

CHAPTER 5

The Visual Dylan: Religious Art, Social Semiotics and Album Covers

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Abstract: The essay explores the cover art on 24 studio albums released by Bob Dylan since his debut in 1962, each one with a photo of the artist on the front cover. The photos are read chronologically in accordance with a social semiotic understanding. Any text, including such elements as names, album titles, song titles and motifs, but also formal means, e.g. compositions and geometric patterns underlying the compositions, are understood as meaningful utterances in their own right, not only as illustrations for other texts. The essay also maps out some parallels between the idol as a mediated person belonging to modernity and as a premodern religious concept. A not surprising finding is that parts of early Christian icon art are continued in modern photographic portraits. However, I have not found anything indicating that traces of early religious art are more prominent on Bob Dylan's albums than on other albums.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, album covers, album art, portraits, photo, social semiotics, religious art

Sammendrag: Artikkelen undersøker omslagene på 24 studioalbum utgitt av Bob Dylan, fra debuten i 1962 til 2015. Hvert av de 24 albumene har et fotografisk portrett på forsiden av coveret. Fotografiene leses kronologisk, som en fortelling eller tegneserie, i lys av sosialsemiotisk teori. Elementer som titler og andre verbale tekster, blikkretning, innramming og komposisjon forstås som selvstendige tekster, ikke bare som illustrasjoner til andre tekster. Artikkelen sammenligner også idolet som førmoderne religiøst konsept med idolet som mediert person i det moderne. En lite overraskende konklusjon er at visse trekk ved førmoderne religiøs kunst – både formale og ikonografiske – lever videre i dagens kunst. Jeg har imidlertid ikke funnet noen indikasjoner på at religiøse elementer er mer sentrale hos Dylan enn hos andre artister.

Stikkord: Bob Dylan, LP-covere, portrett, fotografi, sosialsemiotikk, religiøs kunst

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Introduction

This essay is not about Bob Dylan. It is about the cover art on some of the albums released by Dylan between 1962 and 2015. This may be understood as more or less interesting visual representation of the lyrical content and other components of the songs, but it can also be studied as artwork independent of the music. My primary interest is not to find out who designed the cover art or what they might tell us about the meaning behind it. These questions are interesting enough, but too comprehensive to handle in this essay, where I study the mediated Dylan, not the “real” Dylan. I read the album covers chronologically in order to find out how they comment on or construct a person’s life and its development or growth. Both in Dylan’s biography and his discography, religion has an important place. Consequently, my two research questions can be formulated like this: I. Can the photographic portraits of Dylan on the album covers be read as a narrative? II. Is there a connection between the cover art on the Dylan albums and religious art?

Before some words on earlier research, I give a brief account of the albums selected for this examination. Then I present my methods: social semiotic reading and comparison with religious art. In the most extensive part of the essay, I use these methods in a search for possible meanings conveyed by the album covers.

The selected album covers

Dylan’s discography includes close to 75 albums, of which 38 are studio albums, 13 live albums and 20 compilations, depending on how they are defined and counted. To make a selection, I chose to concentrate on the studio album covers, mainly because the studio albums are the only ones that nearly always feature *new* songs – they surprise and challenge more than they confirm.¹ To reduce the number and make comparison more

¹ I am aware that Dylan is among the artists who cover their own compositions, make new songs out of old songs, and in that way surprise their listeners with unexpected interpretations.

feasible as well as more relevant, I disregarded the 13 studio albums that do not show any photographic portraits of the artist.²

Earlier research

As far as I can see, today's Dylan research can be placed in one of two categories. Some researchers are looking for some kind of "truth"; they work like detectives, and ask questions like: What *really* happened? Even when these researchers analyze lyrics, they may look for "correct" interpretations. At the other end of a continuum, we find researchers who do more ambiguous readings. One of them is Andreas Häger, who in "Bob Dylan and Religion" (2009) does not try to discover whether Dylan is religious or not, or which religion he possibly adheres to. Häger looks rather at how rock artists are 'constructed' as religious figures. He refers to Janne Mäkelä and others when he proposes to study fan culture as a net with no central point instead of a result of *one* artistic genius: an interaction between the individual artist (his or her biography and works), the industry that produces, distributes and markets the works, the media, and the audience or fans. If so, images and album covers are as important as other parts of the net.

David Machin proposes in *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound, Text* (2010) both a social semiotic and an iconographic approach to album covers, not very different from the way I do in this essay. He also connects the analysis of album covers to theories from important semioticians and linguists like Roland Barthes and Michael Halliday.

There are lots of books about Dylan, his albums and songs. Many are illustrated, often with pictures never seen before. *Bob Dylan All the Songs: The Story Behind Every Track* (Margotin & Guesdon, 2015) is – despite its 700 pages – rather typical, with a lot of facts about all the musicians, producers and others who have contributed to this life work. *All the Songs* differs nevertheless from most other books, in that each chapter (except

2 *Self Portrait* (1970), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *Planet Waves* (1974), *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), *Shot of Love* (1981), *Knocked Out Loaded* (1986), *Oh Mercy* (1989), *Modern Times* (2006), *Together through Life* (2009), *Christmas in the Heart* (2009), *Fallen Angels* (2016), *Triplicate* (2017).

two) has a paragraph about the cover of the album that the chapter is about – usually encyclopaedical, but sometimes with an analytical twist, e.g. no. 3: *The Times They Are A-Changing*' (Margotin & Guesdon, 2015, p. 84).

Magnus Bettum has written about “Bob Dylan’s record covers in the light of design history” (2011). Here he uses various methods when comparing the record covers with trends categorized in decades from 1960 to 2010.

A search for “Bob Dylan Album Covers” on the Internet leads to a lot of more or less interesting sites: photographers tell their stories, readers are invited to vote on the best album cover, etc.³ The non-academic style does not hinder some brief, but to the point, analyses – for example, from Andrew Danby (see “Album covers sometimes just as powerful as his songs”⁴). All these books and articles have been helpful in my project.

Methods

The Greek word *semeion* (sign) refers to all kinds of meaningful signs, and the expression “social semiotics” refers to how signs are systematized to constitute a communication system for a certain social group (e.g. traffic signs for drivers). Since the 1990s, social semiotic approaches to all kinds of texts have increased. Images are no longer seen only as illustrations supporting verbal texts, but verbal texts and images are treated as equivalent languages or modes of expression. Albums and album covers have always been multimodal, i.e. consisting of many modes or modalities (Maagerø and Winje, 2010 – see also Jewitt, 2009 and URLs like *Glossary of Multimodal Terms*, multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com – read 24.08.2019).

The different modes usually expand, deepen or contrast each other. Therefore, when I isolate and analyze the cover independently of the music, I concentrate on only one part of the multimodal, total meaning. Besides, each cover may consist of several semiotic systems that do not necessarily support each other. In contrast to more hermeneutical

3 See e.g. www.stereogum.com/2040064/bob-dylan-photographers (read 03.08.2019).

4 www.chron.com/entertainment/music/article/Bob-Dylan-s-album-covers-sometimes-just-as-1727586.php (read 21.07.2019).

approaches, I am not looking for *one* truth or *one* logical conclusion. Instead of verifying or disproving the hypotheses that I construct, I try to map out different possible readings. Underwriting my approach is the recognition that both verbal and nonverbal languages are ambiguous.

After an initial review, I ended up with twelve categories of meaningful signs for the present analysis. In accordance with my understanding of social semiotic theory, both iconographic, formal and other elements can be read as texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The signs in the twelve categories have no fixed meanings, they partly overlap, and their relevance varies from one cover to another:

- 1) Black and white or color photography? (If the latter, what dominating color)?
- 2) Letters or not?
- 3) Distance from camera: close, medium or long shot?
- 4) Subject's gaze: staring directly at the viewer or what?
- 5) Oriented to the right (future) or to the left (past)?
- 6) Hairstyle or hat?
- 7) Clothing?
- 8) Attributes?
- 9) Context?
- 10) Frames?
- 11) Composition?
- 12) Geometric patterns underlying the composition?

I also chose three elements or features typical for religious art that seem relevant for my study (below).

Some words on religious art

It is not possible to give an overview on religious art, which I define as art referring to gods, rituals or other religious concepts and/or practices. Instead I present, very briefly, three different, but typical features in pre-modern religious art – all of them relevant for the analysis of the album covers (Winje, 2012). The first one applies to the very idea of depicting

gods. In Hindu art, the gods are portrayed, either as heavenly beings or as their *avatars* or incarnations, while Buddhist art deals with *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, who are not divine in the same way, but still godlike. In Judaism and Islam we do not find any figurative portraits of God, while the main motif in Christian art is Jesus Christ. According to traditional theology, he is both human and divine, not so different from e.g. Krishna in Hindu mythology.

In a classic text from Tanakh (cf. The Old Testament), Moses receives commandments from God, among others: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20). However, God’s distaste of figurative art is not in force when he a little later wants the Israelites to make two cherubs for the tabernacle (Exodus 25). And when Aaron, the brother of Moses, creates a golden calf as a representation of the God they have never seen (Exodus 32), the Bible text is surprisingly understanding, even if it maintains the prohibition. The worship of the calf in this story is a well-known example of idolatry (cf. *idol*, latin, originated from Greek, meaning an image or representation of a god, usually as an object of worship).

In the early Middle Ages, the production of icons was widespread (Tobiassen, 2012). *Icon* (from Greek) means “image” or “resemblance”. It applies to two dimensional paintings, usually on wood, showing holy persons. They follow strict rules, each painter is anonymous and copies older paintings carefully. In the 7th century an iconoclastic movement gained popularity in the Church, destroying a great deal of art. At a Council in 787 the views of the defenders of figurative art (*iconodules*) were accepted. Their arguments were based on the thoughts of John Damascene (d. ca. 750), a Syrian theologian who saw the incarnation as the main reason for the existence of icons: from the moment God was born as a human child, he was no longer invisible or without form. He was a real human and a real body, and as a real human he could be portrayed as a human. Among the oldest motifs is Christ as *pantocrator* (Greek: “all mighty” or “all powerful”), the most famous example is probably a mosaic in Hagia Sofia, Istanbul. In the context of the last judgment, Jesus is described as a monster in the Book of Revelation (ch. 1), but the icons show him as a

man, fierce, but just, gazing directly at the viewer, and presenting himself by means of the halo, gestures, etc.

The formal acceptance of icons also implied a formal change from verbal to multimodal language in the Christian Church. The Council declared: “What a word communicates through hearing is what art shows silently through an image.”⁵

An idol can be a piece of art, a good example, or a mediator between humans and supernatural beings. An idol can be a god, a semi-god, an angel, saint, prophet and more. And an idol can be a football player, politician or rock musician. Secularization is not an end to idolatry. Instead, idols do not any longer need a religious context.

To be identified, idols usually display attributes that refer to specific qualities. For example, Christian martyrs and Sikh gurus often hold the torture instrument that caused their death, John the Baptist and the Hindu God Shiva are both shabby because they live in the wilderness, and so on. This is the second, iconographic feature. The third feature is more formal, it concerns the composition and the geometric patterns behind it. When gods or holy persons are portrayed, there is a tendency to make them seem harmonic and peaceful, which is done with different forms of symmetry, balancing elements against each other, repetitions of certain patterns, the golden ratio, etc.⁶

Analysis

All in all, the Dylan covers have some distinctive features. One is that none of them look like any of the others. No words, not even the artist’s name, are repeated with any special design to visualize that these albums belong together. The alternation between color and black-and-white also works against any kind of continuity from cover to cover. However, during the later years, photos seem to have lost some of their importance in the overall design. Among the first half of the studio album covers

5 Citation taken from a lecture by Hilarion, bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church (*Theology of Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 2011, mospat.ru – read 01.07.2019).

6 The golden ratio (1,618): When the proportion between the shortest line and the longest line is the same as between the longest line and the sum of the two lines.

(1962–1978), all but three (close to 85 %) are photographic portraits, while among the last half (1979–2017), less than 50 % are portraits.

1 *Bob Dylan* (1962)

2 *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963)

3 *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964)

4 *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964)



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The first four albums released by Dylan have, in my view, comparable characteristics regarding both the music, lyrics and album covers. These are also the only albums with specific song titles printed on the covers, making the images a little more like illustrations and a little less like texts on their own.

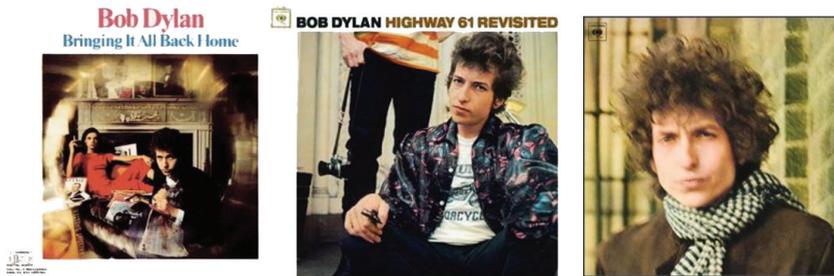
At least two of the four album covers correspond with the song titles: the young man or boy on the first cover looks like an apprentice, an impression confirmed by the fact that most of the titles refer to songs written by others. The artist on the cover of *The Times They Are A-Changin'* looks angry. Both his expression, the black-and-white close-up photo, the thick black letters and the song titles might be associated with revolutionary singer-songwriters like Woody Guthrie, but also Old Testament prophets like Amos, who proclaimed God's judgement on the rich. The photo on the *Freewheelin'* cover suggests to me (probably unintended) associations with Krishna and Radha, the supreme lovers in Hinduism. And because of the long shot in the portrait on the cover of *Another Side*, the expression on the artist's face is difficult to read. *Another Side* is also the first album cover with a framed portrait. Frames can imply limits, borders and discontinuity. An artist in a frame is not merging with his listeners, viewers or other artists. A frame can therefore be said to protect the integrity of the artist, but also to isolate him.

The four portraits can also delineate a somewhat different process. Here *Bob Dylan* marks the starting point of a development that ends up with *Another Side* of a grown-up Bob Dylan. The sequence might suggest the artist's increasing rejection of the conventional roles of a performer of traditional folk songs (cf. *Bob Dylan*), love songs (cf. *Freewheelin'*) or protest songs (cf. *The Times...*), while the fourth album cover represents an effort to evade these prescribed roles and categories and thereby create his own.

5 *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965)

6 *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)

7 *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)



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The covers of albums 5, 6 and 7 are all in color. While nos. 5 and 6 have letters spelling “Bob Dylan” and the album title in their frames, *Blonde on Blonde* has no frame or writing at all. Without frames, the viewers are not held outside, and without writing, nothing is predefined. According to Machin (2010, ch. 2), when the portrayed artist’s gaze addresses the viewer, it breaks out of the frame or border (here the album itself is the frame) so that the artist can communicate with the viewers/listeners instead of communicating with other people in the photos. This openness towards the audience is balanced against the artist’s direct and demanding gaze. We meet this gaze in several portraits, most clearly on the covers of *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. Kress and van Leeuwen claim that “if the picture is at eyelevel, then the point of view is one of equality and there is no power difference involved” (1996, p. 146). That may be right, but after working with religious art, in particular with the pantocrator (see above), it is hard to avoid seeing the power differences here, too.

On the cover of *Bringing It All Back Home*, we see a lot of albums, magazines and other references to culture, art and politics. The disorderly room should maybe reflect activity, that the people who use it are active participants in a modern society. At the same time there is a calmness in the image; neither Dylan nor the lady in red are stressed, and the photograph has sculpted a certain balance between them.

On the cover of *Highway 61 Revisited*, the artist is apparently casually placed, but a closer look reveals a composition characterized by balance between two triangles, one “behind” each person. Dylan is the main figure here, while (the trousers of) the man with the camera (whose presence appears to be incidental) may represent journalism and the media. The sunglasses are, besides the guitar (cf. cover no. 1), the only attributes that turn up rather often. They protect the eyes against the sun, but – like the frames – they also establish a certain distance between the artist and his public.

8 *John Wesley Harding* (1967)

9 *Nashville Skyline* (1969)

10 *New Morning* (1970)



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The next album cover shows a black-and-white photo of Dylan together with three unknown persons (i.e. unknown for the ordinary listener – they are actually two Indian musicians and a carpenter from Woodstock). They are all wearing hats and peering at the sun. It is difficult to recognize Dylan in this photo; he has changed both look, style and attitude. For the first time he is smiling directly at the camera. The cover has a rather dominating, grey frame, that looks like a portal, i.e. a welcome sign. The name of the artist is printed on the upper part of the frame, right over the

title, which happens to be another name. Viewers without knowledge of John Wesley Harding, may think Dylan and Harding is a duo, like Simon and Garfunkel. Hardin (d. 1895), whose name is written without the last -g, was actually a famous gunfighter, “a friend to the poor,” and the hero in a lot of traditional songs – in other words, the title proclaims that the artist once again turns to tradition.

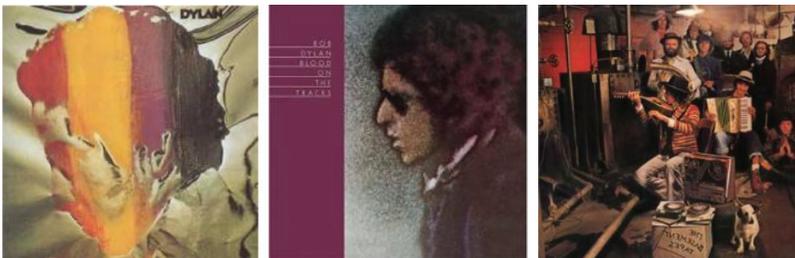
Nashville Skyline has, like *Blonde on Blonde*, a cover without writing or frames. Because of the low angle, and the fact that Dylan and his guitar are rather dark, the cover seems blue. If we see the two album covers of *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* as one, the artist is given a double position. On the black-and-white photo he is placed among other ordinary people in the lower part of the picture, a placement associated with reality. In color he is placed in the upper part, associated with the ideal, and in this particular picture with heaven. Thus, the artist is placed both in heaven and on earth, and because of his big smile and friendly attitude, his heavenly position does not seem threatening – even if he is actually looking *down* on the viewers.

It is difficult to categorize the album cover of *New Morning*. Like *Blonde on Blonde* and *Nashville Skyline*, there is no writing on the cover, but it also differs from the two previous albums. It is in black and white, and with a frame that establishes a certain distance to the viewer. Furthermore, Dylan is not smiling. He looks straight at the camera. He looks serious, calm and thoughtful, an impression reinforced by the oblique angle of the viewer’s perspective. The haircut contributes to this interpretation.

11 *Dylan* (1973, recorded 1969)

12 *Blood on the Tracks* (1975)

13 *The Basement Tapes* (1975, recorded 1967)



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14 *Desire* (1976)15 *Street-Legal* (1978)

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Two of the albums issued in the 70s were actually recorded in the 60s. The bulk of *Dylan* was recorded five years before its release, and most of *Basement Tapes* eight years before its release. Therefore, pursuing a visual chronology in this period comes at the expense of musical chronology. Dylan was rather active during the 70s, when he released two compilations, three important live albums (*Before the Flood*, 1974, *Hard Rain*, 1976, and *Bob Dylan at Budokan*, 1979) and four important studio albums without photographic portraits on the covers: *Self Portrait* (1970), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *Planet Waves* (1974) and *Slow Train Coming* (1979).

The cover of *Dylan* (1973) shows the profile of Dylan, who looks like he did on the cover of *New Morning* (no. 10). The image is manipulated: the head is covered with four vertical fields in unnatural colors (red, yellow, purple and black), and the background looks like a piece of cloth. Is it a psychedelic banner? Or does it differ from all the other album covers just to tell the listener that it *is* different from the others? This cover is one of the two that are not mentioned in *All the Songs* (Margotin and Guesdon, 2015), probably because it is not counted with the others (CBS issued the album without Dylan's permission).

In *The Basement Tapes* cover photo, which seems to be a 1975 reconstruction of a 1967 recording session, both Dylan and The Band wear unusual hats (Dylan also wears an unusual sweater) while playing unusual instruments in unusual ways. The interior of the room makes it clear that this is a typical basement, and a tape recorder gives the illusion

of a studio. Nothing tells us who these people are, but “The Basement Tapes” is written on a cardboard box. As far as I can tell, the whole concept is a kind of staging, an effort to give the material from 1967 a picturesque context for its 1975 release.

The cover of *Blood on the Tracks* also features some retrospective elements. The head in profile looks like Dylan in 1966, and the sunglasses further suggest the same period. The image is manipulated, but not as much as the image on the *Dylan* cover. If the *Dylan* cover tells us that the album is different from the others, the *Blood on the Tracks* cover tells us the opposite, that this album is typical.

With so much attention on the earlier career of Dylan, it is no surprise that the artist is often portrayed looking or moving to the left, the direction that (according to Kress & van Leeuwen, 1991) implies an orientation toward the past. The ambiguity and lack of precision of this semiotic language must not be exaggerated. We cannot force the Dylan in the basement to turn around or look to the left, even if the whole *The Basement Tapes* album is a demonstration of nostalgia.

On the album cover of *Desire*, Dylan looks more determined and focused on the future, and I associate his clothing, especially the fur over his shoulder and the ribbon on the hat, with a romantic view of artistry as well as a romantic vision of exoticized cultures, such as Native American or Romany. This is also the first album cover that shows the main figure surrounded by green nature – if not a summer picture, then spring or autumn. It contrasts the six or seven earlier covers that correspond with winter: Numbers 1 and 7 (winter clothes), 2 (snow in the street), maybe 4 (winter street?), 5 (indoors by the chimney), 8 and 9 (no leaves on the trees). To paraphrase this change with a cliché, the image suggests a season of new growth for Dylan.

The cover of *Street-Legal* shows Dylan in a warm place, maybe on a summer’s day. Dylan is placed before one of the three fields or elements that constitute the scene: a door, a section of a wall and a staircase. This might be seen as a classic dilemma: if you want to move forward, you have to make a choice, but you do not know what lies behind the door or at the end of the stairs.

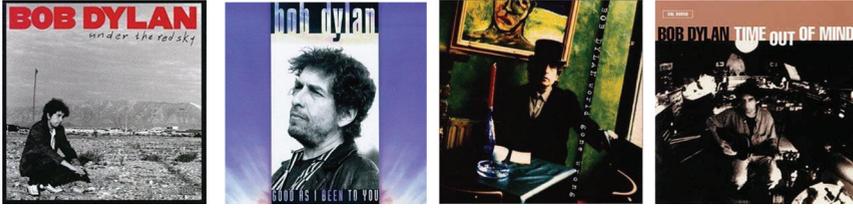
16 *Infidels* (1983)**17 *Empire Burlesque* (1985)****18 *Down in the Groove* (1988)**

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Of the six studio albums from the 80s, three covers are photographic portraits. In all three Dylan is more or less oriented towards the left (for the viewer), i.e. conscious of the past, contrary to *Desire* and *Street-Legal*. This is especially clear on *Down in the Groove*, where he sits alone in the spotlight with just one acoustic guitar – as in his first recordings. He occupies one third of the field, the rest (the empty space in front of the musician) is black.

Dylan's main attributes so far have been the guitar and the sunglasses. They are both present on the tree album covers from this decade as well, but not on *Empire Burlesque*, where he wears a trendy jacket and is placed inside a trendy frame. “Dylan’s 23rd studio album featured a distinct ‘80s-style’ aesthetic that many found tough to take” (Danby). “Regan [the cover-photographer] shows Dylan bowed, wearing an improbable *Miami Vice*-style jacket which some felt proclaimed the techno-pop tone of the album” (Margotin & Guesdon, 2015, p. 528). It is surprising to see Dylan dressed so modern, especially when his haircut looks like it did in the 1960s. However, the image gives a good example – or description – of this double belonging, both to the present and to the past.

19 *Under the Red Sky* (1990)**20 *Good as I Been to You* (1992)****21 *World Gone Wrong* (1993)****22 *Time Out of Mind* (1997)**



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The four album covers from the 90s differ a lot from each other, not least when it comes to the use of color. They also reveal a balanced attention to the past (left), to the here-and-now, and to the future (right).

If we divide the *Under the Red Sky* photo into four squares of equal size, we discover two combined models of composition. In the first model what is placed in the two upper squares represents the ideal, while what is placed in the lower squares represents reality. In the second model what is placed in the left-hand squares represents what is known, while what is placed in the right-hand squares is what is still unknown. Dylan is placed in the bottom left-hand square, as a person who still has a lot to learn and experience. He is looking to the right (from the reader's point of view) and seems focused on the future. The "red sky" in the title can allude to some kind of threat or catastrophe. The mountain that divides earth from heaven reminds me of Uluru ("Ayers Rock") in Australia, a red sandstone monolith that is holy for the indigenous Australians – but the photo is actually taken in the Mojave Desert, California (Margotin & Guesdon, p. 578).

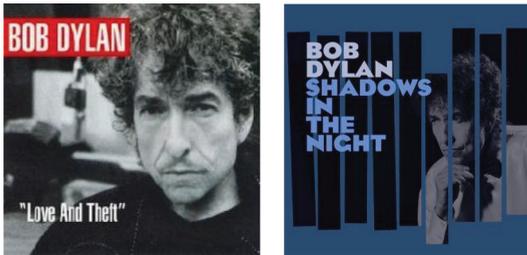
The *Good as I Been to You* cover shows a man who is serious and has something important to say. He is placed like a vertical axis with blue fields on both sides. In my view this portrait follows up the portrait from *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1964), but here he is placed within a frame, which may imply a greater distance to others.

The *World Gone Wrong* cover shows the artist with a top hat in a café. I do not know how to interpret the hat. It may be a part of some kind of masquerade (cf. *The Basement Tapes*), which can be serious enough. Or it might refer to the covers from 1965–66, where Dylan is gazing right at the viewer, demanding and self-confident. On the other hand, the album title, written with a Dymo Label Writer, declares that the world *has* "gone wrong". The whole scene is tilted 10 to 20 degrees to the right, as if to illustrate that fact, but all vertical lines are still parallel.

The *Time Out of Mind* album cover shows the artist with a guitar in a studio, maybe referring to his first recordings more than 30 years earlier. The guitar is the same, while the technology in the studio has changed. Dylan stands in the center of a circle made by studio furniture, gazing at the camera/viewer.

23 “*Love and Theft*” (2001)

24 *Shadows in the Night* (2015)



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The final two images to be commented on in this essay were published in 2001 and 2015. They are in black-and-white, and they are both rather dark. The word “theft” and the fictional jailhouse make me think that this is about crime and prison. The cover of “*Love and Theft*” has much in common with other albums discussed above – for example, the artist’s gaze leveled directly at the viewer.

The cover photo of *Shadows in the Night* has no parallels in my material. Dylan is partly hidden behind bars (not part of the original photo). It resembles the cover of a jazz-album from 1962, namely Freddie Hubbard’s *Hub-Tones* (Blue Note). Here the artist also is behind bars, but, as I see it, the two covers are in many ways rather different from each other. Hubbard is more positive and energetic than Dylan. *Shadows in the Night* is a collection of songs performed by Frank Sinatra (d. 1995), who was at his most active in the 60s. As on the *Under the Red Sky* cover, the artist occupies a lower quarter of the image. However, on the 1990 album he is placed on the left, maybe concerned about the future, while on the 2012 album, he is placed on the right and seems to look back, maybe at the time that has passed and gone. There are a lot of possible interpretations, but none of them very convincing. It is symptomatic that this cover is the

only one besides no. 11 (*Dylan*, 1973) that is not mentioned in *All the Songs* (Margotin & Guesdon, 2015).

Summary and conclusion

To reiterate an important point: I neither can nor wish to say anything about the “real” Dylan. Instead, I look for the one I have already met – the one who exists on records and in pictures and movies. In my material, the mediated singer smiles only twice, namely on albums no. 8 and 9, and (depending on the definition of a smile) maybe on no. 2, 13 and 14, while the more grave Dylan is present on nearly 20 album covers. I expected that as a result of this seriousness there would be more black and white photos, but there I was wrong. *All* photographs from the 70s and 80s are in color.

On the other hand, the alternation between close-ups and long shots is interesting. Long shots give a feeling of distance, and one result can be seen on the covers of *Another Side ...* (no. 4) and *John Wesley Harding* (no. 8), where it is difficult to see the details or the expression in his face. These are two albums that unexpectedly changed the direction in this narrative. A certain distance from the camera allows the context to play a more important role, as we see in *Under the Red Sky* (no. 19) and *Time Out of Mind* (no.22, but see also 2, 5, 13, 15?, 18?, 21). For David Machin, distance is an expression of social difference (2010: ch. 2), but in my opinion this may be too narrow a view. I do not see that the distance from the camera corresponds with other variables. Consequently, I give reasons for my conclusions in only ten of the twelve observations listed above – not the first (black and white or color) or the third (distance from camera).

I first try to answer the first research question: I. Can the photographic portraits of Dylan on the album covers be read as a narrative?

Firstly: The findings under the fifth question, “Oriented to the right (future) or to the left (past)?” contribute to an understanding of Dylan’s career as a constant and creative conflict between nostalgia (new songs inspired by old songs, new look inspired by old look, etc) and innovation. In five of the 24 photos (1, 3, 14, 15, 19) Dylan is more or less oriented towards the right/future, and in about ten of them (he is oriented to the

left/past (4?, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 20, 24). During the first seven albums he established a sound and a look that he was later expected to repeat, even if the main reason for his long career may just have been his many breaks with these expectations. The record covers seem to comment on and maybe exaggerate this.

The albums from the 70s (nos. 11–15) give a good example, partly because it is so obvious that Dylan is oriented to the left on the covers of *Dylan* and *Blood on the Tracks*, and to the right on *Desire* and *Street-Legal*. The two principles are visually pulling in opposite directions. Clothing (including hats) and nature show that winter is the dominating season during the whole narrative (see above), and the two summer scenes (no. 14 and 15) correspond with a new peak in Dylan's career, a peak that does not necessarily confirm the established look or sound.

Secondly: On the first four covers the song titles are printed, obviously steering the interpretation. On the other hand, there are three album covers with no verbal signs at all (7, 9, 10, no. 10 with frame), leaving the viewers free to read them in their own, different ways. Related to the titles are the frames, which, among other things, mark the borders between the singer/songwriter and his listeners (see above). I found some kind of frame on ten of the 24 selected album covers (40 %) – either on all four sides, or on one or two sides (4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24?). Frames are often, but far from always, to be found in portraits where the artist is oriented to the left, e.g. like *Blood on the Tracks*. Since I do not know how many frames to expect, I compared Dylan's album covers with Van Morrison's and Neil Young's album covers, using exactly the same criteria as for Dylan. The result did not differ much from my premonition: on the 45 Morrison albums with photographic portraits on the front cover, I found 15 with frames (33 %). And on the twelve relevant Young albums, I found two with frames (16 %).

As I see it, the 24 portraits do not tell a different story about Dylan's career than what is told in other modes or modalities. But the visual narrative emphasizes certain elements, namely the creative conflicts between repetition (not understood as stagnation, but as development while following a certain track) and new concepts – and between interaction with his public and keeping to his own ideas in a more stubborn way.

To answer the other research question (“II. Is there a connection between the cover art on the Dylan albums and religious art?”), I will discuss the three features observed above (under the heading “Some words on religious art”):

Firstly, in a little less than half of the photos, the artist stares directly at the listener or record buyer (no. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 17, 21, 22, 23), and in a period at the end of the 60s this direct gaze was never absent. In religious art, both Eastern and Western, we can divide images of idols or holy persons in one group that illustrate ideas (e.g. Jesus carrying a lamb) or stories (e.g. Jesus is born), and one group where the gods or holy persons – the idols – gazes directly at the viewer, ready to communicate with him or her. (see above). It gives the portrayed a certain authority, and the viewer a sense of contact. Studies of the interior of youth’s bedrooms show that a lot is setting up “altars”, with candles symmetrically placed around an idol representing values and ideas in modern youth culture (Aagre, 2006).

Secondly, in religious figurative art, a lot of martyrs, bishops, gods, angels, buddhas and others resemble each other so much that they need some attributes to be identified. We have seen that Dylan’s main attributes have been the guitar and the sunglasses (see above), but a characteristic hair cut can also make him identifiable. On the cover of *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) he holds a kitten, on *Basement Tapes* (1975) he holds a mandolin, and on *World Gone Wrong* (1993) I first thought he had a book, but it must be a napkin. Gestures and body language can also help the viewer to identify the idol. One example is Dylan depicted as a thinker (17, 19) in contrast to e.g. a critic/prophet (3, 10?, 20?) or boy-friend (2).

Finally, idol portraits today are often based on the same geometric forms and principles as in earlier times (see the paragraph “Some Words on Religious Art” above), which leads to the same principles for composition. I have looked through my two album cover books (Miles, 2005; Ochs, 2005) without finding any non-harmonic portraits. There are a few examples, like *With the Beatles* (1963), where the composition at first sight breaks with the harmonic ideals: three heads in a middle row, and one head in the lowest row. This is unusual, but after some time we accept the pattern, probably because it makes the underlying form more visible.

Some photographs taken from newspapers, etc., e.g. The Roots: *Things Fall Apart* (1999), have no underlying pattern, but they do not pretend to be portraits in a traditional way.

As a conclusion I will allege that we actually find some elements from early religious art that live on in new contexts, such as modern album cover art. But we have no reason to think that this is something special for Bob Dylan.

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