

Listening to images, reading the records: The inclusive experience in British progressive rock of the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract

The article concerns the form of experience offered by the British progressive rock of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the light of the tendency to view the genre through the prism of modernism. The materiality of key musical albums within the genre—through elaborate aesthetic construction and reliance on literary ideas—played an indispensable role in interacting with the records. I argue that through constructing a narrative message in the form of record covers, progressive rock could be treated as a literary form which functions according to what Nicholas Royle describes as veering and which allows to avoid problems associated with considering the genre as modern or postmodern.

Key words: experience, progressive rock, veering, postmodernism

Introduction

The two paintings have a lot in common: an attempt to render feelings of distress, desperation and a sense of urgency in reaching out to the audience. Both are images of iconic status; both are similarly expressionistic in representing their subject matter and, significantly, both depict screaming figures. In fact, the paintings in question, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) and the cover of King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King* (1969), are not only documents of their zeitgeist but may still have an important story to tell about the overlapping areas in the experience of images, music and words.

Munch's chronologically earlier painting, widely acknowledged as an epitome of modernist art, is an easily identifiable inspiration for Barry Goldber's emblematic record cover of what is often considered as one of the defining examples of progressive rock. This genre of popular music, contentious and notoriously difficult to define, rose to prominence as a British phenomenon between the late 1960s and mid- 1970s. It was associated with what might in most general terms be regarded as attempts at broadening the rock convention through perfecting the extended musical forms of concept albums, rich and varied

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instrumentation, or a deliberate merging of styles to include European or Eastern traditions, accompanied by impressive musical craftsmanship and lavish stage shows. Regardless of the many controversial and contradictory monikers progressive rock connotes in discussions, the albums by bands like Genesis, Yes, Emerson, Lake & Palmer (ELP), or King Crimson constitute musical explorations in rendering more complex thematic, conceptual and narrative ideas than the ones usually formulated in popular music. These were often not only derived from literature but also produced an experience closely mirroring that of interacting with literary texts.

In what follows I argue that the high ambitions of British prog rockers were frequently achieved—apart from employing musical means—through a strong visual component present in the very materiality of a musical album’s cover artwork or in the lyrics—the indispensable elements of the records frequently based in or aiming to achieve a literary experience. This understanding of experience seems to correspond to Nicholas Royle’s proposition to view literature as veering (Royle 2011) and likewise allows to look at prog as a literary inspired genre which not only embodies certain postmodern aspects but, symptomatically for the bulk of contemporary art, relies on the visual domain in generating an immersive experience.

Prog (as post-)modernism

Starting with a link to a modernist work is, as most examples, by no means innocent nor incidental. Despite the distance of several decades from the peak of its popularity and the substantial critical coverage of the genre, progressive rock definitions continue to remain contentious. This, to a degree, mirrors the genre’s formal complexity and is visible in a marked tendency among rock critics to merge progressive rock with modernism.

For some, progressive rock may well have the traits of a clearly defined genre. Bill Bruford for example—an expert drummer for several of the genre’s significant bands—sees it as distinctive enough to become ‘a subject for doctoral thesis and learned discussion’, especially because of

[a] reasonably clearly defined beginning and end, with a peak golden period followed by a slower decline and fall, a sociopolitical context against which the

music could be heard (the counterculture), and at least three major technological innovations in place to facilitate change (the long-playing vinyl record, stereo twenty-four-track recording, and FM radio). (in Romano 2010: ix)

However, even among Bruford's fellow musician participants in the prog rock scene of the time such labels projected on the music were not ones which everyone was completely comfortable with¹.

Progressive rock thus owes part of the problem with its definition to labelling as such, which at a closer inspection reveals the term's ambiguity and easily invites shorthand definitions. This vagueness of the genre is what Will Romano calls 'progressive dynamics' (2010: 2), recognising that the very term 'progressive' can refer both to artistic evolution and to musical changes within the framework of a single song. In this way prog rock may be seen as an undecidable: the traits connoted by the term are not entirely untypical of either musicians or their works. Just as every artist evolves in some way, many tracks unfold, progress and change their dynamics when they reach their final bars. What is more, the notion of rock itself can be seen as equally ambiguous because the genre can too be seen as 'instantly evocative and frustratingly vague' (Keightley 2001: 109). It is thus more owing to the process of exclusion that we know 'who rocks' and who does not, rather than because of some fixed characteristics of the tracks or the artists themselves. Correspondingly, the complexity and inherently varied nature of what came to be recognised as progressive rock result in definitions which acknowledge its heterogeneity as troublesome (Hegarty and Halliwell 2011: 3; cf. Macan 1997), as well as ones which see its eclecticism as the genre's distinguishing trait, allowing to term it 'a kind of "concert-hall rock"', which eventually was performed at stadiums and arenas, but which also suggests music designed more 'for listening' than for dancing to; it is thus associated with intellectual contemplation rather than a 'practical' usage (Covach 1997: 3). Thus defined, the genre can include both King Crimson's already mentioned 1969 debut album which fuses classical music, rock, folk and blues traditions with odd-timed jazz-tinged rhythms, as well as, for example, Gentle Giant's *Acquiring the Taste* (1971)—a fairly experimental descent into jarring musical

¹ King Crimson's Robert Fripp, for instance, expressed such sentiments as early as 1973 as part of an attempt to distance himself from the broader movement of prog (in Hegarty and Halliwell 2011: 9).

concepts, not only based on a literary text by François Rabelais ('Pantagruel's Nativity') but also famously intended and announced as a text for contemplation in the sleeve notes.

Because of the difficulties with accounting for the multifarious characteristics of progressive rock incarnations, there exists a tempting tendency to conceptualise it as modernist. The benefit of such an approach is that it allows to identify modernist affinities in terms of form and content of numerous albums and groups. It is along these lines that musicians are frequently said to draw on European classical tradition of employing 'extended pieces, orchestration, complex harmonies and rhythms, and "grand concepts"' (Bannister 2006: 37) or of musical modernism in the form of 'structures derived from symphonic or modernist art music composition' (Wall 2003: 127). Such conceptualisations also reference actual modernist literary authors as inspiration, including T.S. Eliot or Herman Hesse, to name but a few. However, such enumerations should be approached cautiously, as representations like these may lead to a false conviction about the possibility to 'approach any cultural form or event with a checklist' (Taylor 2002: 94). A comparison between examples from some well-known postmodern studies (e.g. by Ihab Hassan, Charles Jencks and David Harvey) shows that such trait listings, often organised around binary oppositions between Modernism and Postmodernism (deliberately capitalised here), suggest historical periods, ideas or practices as separate and give the impression of a terminal break between the epochs or 'imply a fixedness that social processes never have' (Taylor 2002: 98). In line with Lyotard's (1988) emphasis on the historical concurrence of modernist and postmodernist responses, some aspects, which such clear-cut listing qualify as mutually exclusive, may be treated as actually congruent. As Allan F. Moore illustrated in his study of the much successful folk-prog rock band Jethro Tull, such strategy, despite the parallels to what is accepted as an obvious criterion of the 'modern' (e.g. unnecessary difficulty), should rather lead to seeing progressive rock as 'a site wherein contemporary music practices can be conceptualized to accommodate aspects of *both* modernism and mass culture, enabling them to be viewed [...], as sibling expressions of modernity' (Moore 2003: 172, my emphasis).

In this way, due to its pick and mix strategy of fusing styles, traditions and cultural registers, progressive rock should be treated more

as an inclusive genre, opposed to the exclusion-driven practices of more mainstream rock culture. Through its pastiche-like quotes from high brow traditions (cf. ELP's wild borrowing from the classics), the genre can be treated as a postmodern one, especially that quotes as such constitute a form of link to the past. In their essence, quotes can also be said to epitomise the postmodern condition where ideas and objects are repeated and replicated in surprising contexts. Consequently, it seems more productive to think about progressive rock within the framework of Fredric Jameson's dynamic conceptualization of postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant' which is marked by a 'presence and coexistence of a range of a very different, yet subordinate features' (Jameson 2008: 4). Such an approach allows to recognise the eclecticism progressive rock seems to offer, for example in such disparate statements for the genre as the works of groups as differing as Genesis, Pink Floyd or Yes. This certainly echoes the more general and 'maddening imprecision' of viewing postmodernism as a musical concept (Kramer 2002: 13), but through an emphasis on transgressing the musical medium with visual messages the genre can be treated as a variation on postmodern literary production, resulting in an inclusive form of experience for its audiences.

Musical images

Elusive, amorphous and contradictory, apart from the auditory dimension, progressive rock is equally a visual genre. According to Romano, '[it] is a bit like pornography—the lines and definition can be blurred, but you know it when you *see* it' (2010: 1, my emphasis). This is because of the reliance on images and visual thinking within this type of music, especially when we consider the form of record covers serving as portals to other worlds or lyrics employing suggestive imagery. The textual package of a prog rock record should consequently be approached in terms of a visual immersive experience: a space where many disparate layers of meaning and interaction channels overlap.

Indeed, it is the visual element within the experience of interacting with prog rock records that turns them into objects inducing an immersive experience. For example, both images of screaming figures already alluded to register an effort to transcend their medium in order to represent sound within the visual form. Even though such a reading of Munch's *Scream* may be seen as a failed attempt at going beyond the

form of its aesthetic expression, there is an aspect of experience which both images also share:

The absent scream returns, as it were, in a dialectic of loops and spirals, circling ever more closely toward that even more absent experience of atrocious solitude and anxiety which the scream was itself to 'express'. Such loops inscribe themselves on the painted surface in the form of those great concentric circles in which sonorous vibration becomes ultimately visible, as on the surface of a sheet of water, in an infinite regress which fans out from the sufferer to become the very geography of the universe in which pain itself now speaks and vibrates through the material sunset and landscape. (Jameson 2008: 14)

The modernistic work thus attempts to document the experience of anxiety and of the madness of contemporary life, but the impairing of its means of representation simultaneously problematises the message of the work. In this way the image also produces a form of experience which encircles the viewer in its seeking to transcend its medium so as to visually render the sonic qualities of the inaudible cry. King Crimson's artwork precisely re-enacts these aspects of Munch's figure: the close-up of an agonized human face looking somewhere outside the frame, or the features disfigured by what might be a scream of anxiety, horror or disorientation. This time, however, it seems we can actually listen to the sounds and to the music when we play the record. In this respect the compositions also seem to signal dystopia within the very music the cover image is so graphically to illustrate—an auditory commentary on the late 1960s paranoid zeitgeist. As an album cover—originally intended to simply protect the vinyl LP inside—the sleeve, when spread to a panoramic format, reveals the image spilling out to the back cover exposing what can be taken for a multiplied ear of the frontal figure. This symptomatically makes a reference to the actual fragmented and repetitive experience the record is trying to evoke. King Crimson's debut—subtitled 'an Observation'—can thus be viewed as a creation of sonic space intended to convey the fragmentation of the modern world through screeching and discordant guitar and sax sounds, syncopated rhythms and maddening speed ups coexist with false endings ('21st Century Schizoid Man'). These states are further contrasted with natural sounds of the almost pastoral, flute driven and hippy-reminiscent ambience ('I Talk to the Wind'), leading to the display of one of prog's sonic hallmarks—the Mellotron, an instrument capable of replicating the grandeur of string sections, adding the obligatory orchestral ambience to

more sombre moments on the record ('Epitaph' and 'In the Court of the Crimson King').

Interestingly, King Crimson's work, progressive and avant-garde through most of their creative output, managed to prove the usefulness of image-based thinking even in tracks without lyrics. The two instrumental parts of the title track from the band's *Larks' Tongue in Aspic* (1973) framing the album rely on the sonic imagery of drums, percussion and distorted guitar to convey a narrative of strife and crisis (Karl 2002).

If lyrics were not crucial to the visual thinking in progressive rock, the record cover and its artwork became cornerstones for regarding many prog albums as art pieces. The interaction with the materiality of the album in the form of artistically designed and aesthetically suggestive record sleeve was a significant component of an otherwise aural experience and as such was recognised as a gateway to another world. Describing his involvement with the famous cover art designers from Hipgnosis, Peter Gabriel not only acknowledges the vital role of rock music and the album in the cultural revolution of the sixties but also points out the way in which the album cover images were an extension of the musical content: '[o]pening a new album from your favourite artist was a religious experience, and the sleeve was vital to making the pictures of the magical world you were about to enter when the needle was lowered into the grooves' ('Foreword' in Powell 2017). Similarly, the listener became 'a reader of images', especially that the cover picture would willingly 'spread over two, or even four, 12-inch surfaces' (Hegarty and Halliwell 2011: 70).

The pragmatic function of the record cover, i.e. protective and informative, had at the time been overshadowed by its aesthetic function already owing to the Beatles, especially with the watershed *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). On the now-classic cover the band, all dressed up in fake costumes of the eponymous ensemble, is carefully placed among a carnivalesque throng of cultural icons which, surprisingly, also includes the Beatles in their former stylistics. The hitherto customary closeup or group shot of the artist was thus supplanted by a strategy of distancing from the band's previous look, but with an acute awareness of the artificiality involved in creating a media

text which was to typify attempts at construct a concept album.² Over the years following the Beatles' productions, vinyl album cover art was perfected by several (not solely) progressive (and not solely British) rock bands. The musical and conceptual work was accompanied by that of the renowned artistic visual designers. Many prog rock albums employed disparate artistic techniques to add visual depth to the experience offered by the music, and in these efforts the musicians were aided by creative professionals, like the famed London based art design group Hipgnosis who created the bulk of most recognisable record covers. These visual artists often recruited themselves from art colleges and were responsible for merging image, sounds and content of numerous iconic LPs.

The cover images and sleeve design follow disparate tendencies corresponding to the varying content of the musical albums. From images evoking the haziness of psychedelic experience (Pink Floyd's *Saucerful of Secrets* [1968]), through ones connoting narrative content (in albums by Genesis, ELP, Van der Graff Generator), or surreal minimalism, bordering on the abstract (Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* [1973]), the sleeve images started becoming artistic statements in their own right as well as an indispensable part of the experience of interacting with the records. Cover images logically found their way onto the merchandise sold by the record companies to promote the musicians and started forming a significant element of many group's visual identification in live performances. Many of such shows would deliberately evoke experiences of taking part in a ceremony or would use light and special effects for greater aesthetic effect (cf. Yes or Pink Floyd concerts).

In terms of the studio recordings, the LP format itself, apart from securing longer music playing times and relative creative freedom for the artists, physically allowed for a more unusual packaging, with many gatefold albums (Yes' *Tales from Topographic Oceans* [1973]) or various forms of cut-outs and flaps to be unfolded (ELP's, *Brain Salad Surgery* [1973]). All of these devices invited the listener to contemplate the images with the attention equal to that devoted to the auditory

² The idea of *Sgt Pepper's...* being a concept album, however, is also contentious. Hegarty and Halliwell, for instance, argue that it was the first rock release 'to weave a concept through a song-cycle' (2011: 31), while Simon Warner points out that the title opening song does not bookend the album in any narrative frame (fn. in Romano 2010: 10).

sensations. One emblematic example for progressive rock in this respect may be Yes' collaboration with Roger Dean, whose artwork would frequently depict fantastic faraway lands. In its reliance on artistic imagery of other-worldliness, the cover of *Close to the Edge* (1972) serves as a key element in offering a holistic and immersive experience typifying prog rock. Apart from the group's name and album title in the group's typical twisted lettering, the cover image simply displays different shades of the colour green. It is only when we open the gatefold cover, in a gesture imitating that of opening a book, we see an exotic natural landscape of cliffs and waterfalls gradually receding into the aerial perspective of the horizon. This may be a visual representation of the sounds of forest which open the first side-long title track on the album and evoke the eponymous edge, but more importantly it serves to show how the record already at first sight invites a portal like, immersive experience where part of the message, based on Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, is conceptualised within a visual language even before the sounds reach the ears of the listeners.

A similar way of using the sleeve space to complement and enhance the musical message of the record is visible in King Crimson's *Lizard* (1970) which employs yet a different visual strategy. Gini Barris' artwork, intended to imitate the richly decorated medieval illuminated manuscripts, corresponds to the motifs employed in the music and in Pete Sinfield's lyrics. The LP cover design also features richly decorated stylised lettering of the band's name with the two outer sides of the sleeve depicting various scenes peopled with more or less allegorical characters and situations which announce the lyrical and musical concepts to be expressed on record. On a literal level the artwork illustrates the lyrics by employing the medieval imagery, or courtly and circus settings, which could be interpreted 'as a seditious commentary on sacred texts, which only completes the artistic package and reflects the depth of its perversity' (Romano 2010: 38). In its very construction, however, the cover invites the listener to a more focused and longer study of the illustrations (at a closer inspection one can even discover the Beatles), thus representing the mode of prolonged involvement in the interaction with the album.

The design of artistic packages authored by Hipgnosis often consisted in unusual juxtapositions of objects and situations, straying heavily away from the customary picture of band members (Powell

2017: 23). The specificity of their covers often echoes surreal poetics to a successfully quizzical effect, in line with a powerful minimalism noticeable in many of their works (e.g. Pink Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother* [1970] or *Dark Side of the Moon* [1973]). Most of these are images which connote the forceful presence of a visual language, akin in its cinematic feel to the moving pictures, 'like a scene from a Luis Bunuel, Man Ray or David Lynch film—haunting and unsettling' (H. Pearce in Powell 2017: 315).

All of this allows to regard progressive rock as a complex and particularly rich cultural text. Significantly, one important effect of such 'extravagant' album art is the way in which the listener-turned-reader is invited, even before the listening act, to invest his or her time and intellectual efforts to contemplate the images and the materiality of the recording which 'has the potential to keep playing once the record has been re-sleeved' (Hegarty and Halliwell 2011: 70). The multilayering of literary references, meanings (including names of albums, their content and ideas), record sleeve artwork and artistic performances all make the effects of prog rock records extend far beyond the written word or sheet music. It is this complexity that played a significant role in the development of progressive rock at the turn of 1960s and 1970s. It was coupled with the awareness of producing a multifaceted and often undecidable text which the pre-You Tube era listeners would be deciphering for some time in disparate contexts or states of mind. Such immersive mode of interaction with many progressive rock records bears a striking similarity to literature and could be used to illustrate the functioning of postmodern tendencies in what is traditionally construed as a modernist form.

The literary experience in prog rock

Of many genres within popular music which draw on literary texts progressive rock certainly bears the strongest affinity to literature. One reason for this is that, in their searches for more complex forms of expression within popular music, prog artists were frequently looking for ideas derived from literature. Because of the disparate and wide-ranging manifestations of such searches, tracking down the literary texts that serve as inspirations turns out to be a futile task. How could one, for example, account for topics ranging from the biblical texts (Genesis),

mythological Tolkienesque fantasies (Camel) and dystopian futuristic explorations of fear of technology indebted to George Orwell's or Arthur C. Clarke's works (ELP's *Tarkus* [1971], *Brain Salad Surgery* [1973] or Pink Floyd's *Animals* [1977])? Such an attempt would have to encompass a disparate and lengthy selection of types and forms which would have to include the lyrics as well, inevitably moving the discussion much beyond the scope and limits of the present article. Since my interests here lie elsewhere and concern the very experience produced by the genre's texts, I simply indicate that the literariness of prog offers a link between stories and narrating them through music. In this sense, many albums thus share with literature its multitude of forms, textual lives and the ability to transgress its generic rules. Consequently, British prog rock includes the inspirations from literature as exemplified by Pete Sinfield's recognition of his indebtedness to, among others, the English Romantic tradition, as well as Peter Gabriel's literary creativity of devising intricate plots to accompany the music (*Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* [1974]). In a manner similar to literature, progressive rock as a cultural text draws from innumerable sources of previously written texts and expresses an awareness of its intertextual traits, even from its early days: 'The words have all been writ by one before me/ We're taking turns in trying to pass them on/ Oh, we're taking turns in trying to pass them on' (Procol Harum 'Pilgrim's Progress' [1969]). In a reference to John Bunyan's famous allegorical narrative M. Fisher and K. Reid's lyrics not only elaborate metatextual themes but seem to evoke an almost postmodern sense of repetition, quotation and exhaustion within the otherwise classically-sounding organ and vocal harmonies, so typical for Gary Brooker's band.

Running parallel to social and artistic changes, but—regretfully to some critics—not being part of the hard-core countercultural movement, progressive rock registered the zeitgeist transformations both at the level of modes of music production and the technological developments. The literary interests and inspirations in progressive rock additionally contributed to a further dimension in the experience of a mere listening to a record. If previous post-war decades, with the 1950s popular music, were 'etched' in songs and singles, the late 1960s paved the way for more daring and elaborate, literary derived, conceptual work (Keightley 2001: 113). Bands like the Beatles or the Moody Blues, etc. were eagerly taking advantage of new studio recording techniques (cf. *Sgt.*

Pepper's..., *Days of Future Passed* [1967], respectively), instruments, as well as the LP format which allowed the recording of lengthier compositions and invited more creativity. The aforementioned changes in vinyl packaging which accompanied the development of musical ideas and complex content, allowed also to stray away from simplistic love songs popular in rock's early days. The attempts at literary pretensions should be seen as an element a broader tendency in popular music, following the Beatles' and most notably perhaps Bob Dylan's use of metaphor, surrealism and poetics generally reserved for literature (cf. MacDonald 2008: xi). However, it is with progressive rock of the time that the literary derived longer pieces or narrative cycles acquire musical illustrations in popular music in the form and scale of an extended suite form or that of the concept album which was to become symptomatic for future incarnations of progressive rock. It was also the time when musical albums, together with their artwork, were meant to be experienced a complete package.

While the early artful stages of prog's history are marked by literary references and inspirations, the end of the 1970s saw changes to such tendencies. As Hegarty and Halliwell point out, the distancing from what they call 'progressive 1960s' is noticeable particularly in terms of the band's 'lyrical and musical ambitions [which] became ends rather than means, and contributed to a gradual disconnection between socially progressive lyrics and music conceived as a model for social change' (2011: 139). In a tendency visible in later 1970s work of many significant prog bands (King Crimson, ELP, Gentle Giant, or Jethro Tull), the social narrative of protest against technocracy or dehumanised and spiritually crooked materialism of contemporary society is gradually abandoned. However, as Keister and Smith (2008) managed to show, contrasting the stereotypical criticism levelled against the genre, progressive rock, did not become apolitically pretentious but was still vibrating with the countercultural energies criticizing militarism and social conformity.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with pointing to one way in which prog rock of the early 1970s could be seen as mirroring the literary experience. In a fairly recently proposed approach to literature, Nicholas Royle (2011)

made a clear case in which literature could be understood as a form of veering. Teasingly subtitled *A Theory of Literature*, Royle's proposition is as much deconstructive as it attempts to map and rewrite the experience of engaging with literature. In a style that bristles with literary stylistics, Royle's text deliberately confounds traditional expectations about the literary and boldly mixes creative and critical modes. For him, literature is thus what veers, revolves and provides new, encircling forms of interaction with texts. Literature as veering is an 'experience of time as much as space' (2011: 1), which obviously involves the traditional philological 'love of words' indicated by philology (2011: ix), but through its entanglement with such cognates as environment it also seeks to 'to elaborate an understanding of veering that goes beyond any traditional enclosure of "literature" and that cannot be confined or reduced to any kind of "mere theory", "linguisticism" or "wordplay"' (2011: 5). Just like literature veering is thus also inclusive as it includes non-anthropocentric approaches to that what encircles us.

While the environmental slant of such formulations concerning literature found its successful application in the work of ecocritics in the form of works by Timothy Morton or anthologies like *Veer Ecology* (Cohen and Duckert 2017), I would like to stress the way in which veer-thinking is also a reflection of the various layers of the musical pieces in prog. It is precisely through their very materiality that the record sleeves constitute part of the message and of the experience of interacting with the music. Within that context veering not only blurs borders through impelling 'us to think afresh and otherwise about the borders of opposition between interior/ exterior or inner/ outer' (Royle 2011: 7), but it also includes all sorts of turns (following the French verb *virer*, 'to turn'). This, at a musical level, echoes the LP's 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ revolutions per minute (RPMs) on the turntable as well as the revolutions in music, culture and technology. If British prog rock can arguably be read as a literary genre, its works could be read like a novel.

When you read a novel, as you become involved, you veer. You come to realize that you have veered into it and you go on veering. It is not like a movie or computer game or conversation or session with a psychotherapist, it is another world. It is not simply a separate world, a utopic place. Falling in love with a novel, letting yourself be seduced, drifting into its strange expanse that is really neither surface nor depth [...]. (Royle 2011: 13)

Changing the word ‘novel’ into a (prog rock) record in the quotation above allows us to picture the type of experience the musical albums evoked.

Owing to the overlapping aspects of materiality of form and content, an engagement with British prog rock records managed to offer an inclusive, veering experience—one where the very materiality of the sleeve is as important in as the musical message. It is in the records from the turn of the 1960s and 1970s that one finds the significance of the whole package produced by the albums intended for a lengthy contemplation, mirroring that which is typical for literary works. It is an experience which deliberately invites the listener to take a plunge in the imaginary worlds of sonic landscapes and narratives. Conceptualised in such a way, the experience effected by the records allows to sidestep the problems with thinking about the music in terms of (post)modernism. Moreover, it can partially help to explore the lasting allure the albums may still have, especially with the recent resurgence of interest in vinyl records.

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