its most recognizable form—plant life. Iceland owes much of its greenery to the interaction between rich volcanic soils and comparatively mild, marine-stabilized temperatures around its fertile ring. Organicism is literally present in the visual elements, just as it is metaphorically present in the gradual unfurling and eventual blossoming of the tonic triad. The sonic and spectral growth shown in Example 11-3 couples with the cliff scene in Example 11-4 to further enhance this sense of growth at the video’s climax.

“Green Grass of Tunnel” is not merely defined by its lack of this growth. Rather, the stasis it projects through its pentatonic collection is a direct commentary on the comparatively timeless nature of Iceland’s glaciers. We may choose to hear the rising and falling vocal melody as either stepping through a pentatonic scale or as skipping around the tonic triad, but in either case, the rapidity with which this gesture happens seems to suggest a bounding over the jagged, craggy mountains of the interior, as well as those in the iceberg-filled fjords (the sense of playfulness and whimsy in Valtýsdóttir’s delivery would seem to bolster this observation). The pentatonic bass collection and parallel voice leading also deters any

sense of “progression” and is better heard as an immobile ostinato. Of course, glaciers and icebergs do move, but, as opposed to the living flora and fauna depicted in “Glósóli,” they do not do so under their own volition.

Yet another way to express these two dichotomous depictions of Iceland involves hearing Múm as mineral/cold, and Sigur Rós as organic/warm. The preceding compositional comparison has relied on metaphors commonly associated with tonal and pentatonic collections, but the physical materials used to make the recordings leave their invariant traces as well. The bass lines transcribed in Examples 11-5 and 11-6 are produced using circuit boards and trees, respectively. “Green Grass of Tunnel” bears the distinct signatures of computer/electronically processed drum, bass, and synth sounds, while Glósóli leaves the listener with distinct traces of human and plant activity in its rhythm section. We can hear the sounds of bass strings resonating against a wooden fretboard, as well as the preceding pick-attack that generates this vibration. One might even go so far as to call the video titles ironic. “Green Grass of Tunnel” depicts no greenery in its video and utilizes no organic materials in its rhythm section production. “Glósóli” depicts very little sunlight on-screen and, though the earth’s sun contains almost no carbon, the track relies entirely on once-living organic materials for its instrument sounds.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the role of acoustic “tinkering” noises created in the studio to add resonance to otherwise electronically produced tracks like “Green Grass of Tunnel.”³² In closing, I would like to point out yet another irony borne out by this observation. Sounds such as these, heard clearly in the opening of the track, yet present throughout, seem to be commonplace in post-millennial electronic rock music. It seems to be a clever solution to a common problem. As anyone who has created electronic recordings on a computer can attest, the end result is often flat, lifeless, dull, and cold when compared to comparatively warm and dynamic acoustic recordings. This is due to the dynamic compression applied to most synthesized instruments and samples. Thus, the sounds of small physical objects being manipulated in a live room are often added to tracks such as these to add the desired ambience. What is ironic about “Green Grass of Tunnel” is how the addition of these noises seems to have the opposite effect. By attending to the physical invariants specified by the sounds themselves, we hear *mineral/metallic*. That is to say, we hear yet another iteration of the cold, mineral nature of Iceland’s glaciers and icebergs in the sounds themselves. The video titles for “Glósóli” and “Green Grass of Tunnel” may be ironic, but the invariant physical

properties of the materials used to craft their sonic depictions of two very different Icelandic landscapes—organic in the former, mineral in the latter—instantly specify the same images as those depicted cinematically. My hope is that the ecological methods espoused here and throughout this chapter help us to produce a “musicology of the image” that directly addresses invariant connections between music and ecosystem.

Notes

¹ Throughout the essay, I prefer use of the term “ecosystem” rather than “environment” or similar nouns. The former emphasizes an interactive space between living organisms and non-living elements, both natural and human-made. The latter tends to create distinctions between humans, non-human animals, plants, and natural features.

² Nicholas Cook, *Analyzing Musical Multimedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 150.

³ In addition to drawing from these two scholarly fields, my views on the Icelandic landscape, especially its geo-physical landscape, are greatly informed by the two trips I undertook to the island in 2010 and 2011. On the first of these trips, I spent a great deal of time around the live music scene in Reykjavik, and on the second, I experienced the wilderness by hiking and camping around the more sparsely-populated southern and eastern coastlines.

⁴ As evidence of this current growth, one might note the special joint Ecomusicologies “pre-conference” at the 2012 joint national meeting of the Society for Music Theory, the American Musicological Society, and the Society for Ethnomusicology, as well as the edited collection of essays to be released from this meeting.

⁵ My intent in this introduction is not to provide a complete literature review of these two fields, which is superfluous for the current application. No prior understanding of these two fields will be necessary to perceiving the links between music, film, and place in the three analyses to come. Instead, relevant details from key sources in these fields will be presented throughout the analyses to come in order to frame the ecological details of the music and cinema.

⁶ Denise Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2009).

⁷ *Ways of Listening: an Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸ Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analyzing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (London: Ashgate Publication Company, 2012).

⁹ Eric Clarke, “Subject-Position and the Specification of Invariants in Music by Frank Zappa and P.J.Harvey,” *Music Analysis* 18/3: 347–374.

¹⁰ Nicola Dibben, through a survey of over 45 Icelandic music videos, as well as extensive field work conducted in 2006, has conclusively validated this aspect of

the country's musical culture. See Dibben, "Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18/1 (June 2009): 131–151.

¹¹ Ari Alexander Ergis Magnússon, *Screaming Masterpiece* (Soda Pictures, 2005), DVD.

¹² Dibben 2009 provides a closer reading of Iceland's popular music history, as well as its briefer history of music video production.

¹³ The highly respected and influential indie-rock radio station KEXP (Seattle) broadcasts live from Iceland Airwaves each year, taking up temporary residency in a local hipster hostel coincidentally named KEX.

¹⁴ For example: fire/ice (active volcanoes and perpetual glaciers), farmland/tundra (the uninhabited interior of the island and the fertile agrarian outer ring), and dark/light (perpetual darkness in the winter, midnight sun in the summer).

¹⁵ It is hoped that the reader will take advantage of streaming video sites such as YouTube in order to experience the music videos analyzed here.

¹⁶ See Jason Summach, "Form in Top-20 Rock Music, 1955–89" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2012); and Brad Osborn, "Subverting the Verse/Chorus Paradigm: Experimental Formal Structures in Post-Millennial Rock Music" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2010).

¹⁷ Of the country's 320,000 total human population, just over half of those humans live in the capital city of Reykjavík, located in the southeast corner of the country. The rest of the population is either clustered into small towns or spaced out into smaller-still villages, all of which reside only on the country's outer ring (the interior is a vast, mountainous tundra covered by snow and ice most of the year, and is all but uninhabitable).

¹⁸ A gender-based analysis of this video that highlights the ambiguous identity of the cat-partner, as well as the inter-species romantic overtones that accompany the kiss, while outside the bounds of the current ecologically focused interpretation, seems especially fruitful to me.

¹⁹ For more on the compound AABA form as a conventional formal structure see John Covach, "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," in *Engaging Music: Essays in Musical Analysis*, edited by Deborah Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 65–76. The final A section of these compound AABA forms can either be a verse/chorus pair, but is just as likely to be either one or the other. Usually, if only one section serves as the final recapitulation, it will be the chorus (as here).

²⁰ Of course, this relationship is mirrored relative to a traditional first and second tonal area. Rather than think of this as some sort of dualistic relationship, or highlighting the role of plagalism in rock music, I hear the composed-out Bb triad of the first verse as a structural dominant anticipating the arrival of the Eb major triad in the more memorable chorus.

²¹ So intense is this level of celebration that the U.S. State Department recently issued the following warning to American tourists: "be aware that downtown Reykjavik [sic] can become disorderly in the early morning hours on weekends." <http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1138.html#crime>, accessed July 22, 2012.

²² The countryside is quite untouched indeed—93% of the country’s population lives in some sort of urban environment.

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ic.html>>, accessed July 22, 2012.

²³ My sincere thanks go to Kimberly Cannady for identifying this specific bar for me. While I had passed by the graffiti-clad ruins of the bar on several occasions, it was no longer open to the public by the time I had started visiting the country.

²⁴ Steinunn Jakobsdóttir, “Last Call: Sirkus is Closing,” *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, 2007. <<http://www.grapevine.is/Home/ReadArticle/Last-Call-Sirkus-is-Closing>>

²⁵ I emphasize the role of the urban in “Triumph of a Heart” inasmuch as it contrasts sharply with depictions of the natural/pastoral in the two other videos analyzed in this essay, as well as other Björk videos such as “Jóga” (1997).

²⁶ The only modifications to this bass line happen through rhythmic and metric alteration. Twice during the build-up to the climax, the rhythm is normalized to equal values, beginning on the D instead of G [D–E–C–G].

²⁷ The valleys at the end of the track’s spectrum and waveform graphics represent the last chord being held out over 40 seconds until it gradually decays.

²⁸ See Brad Osborn, “Understanding Through-Composition in Post-Rock, Math-Metal, and other Post-Millennial Rock Genres,” *Music Theory Online* 17/3 (2011).

²⁹ The cut chosen for the video is, in fact, a radio edit that omits about 45 seconds—her voice does not appear in the album version until 2:35.

³⁰ The video’s lighthouse may have been directly inspired by the lighthouse-keeper’s home in which Múm recorded this and one other album. See “Múm: The Good Life” [interview] in *The Milk Factory*

<<http://www.themilkfactory.co.uk/interviews/mumiw.htm>>

³¹ For more on gapped fifths cycles, see Guy Capuzzo, “Sectional Tonality and Sectional Centricity in Rock Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26/2: 177–199. “Glósóli” features the same gapped fifths collection in its bassline, and, although that collection is also a subset of the larger diatonic collection heard in the voice part, I hear the link between bass and voice collections as weaker in “Glósóli” due to the three-pitch-class difference in cardinalities, as opposed to only a one pitch-class difference between bass and voice in “Tunnel.”

³² See Osborn, “Subverting the Verse/Chorus Paradigm.”