The work of the early visual artists had a great impact on later filmmakers, through Norman McLaren, the Whitney Brothers and Stan Brakhage. But you can also see their influence in many recent music videos, where music and image are often rhythmically coordinated, yet retain their own narrative. Other videos reference early visual music directly, such as Michel Gondry’s video for The Chemical Brothers’ ‘Star Guitar’, which is a tribute to Ruttmann’s 1927 film, Berlin: Symphony of a Great City. But it is the beautiful, colourful play of Oskar Fischinger’s audiovisual animations that most people think of in relation to early visual music. Fischinger is perhaps best known for his work on the “Toccata and Fugue” scene from Disney’s Fantasia (1940). However, Fischinger was dissatisfied with the results and later took his name off the credits before the film was released. Fischinger insisted that his images were not meant to be “translated music, because music doesn’t need to be translated on the screen”: rather, they were meant to enter into a conversation with the music in order to create something totally new. You can see his hand-drawn animated dialogue with Liszt’s Second Hungarian Rhapsody in his 1938 film An Optical Poem, and describes the results as resting “somewhere in between music and painting”.

Although Richter’s contemporary Walther Ruttmann also used abstract images, he commissioned new music to be performed so musical that sound was no longer needed for the finished film. "instrumental themes”. The interesting thing about films such as Lichtspiel No 1 (also 1921) is that Richter thought his images were “intended to form a conversation” with the music, and in the case of his string quartet composed for visualisation (be included). After becoming popularised in the work of Wagner during the nineteenth century, the notion that image and music could combine so closely as to form a new audiovisual artform was taken up with great gusto by filmmakers in the early twentieth century. During the 1920s, Berlin became a hotbed for liberal visual music. Pioneer Hans Richter created innovative visual music (music videos) using light in colour. His 1927 film Berlin: Symphony of a Great City is a pioneering example of visual music. Fischinger insisted that his images were not meant to be “translated music, because music doesn’t need to be translated on the screen”: rather, they were meant to enter into a conversation with the music in order to create something totally new. You can see his hand-drawn animated dialogue with Liszt’s Second Hungarian Rhapsody in his 1938 film An Optical Poem, and describes the results as resting “somewhere in between music and painting”.

FACT's exhibition The Art of Pop Video charts the key history of the music video back to its beginnings. Dr Holly Rogers, Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Liverpool explores some of the key exhibitions of music and moving image. The Art of Pop Video exhibition is at FACT until 26 May. Find out more here.