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Introductory Editorial: Snail, Shark, Spirit

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

Joanna Demers and I independently and simultaneously proposed that the themed section of the Fall 2013 issue be devoted to aesthetic matters concerning animals. But that happy coincidence is only half the story. For my part, I began to wonder what today’s philosophers and scholars thought about such matters as a result of two encounters: one with a shark and one with a snail, one dead and distant, the other very close and so alive.

• The Snail • _____

At first I thought it was someone’s feet scuffing the carpet, someone trying to move in silence, betrayed by friction. When nobody appeared, I blamed the miniscule noise on some machine on the verge of malfunction. In summer in my native land, I continued typing, surrounded by paperwork

and that day's mail – and every now and then that tiny sound: a little scratch, or was it a microsonic crunch?

From the corner of my eye, I saw a tentacle testing the air between two envelopes. Slowly, timidly, I removed the letter that crowned the pile of mail.

At the end of that tentacle was a very different eye.

Bermuda, my native country, a bit of mid-Atlantic limestone nestled in the crater of an oceanic volcano, was the scene of hundreds upon hundreds of shipwrecks. That's how humans came to be here; a plethora of other species arrived in the same way. I wouldn't be surprised if that's how snails got here: by accident, stowing away in a coil of rope or between the braids of a basket, riding out the storms that vexed the Devil's Isle in serene estivation until sunlight and stillness and the scent of vegetation kissed them awake. Certainly that's how the young milk snail, *Otala lactea*, ended up in my house: by accident. It was 2012.



Toru. Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

The snail had a pale shell, about a centimeter in diameter, with a distinctive array of brownish stripes. It was inquisitive. I watched it crawl from the edge of a white envelope down to the address label, where it seemed to read our names. Then it meandered to a different edge and peered over the side, the way we Bermudians love to stand on rocks and bridges looking down into our clear ocean at its abundant life.

I was enchanted. I'd never thought much about snails before, except as the gardener's bane.¹ But within minutes, this snail had fresh cabbage from the fridge, some water and a lidless Tupperware to crawl around in, and a name: Toru, for the guileless protagonist of Haruki Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The envelope went with him into the Tupperware. I feared that I might hurt him if I touched him, he was so small. And anyway he seemed to like the envelope. That night a late-summer storm rattled the house. It hung around for about a week, howling and whipping the trees, inundating the island with heavy rain. It gave me the excuse I needed, ignorant as I was, to keep Toru with me.

He napped most of the time, but every day, usually early in the morning and again late at night, he awakened and explored his meager terrarium. I waited eagerly for him. I worked with one eye on the Tupperware, and at the slightest sound I went still and fell silent. Toru had a replenished supply of cabbage and clean water every day, at one point he had cilantro (I learned by observation that he preferred his veggies slightly stale), and his meals were my favorite moments: the soft crunching sounds from the little mouth under his tentacles: that I could hear it at all amazed me to no end, his little head bobbing up and down. He ate a lot. A single leafy meal was often longer than he was. But he burned it all with exercise and growing: I've seen milk snails three times his size, he had a ways to go; and to my amusement he moved quickly for a snail. He was free to roam as he pleased, his tiny trails of slime were no bother. In fact his after-dinner constitutionals, during which he covered a surprising amount of ground, seeking and exploring with his tiny tentacles, were rare moments of delight in what for me, at that time, was a lusterless existence. I photographed Toru with a digital camera that boasted a "Mute" setting, until I realized that it bothered him: he could hear the thing's innards working even though I couldn't. Clearly I knew nothing about snails.

When the storm passed, I had to fly to the US. Otherwise I might have kept him longer. Instead and with a heavy heart, I released him into a forgotten garden. Low walls offered some protection from the harsher elements.



Toru. Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

On the night of his release we had more rain. Missing Toru, I looked through a window at the garden. There he was, sliming along the wall with a tree frog for company.

To my dismay, I realized that Toru preferred the rain and dark. That meant that the storm, which provided six days' worth of excuses to imprison him in my company, should actually have been my signal to release him the moment I'd discovered him.

If that wasn't enough, I returned from the States to find that forgotten garden tilled and replanted.

The shame remains with me, along with, I confess, delight in my memories of Toru. I cannot pass a snail – and there are many in Bermuda – without feelings of warmth and wonder, laced with regret, taking root within my consciousness all over again. With each new root there is growth in multiple directions.

And yet what was he to me, that small creature who, had he not fallen asleep in that day's mail, would have seemed less than significant? He would not be played with like a dog. He couldn't look at me with

knowing eyes; that would have been like one of us sympathizing with the sky. The enjoyment I found in Toru was aesthetic, all looking and listening, but it was so different from the pleasure I take in books, films, and other artworks. And yet hasn't Charles Fisk written of musical pieces as "companions"?² Hasn't he suggested that even when I interact with an artwork – I might venture to say: in all aesthetic encounters – I interact with another "self" in a relationship of "mutual recognition of each other's potential subjectivity, along with our shared recognition of the specificity of [our] environment"?³

All of the contributors to this issue's themed section reflect on the aesthetics and ethics of animal encounters, but none of those are first-hand encounters between an animal and the author him- or herself. I describe my brief relationship with a milk snail in order to emphasize that aesthetic encounters directly between humans and animals do occur, and that such experiences are simultaneously embodied and reflective. Being with animals is neither a matter of purely involuntary corporeal instinct, nor of cerebral abstraction. Furthermore, aesthetic appreciation may be an appropriate response to certain animal encounters, but it is not the only available response, especially when one is faced with a living animal as opposed to an animal that features in an artwork. We happen upon animals in many different situations, some of which, like my temptation to seek companionship in Toru, can complicate aesthetic appreciation.

Some months after I lost Toru, I became aware of Elisabeth Tova Bailey's marvelous book, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Only then did I begin to do Toru some justice in my thinking. For one thing, Bailey's book illuminated the depths of my ignorance in practical matters (heading-towards-moldy was a good guess vis-à-vis snails' dining preferences; but I'd had no idea that, given time, Toru might have produced and hatched over a hundred eggs all by himself). She also led me to start asking the proper questions.

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating is Bailey's true account of her time with a brown forest snail, *Neohelix albolabris*. In a fortunate accident, the snail ended up in a terrarium at Bailey's bedside. It remained there during a terrible illness that confined her to bed for months on end. That small creature's company "sustained" her during hours of stasis and isolation; it was "a true mentor," she writes: thanks to a snail, she survived her seemingly interminable debilitation.⁴ In wistful prose, Bailey's book summarizes her twenty-year investigation of gastropod physiology, behavior, and culture. The book is also a memoir about the snail who gave

her hope and a valuable “how-to” manual on snail care, which Bailey arrived at (as I did) via trial and error. In addition, her quest for snail-related facts is a philosophical meditation on matters such as time, illness, confinement, solitude, and wastefulness – a meditation inspired by snail-watching.

Bailey is explicit: her snail was certainly a “companion.”⁵ But at the same time, as she was utterly immobile, her interactions with it were necessarily non-negotiable and from a distance: she was capable of nothing more than listening and watching. Moreover, aware of countless unbridgeable divides between herself and this curious hermaphrodite, Bailey found herself loath to give the snail a name.⁶ For her it wasn’t just an animal but also an ecology and a new way of being-in-the-world. “The snail was not just an individual creature that I was coming to know,” she writes. “It was introducing me in spirit to its entire line of gastropod ancestors” and their idiosyncratic capabilities, which in her infirmity she began to envy.⁷

I mention Bailey because she confirms my suspicions about my relationship with Toru. It was and was not companionship. Its success (the snail’s survival) depended less on knowledge and communication than on guesswork and sensitivity to difference. The sustenance derived from it, at least on the human end, was aesthetic: nonlinguistic, sometimes contemplative, often purely sensorial. The joy in the relationship was all in slime trails, stripes and spirals, swaying tentacles, the quiet sounds of microscopic munching. The danger was the relationship’s reliance on dissimulation: as I lovingly anthropomorphized Toru, Bailey inquisitively posed as an omniscient evolutionary biologist who could see all the way to the beginning of time, and from that standpoint her snail became a specimen. Nonetheless, like works of art, the creaturely aspects of snails moved us both to philosophical questioning. Such questions showed themselves when at last we started to think through, with, and alongside the animals.

Questions, which I have yet to answer, were Toru’s and Bailey’s gifts to me. Here are some of them.

Both Toru and Bailey’s snail always chose to return to their terrariums, though they had the run of their respective houses: what more is there to learn from such apparently purposeless decisions on the part of animals – decisions which are perhaps aesthetic? What other questions might arise from thinking aesthetically with and through other animals?

What potential is there in human–animal relationships besides the potential for dissimulation, companionship, aesthetics, and exploitation? How can we make the most of that potential in our thinking, for the mutual benefit of all animals? How close is the aesthetic appreciation of an unfamiliar nonhuman or inanimate object to the friendly appreciation of a human or familiar nonhuman companion? How productive is that closeness?

What else might we learn from thinking with particular animals? For example, how might an animal who is capable of estivation experience time? What might we learn from thinking time and age with spirals? Is the snail – a creature that carries its dwelling wherever it goes, and that is self-sufficient even in reproduction – perhaps the closest thing to a living monad? If so, or not, what can being-in-the-shell tell us about ecology? What difference might it make to aesthetics to think with eyes projected forward-upward on flexible tentacles? Suppose we think stomach and foot together (*gastro-pod*): propulsion, digestion, and touch as the workings of a single organ?

Vilém Flusser is gifted at this kind of thinking. His fictional-philosophical treatise on another intriguing mollusk, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, “the vampire squid from hell,” invites terrestrial *Homo sapiens* to “vampyroteuthize” our thinking.⁸ He speculates on squiddish physics, culture, society, ethics, art – “Vampyroteuthic *Dasein*.”⁹ Indulge our snails’ distant relative for a just a moment:

For it, space is not a lethargic and passive expanse supported by a Cartesian endoskeleton. It is rather a realm of coiled tension, laden with energy, that has been banished from its snail shell. ... According to its thinking, for instance, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line but a coil spring that, when fully compressed, brings two points together. Where the world is constituted in such a way – as a dynamic conglomerate – there can be no immutable and eternal forms ... [hence by] observing the vampyroteuthis we are able to recognize an art of a different sort, one that is not burdened by the resistance of objects ... but is rather intersubjective and immaterial. ... In short, the difference between our art and that of the vampyroteuthis is this: whereas we have to struggle against the stubbornness of our materials, it has to struggle against the stubbornness of its fellow vampyroteuthes.¹⁰

• The Shark • ---

I had hoped to receive submissions on living aquatic species. I'd also wanted someone to weigh in at length on Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*: a tiger shark murdered for art's sake, suspended in a tank of formaldehyde. I have not seen this artwork in person, but I've read a great deal about it. I am unable to come to terms with it. I'd hoped that one of our contributors might succeed where I have failed, but in the end, we were unable to publish either on sharks or on Hirst. For that reason I venture to offer a few cautious ideas of my own.

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living is a Romantic piece in the Hegelian sense. In Romanticism, human ideas exceed all objects: no object is adequate to convey our deep and complex thoughts. That is why, for Hegel, the quintessential Romantic form is poetry, whose medium is imagination.¹¹ In Hirst's work, too, human notions, human purpose, human force and effectiveness, which altogether Hegel would call *Spirit*, exceed and overpower the nonhuman other. But in Hirst, the nonhuman object does not disappear, it cannot dissipate into pure thought as it does in Hegel; hence perhaps (in a generous mood) the "impossibility of death." Neither does Hirst's work convey any acknowledgement of the authoritarianism inherent in his aesthetic process: the shark is not even permitted to decompose.¹² We could say that Hirst's title refers to a general refusal, on the part of the human mind, to recognize its own destructive capabilities – but that is an anthropocentric reading (of a solipsistic title) to which the shark has no relevance.

It seems to me preferable, and perhaps more indicative of the domineering ideologies underlying Hirst's piece, to think of it as ultra-Romantic, as Romanticism on the edge. In Hegelian Romanticism, Spirit – ideas and effectiveness – exceeds nonhuman objects. Additionally in Hirst, Spirit exceeds Spirit, in the sense that one kind of Spirit overcomes and overpowers another: human interests and effectiveness override those of another sentient being that itself possesses Spirit. This is more than a matter of ideas refusing to be contained by images, sounds, or words. Arguably, Spirit exceeding Spirit – human ideas and capabilities refusing to be checked by others', or even by our own notions (for example of endangered species) – is the *ensuing* step, Romantic exceeding *to excess*.

According to Cornelia Tsakiridou, the propensity for excessive exceeding is latent in Hegelian Romanticism, which can take the form of propagandic art: works wherein the Spirit of a particular person (his particular ideas and the force of his particular personality) exerts itself beyond its rightful bounds, imposing itself upon and thus subsuming other Spirits.¹³ Isn't Hirst's tiger shark another realization of this propensity?

Hegel could not have foreseen art like Hirst's. But if he had envisioned anything of the kind, Spirit subjugating and even killing Spirit in the name of art, then he would have understood it as the end of art. Not in the sense that there can be no more art after Damien Hirst, but in the sense that with Hirst, art ceases to be art – a means of materially contemplating truth, self, and world – and becomes something else. It becomes a self-destructive movement in which Spirit itself expires, conquered and undone; human Spirit murders nonhuman Spirit, but in addition human Spirit does away with itself as it has been, and so it can only go on in a mutated form. Whether or not the artist and his viewers intend this to happen (I doubt that Hirst has any inkling of it), art exceeds itself to become the kind of movement that Hegel describes, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a change in the character of Spirit on individual and cultural levels: a movement such as that which culminates in the fight to the death – a global change of attitude. Hegel might say that via this kind of art-that-exceeds-itself (art as its own end), human Spirit struggles with itself as it forces itself to evolve, to enter a new age. The way I see it, and even this may be too generous: at best Hirst's horrific work is a violent propulsion towards the difficult realization that prevailing human attitudes towards nonhumans – the anthropocentric, domineering ideological framework in which Hirst conceived his work in the first place – must be done away with. Perhaps this propulsion must be violent and disagreeable, because the attitudes at stake are entrenched.

The time in which they are finally overthrown might be what Tim Morton calls the Asymmetric age.¹⁴ It is the time in which, thanks largely to our own bungling excesses and presumptions, human Spirit finds itself conquered and overrun by nonhuman others and hyperobjects, such as global warming and pollution, and art must contend with that which lies beyond human experience: with the global and the animal, with extinction. Aesthetics in the Asymmetric age, one might say at the height of the Anthropocene, can no longer proceed without wondering if it has overstepped its bounds. We artists now have so much at our control – animals, chemicals, computers, heavy machinery, whole tracts of land – that in the current ecological crisis, we must wonder before doing

anything. Aesthetics and ethics will never be one and the same, but they will always shadow one another, and in the Asymmetric age the tenacious intimacy of those two shadows becomes frightfully and oppressively apparent.

• The Contributors • ---

There is so much more to animal aesthetics than I have touched on here. I hope I have whetted your appetite for the profusion of deeper ideas and far more eloquently articulated perspectives presented by our contributors.

Andrew Hageman does deal in corpses, but his outlook is worlds away from Hirst's presumption of omniscience. Hageman writes that when he meets a dead animal – he met a whale, or at least part of one – no matter how intimate the circumstances, even if he sits upon its bones, tracing its dry, fissured contours with his fingers, it is the vast distance between himself and the animal that strikes him. Though the experience of a dead animal may be as intense and revealing as a Hirst artwork, from the perspective of knowledge skeletons, dissected corpses, and taxidermied bodies amount to “opaque surfaces and mysterious black holes.”¹⁵

Hageman's perspective here calls to mind Ron Broglio's incisive look at Hirst's oeuvre, including *The Physical Impossibility of Death*. For Broglio, Hirst's work amounts to an elaborate and cruel expression of the vain assumption that human knowing can be absolute.¹⁶ To this end Hirst determines to make animals completely visible, inside and out, further assuming that seeing and knowing are the same. The attempt, as Hageman knows, is futile. This has not to do with the difference between living and dead but with the finitude of knowledge and the impossibility of being together, the ethics of which Hageman learns to question in the company of dead whales.

But as David Cecchetto observes, the problem of being together is not exclusive to human-animal relationships. In an article for our *@Aesthetics* section, which presents new thinking on all kinds of aesthetic questions, Cecchetto describes the digital sound artwork *Exurbia*, an online environment for sound-editing and composition wherein each user's activities immediately and directly impacts every other user's work. The

vulnerability of every member of the network is thus sorely yet not totally apparent, as “one can only listen for other users’ interventions by listening for differences that are not verifiable.”¹⁷ This paradoxical, interdependent self-sufficiency also characterizes aesthetic media in relation to aesthetic practices. If sound is to function specifically as the medium of music, then it must “point beyond itself”: musical sound is sound with non-sonic aspects (with discursively determined limits, for example). At the same time, musical sound *qua* musical sound must be tautologically recognizable as exactly that and nothing else. “Medial specificity” in music or any given art form is thus “both necessary and impossible.”¹⁸

Holly Watkins describes how animals and humans relate to music. She argues that when it comes to sensory stimuli, animals’ “cognitive abilities go far beyond the passivity implied by the concept of *reaction*.”¹⁹ Instead, animals *respond* in a manner that itself demands a response. Taking up Jacques Derrida’s call for an inter-species exploration of the similarities and differences between reaction and response, Watkins examines how music occasions both cognitive responses and physical reactions even in humans. The implication is that humans cannot be distinguished from animals on the basis of how they encounter stimuli. Watkins therefore questions the evaluation of human and animal *sounds* according to divergent aesthetic criteria. She calls instead for “a speculative aesthetics that folds human music-making into the broader sphere of animal physiology while admitting animal sounds into an expanded notion of the aesthetic.”²⁰

In a contrasting discussion, Eric v.d. Luft suggests that it is distance, both physical and intentional “perceived or invented distance,” that enables us to perceive animals aesthetically and, more importantly, to perceive them as perceiving subjects. A human-animal encounter should include a deliberate intentional shift, in which one “transcends” the ontological differences between oneself and the animal, and makes a deliberate “move” from the cognitive standpoint that objectifies the animal other to one that “believ[es] in the ‘other’ as subject.”²¹ In a move that to my mind resembles Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Luft works towards the same goal as Watkins – an inclusive and respectful aesthetic relationship with animals – from the opposite direction: Luft imposes a transcendental distance from which the differences between animals and humans as perceiving subjects appear contingent; Watkins delves into the particularities of animal and human sound-making, working through the corporeal idiosyncrasies of divergent species towards a shared aesthetic.

But J. Marie Griggs takes a hard look at what can happen when animals are forced to participate in aesthetic deceptions. She studies remediated landscapes: polluted landscapes that, because they are inhabited by wildlife and flora, are advertised as parks or preserves – as safe havens from pollution. But that is precisely what remediation is not: the toxicity of a polluted landscape cannot be undone, though it may be somewhat attenuated. Promoters tout aesthetic appreciation as the appropriate response to such wronged landscapes; but for Griggs, aesthetic appreciation constitutes a failure to respond to the violence that continues to sicken the land from behind the opaque ideological curtain supplied by words like “nature preserve.” Griggs considers the work of artists who, in contrast, “*express* pollution” by “accentuating fragmentation and failure,” demonstrating that while human attempts to remediate ecological damage must fall short, there are other, vulnerable agencies at work.²²

Gray and Kanta Kochhar–Lindgren take up Griggs’ challenge to aesthetically confront pollution head-on. Together these performance artists devised a series of conceptual artworks, or rather instructions for performance, “in order to shape a research method for encountering garbage, its many guises and potential for transposition into new forms.” The artworks are fascinating, and despite the apparent simplicity of their wording they are nothing short of intimidating. Each set of instructions, or *score*, is a challenge to research by reaching out into “the opening that enables both the determination of form and the emergence of the unexpected,” which (echoing Alain Badiou) Gray and Kanta call an event. Garbage is just such an event, as is a score and the scoring/scratching in which the Anthropocene mars the planet with garbage, and so is “the interminable scratching of that which is buried alive, planetary recycling as we scratch out a living by peeling the skin of the earth”²³

• Notes •

¹ Cathy Stovell, "Milk snails prove to be a real pest," *The Royal Gazette*, April 26, 2011, <http://www.royalgazette.com/article/20110426/ISLAND05/704269929>

² Charles Fisk, *Repertoires: Composers of My Life* (unpublished manuscript, 2012), 56.

³ Fisk, "Chopin's 'Duets' – and Mine," *19th-Century Music* 35, no. 3 (2012): 185-6.

⁴ Elisabeth Tova Bailey, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (New York: Algonquin, 2010), 160.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12, 108.

⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroreuthis Infernalis*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42, 63.

¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume 1, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹² And when it dared to do so, at first on the inside, another shark was murdered to replace it. See Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking With Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 17.

¹³ C.A. Tsakiridou, "Art's Self-Disclosure: Hegelian Insights into Cinematic and Modernist Space," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 1 (2013): 65.

¹⁴ Timothy Morton, "Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 131-134.

¹⁵ Andy Hageman, "Dead Whale Watching," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 107.

¹⁶ See Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 18.

¹⁷ David Cecchetto, "The Sonic Effect: Aurality and Digital Networks in *Exurbia*," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ Holly Watkins, "Music Between Reaction and Response," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

²¹ Eric v.d. Luft, "Bullough, Pepper, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenology of Perceiving Animals," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 115.

²² J. Marie Griggs, "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 73.

²³ Gray Kochhar-Lindgren and Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, "Scratch: Garbage, Scores, and the Event," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 22.

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COLLISION

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013)

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Kochhar-Lindgren, Gray, and Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren. "Scratch: Garbage, Scores, and the Event." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 20-33.

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the scratch as it relates to garbage, scores, and the event. Garbage is that which is cast aside as social systems form themselves, and, as such, is always destined to return. Scores are both methodological maps and experimental artistic methods. And the event, in this context, is the opening that enables both the determination of form and the emergence of the unexpected.

KEYWORDS

scratch, garbage, scores, event, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Giorgio Agamben

Scratch: Garbage, Scores, and the Event

Gray Kochhar-Lindgren and
Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren

How?

By a stroke

anti-logical

anti-philosophical

anti-intellectual

anti-*dialectic*

of the tongue

by the stubbing with my black pencil

and that's all.

Antonin Artaud, "Ten Years Ago Language Left..."¹

The first scratch is the deepest. It partitions the world into regions of experience, into words and things, words and words, sense and intellect. We stub with our black pencils and scratch our skins, scratch the skin of the earth. We create garbage. The incision creates events without which nothing would occur and also initiates death as event, non-event, and the end of events. Language comes, lingers for the time of a breath, then dissipates.

1 · The Theater of Garbage ---

As our garbage piles high around us, is buried below us in the bowels of the earth, and reaches out toward the boundaries of the solar system — Voyager I has now passed the terminal shock and entered the heliosheath — we are scratching around in the trash to see what emerges. The *mise-en-scène* of this theatrics is the interminable scratching of that which is buried alive, planetary recycling as we scratch out a living by peeling the skin of the earth, and the lightning stroke's incandescent zigzag.

Our art, research, and teaching are increasingly drawn into the chaotic swirl of the many quasi-hidden manifestations of the scratch and of garbage, a term that derives from *garble*, meaning "siftings, refuse," from *jarbage* "bundles of sheaves, entrails," and much earlier, from *grebh* "handful, grasp."² As with any history of language things are garbled, in need of constant sifting, and there are plant, animal, and plastic remains that mix with each other in the dump, causing a nauseating stench and the death of wild-life (our own included). This discourse moves across the terrain of technology and its computing — GIGO: garbage in, garbage out — and serves as an index of the presence of an ethical and material sorting system, of the operations of a culture.

Score 1

Pass a piece of garbage from hand to hand.

Ask your friends to bury you up to your neck in the sand and pile your garbage around your head in a ritual circle.

During what I fondly call my “garbage course” – but what is more formally known as “Topics in Performance Studies: Garbage as Art” – I send students out to forage for the remains of their own lives, digging through the garbage in their backyards or their purses, drifting through

construction sites, or dragging themselves through the garbage bin of their memories. We tackle a range of social categorizations from “white trash” to genocide, in which whole peoples are wasted. I find out days after the course is “over” that one of my students was harassed by the campus and city police because they refused to believe that she had found the chair she took home in the campus garbage dump. They denied the validity of this explanation of refuse; they even refused to believe that I existed or that I was teaching a course called “Garbage as Art.” Who would do such a thing?

How, the police asked – with a familiar logic – could a university support such a waste of time? Garbage, after all, belongs outside the walls of the academeton, the machine assemblage that generates the space of the modern university. In spending so much time staring into the face of garbage and its dis- and re-appearing trail, the perverse policing of the university by the protocol of the clean, containable, and knowable, we’re just trying to figure out what is happening. Where do things come from and where are they going? What is a thing of value, what is worthless, and what are the mediations between the two?

2 · Scratching the Surface

Old Scratch himself has come for us from what is politely called the “archive” of the past and:

Old Scratch “the Devil,” 1740, is from earlier *Scrat*, from O.N. *skratte* “goblin, monster,” a word which was used in late O.E. for “hermaphrodite” (cf. O.H.G. *scrato* “satyr, wood demon”).³

Satyrs of the wood become hermaphroditic become monstrous, and then the Devil appears, old cloven-foot himself. That old goat, wily transmuter of form personified. How is it that the hybridity of the satyr and the monstrous – always lurking alluringly along the edges of the maps of civilizations and consciousness – is driven into the form of the Devil who governs the cesspool of human misery? What are the cultural, political, and economic operations that split Hermes – who wing-footed travels from Olympus to the underworld with dead souls in tow – from foam-born Aphrodite, that split man from woman, the animal from the human and the machine, and Old Scratch from the Most High?

What is essence of the splitting that splits? There is always a mark that divides and distinguishes, but this mark is always historicized, leading us to ask the question of "how well-established spatial and temporal practices and 'discourses' are 'used up' and 'worked over' in social action."⁴ The scratch is a transmitting transmuter that reconfigures the social world. It is a stubbing with a black pencil that writes, but that also tears into the surface of the subject as it writes.

When we refer to etymologies, which are always salutary fictions, we are reaching into the rubbish bin of history, kicking up the dust, and drawing out a sheaf of soiled pages covered with writings of faded letters that we compose as legible for our own purposes. As the OED has it, the scratch "begins" in:

1474, probably a fusion of M.E. *scratten* and *crachen*, both meaning "to scratch," both of uncertain origin. The noun is attested from 1586; slang sense of "money" is from 1914, of uncertain signification. Many figurative senses (e.g. *up to scratch*) are from sporting use for "line or mark drawn as a starting place," attested from 1778 (but the earliest use is figurative); meaning "nothing" (in *from scratch*) is 1922, also from sporting sense of "starting point of a competitor who receives no odds in a handicap match." Billiards sense of "to hit the cue ball into a pocket" is first recorded 1909 (also, originally, *itch*), though earlier it meant "a lucky shot" (1850). Verb meaning "to withdraw (a horse) from a race" is 1865, from notion of scratching name off list of competitors; used in a non-sporting sense of "cancel a plan, etc." from 1685.⁵

Like the history of language scratch wanders, traversing the domains of finance and sport, indicating something like "nothing": she's a

scratch golfer, without handicap. This movement from domain to domain indicates that scratch functions like metaphor, and, as Michel de Certeau has reminded us:

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or to come home, one takes a “metaphor” – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.⁶

The scratch makes its way around the city and the countryside, into the folds and surfaces of every screen and every skin. The scratch spreads, travels. Who knows where it will end up?

This attempt to determine the indeterminate makes us want to scratch out our eyes and tear out our hair. There is an immeasurable uncertainty at work here – one that will never be able to be brought into the stable and symmetrical light of the putative neutral objectivity of knowledge – and one crossroads after another is traced as we track down the traces of our own offal. What happens when shit, in any of its forms, becomes that which determines the path of a trace? What is determinable by shit? “[W]hat happens when excrement becomes breath,” Jacques Derrida asks, “when in a word it expresses itself thus, shit, throwing itself against the subjectile without describing anything else, without representing anything more than itself?”⁷ We’ll have to sift through the midden, that rag-and-bone shop of the kitchen, the privy, the *domus*, the *polis*, and the planet, and the subjectile.

Language, this silent shitstorm of babbling spirits, plays with us as if we were being jerked around like marionettes. In “God and the Puppet” – and there are dancing bears close at hand whenever the two appear together – Jean-François Lyotard muses over the meaning of writing, the scratch, and music:

That is what writing – including musical writing – is looking for: what is not inscribed. I’d like to falsify the value of the prefix “e” to hear in *écriture* something like a “scratching” – the old meaning of the root *scri-* *outside of*, outside any support, any apparatus of resonance and reiteration, any concept and any pre-inscribed from. But first of all

outside any support. The matter I'm talking about, the nuance (color, timbre) would have to be imagined — but this is already much too heavy — as though it were at one and the same time the event and what it happens to. There would not first be a surface (the whole tradition, heritage, memory) and then this stroke coming to mark it. This mark, if this is the case, will only remark. And I know that this is how things always are, for the mind which ties times to each other and to itself, making itself the support of every inscription. No, it would rather be the flame, the enigma of flame itself. It indicates its support in destroying it. It belies its form. It escapes its resemblance with itself.⁸

Tradition, heritage, memory, music, and the flame (which reminds us of the scratch of the lightning bolt). Human beings are a choreography of an outside-in and an inside-out, dynamic Möbius strips that are scored, seared. The scratch is a tattoo of finitude that, as it binds world and subject, founds and dissipates identity.

The scratch also marks a jagged line of randomness *through and across* all programs, simultaneously outlining and red-lining the form of the program-as-program, that which can be calculated for profit, moral reward, or the predictability of the event determined by a chain of causality. A causes B. One force creates an equal and opposite re-force. But there is also a zigzag: a scribble in the sky or on a support like paper, textiles, or a body. This scribble doesn't simply mark by its appearance on an already established surface — tradition, memory, consciousness. It makes paper and the body writeable; it makes sound open to the musical; it makes the event, as determined, possible. Outside any apparatus of support except that given by the spatial folds of temporality, the temporal lines of flight that accompany the production of space, not as a neutral container but as torque, touch, the working over of social relations.

This lack of support from a stable foundation, the groundlessness of existence that somehow gives rise to determinate forms, is a recurring motif for contemporary thought. Giorgio Agamben, for example, reminds us that:

Benveniste has shown how human temporality is generated through the self-presence and presence to the world that the act of enunciation makes possible, how human beings in general have no way to experience the "now" other than by constituting it through the insertion of discourse into the world in saying "I" and "now." ... But this unsteady foundation reaffirms itself — and sinks away once again — every time we put language into action, in the most frivolous chatter as in speech given once and for all to oneself and to others.⁹

“Subjectivity” and “consciousness,” synonyms for the *cogito* that founds the phantasm of modern self-certainty, is not a foundational apparatus for epistemology, but a visible-audible evanescence formed by the enunciating event of languaging. Agamben, reading Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge with its fracture between enunciation and the enunciated, the saying and the said, continues:

“I” is neither a notion nor a substance, and enunciation concerns not what is said in discourse but the pure fact that it is said, the event of language as such, which is by definition ephemeral. Like the philosopher’s concept of Being, enunciation is what is most unique and concrete, since it refers to the absolutely singular and unrepeatable event of discourse in act; but at the same time, it is what is most vacuous and generic, since it is always repeated without its ever being possible to assign it any lexical reality.¹⁰

This, too, is the scratch: unique, concrete, singular, unrepeatable, vacuous, generic, and always repeatable only with a difference. (Dis)establishing (non)logic. Being is event; event is ephemerality itself. And yet it appears in a sentence that can be repeated.

The scratch tears us apart, irritates us without end, strikes us with power, shapes us inside and out. This “we” is the striated and layered space where the point scratches the surface and the surface offers itself to that which scratches. It is punctured and not-punctured, scraped and not-scraped, something like Freud’s children’s game, that old *Wunderbloc*. The stylus of history styles us as singularities of experience, but the surface that we “are” offers all of us to the same writing procedure, the same scratch being notated when the notation is the play of possibility and freedom itself. And the scratch always, from the beginning, signs our gravestones.

Whenever there is a scratch, there is surface that is scratched. The scratch-surface is an inseparable event. This, in turn – which is not a phrase of temporal succession, but of incessant movement – engages the *jetée*, the “-ject” of project, subject, abject, disject, eject. This surface and this bombardment of the thrown is what Derrida, reading in the wake of stubbed pencils and cigarette burns, presents as the “subjectile,” a word of Artaud’s, which

appears untranslatable ... [and] will never be transported into another language. Unless it is taken over bodily and intact, like a foreign substance. So we shall be able to conclude: (1) What exceeds translation really belongs to language. (2) What so drastically exceeds linguistic transfer remains on the contrary foreign to language as an element of discourse. (3) The word "subjectile" is itself a subjectile This spatial work would be first of all a corporeal struggle with the question of language – and at the limit, music.¹¹

How do we begin to "translate" garbage, the scratch, noise? At what limit does music appear to be heard? Why does music inevitably sound when we attempt to think the inscription of the scratch? Perhaps because of a certain rhythm in the event.

To take but one example: the Fluxus Event. As Hannah Higgins explains, the Event originated

both practically and conceptually, in John Cage's 1958–59 music composition class at the New School. The Event must therefore be understood as relating somehow to Cage's musical idiom, wherein time (rhythm in a broad sense) is the determining standard for musicality. Cage accepted whatever sounds occurred within a specific period of time. Those sounds determined the music – but not in the prosaic sense. Attentiveness and concentration (the listeners' intentionality) are required, or the sound is mere noise.¹²

Music = temporal frame + sound + intentionality. Or else it becomes "mere" noise.

Derrida, who has more than one thing to say about "intentionality," continues his rigorous reading of Artaud. "We will never grasp the drama of the subjectile," he reminds us, "without grasping this strategy of the projectile. If pictography is heard both *as* music and *as if it were* music, it is first of all through a certain force of penetration. Just as sound penetrates the ear and the mind, just so the pictographic act strikes and bombards, perforates, pierces and forces, digs in and traverses."¹³ The subjectile is both the surface that supports mark-ups – the paper through which the pencil stubs, the cigarette burns, the body which is tattooed or scarred – and the penetrations of the surface via shreadings, piercings, scratchings. But what if, as in deafness, the sound does *not* penetrate the ear? What, then, of music? There is still the scratch of felt vibrations.

All of this is, from one angle of listening, only a series of the most mundane philosophical clichés, a child practicing sounds in its crib while playing with a rattle, the dull repetition of scales, a repetition of what we've read inscribed by an automaton that may or may not be alive. This stupidity of the automaton is, however, nothing to be ashamed of, this lack of the genuine, the originary, the inventive, "when one speaks merely in order to speak, one gives voice to the most splendid, original truths" and we mark, via saying, an event-structure. We chat; we gossip; we repeat like a puppet.¹⁴ We scribble; we scratch –

Score 2

Scratch yourself, anywhere. On the head, under your arm, between your legs.

Scratch your neighbor, lightly.

3 · Scoring the Scratch _____

We have begun to rummage around in the theater of garbage and to consider the implications of the scratch. Part art project and part scholarship, we are developing a series of scores – drawing from the Surrealist games, Fluxus event scores, the Anna and Lawrence Halprin RSVP cycles, the notational systems of Rudolf Laban, musical scores, and digital systems of scoring – in order to shape a research method for encountering garbage, its many guises and potential for transposition into new forms. As a result, we set in motion a re/cycling of change that revises our relationships to the discarded, the worn out, the useless.

There is, of course, a long history of artistic exploration – from Lichtenberg’s *Waste Books* through the early German Romantics, the Dadaists, Surrealists, and so on – as to how the discarded can be reframed and thereby made to speak again in a different tone than its “original” voice. Walter Benjamin addresses the ways that garbage, the detritus of culture, appears as a blast from the past, while new media theorists speak of the “remediation” or “remix” of older media. Time’s ecstasies, tensing and extending, offer events as a visible scratch that marks timing-spacing.

Score 3

R: Take a walk and gather random pieces of trash that catch your attention.

S: Arrange the material so that it asks a question about the environment.

V: Evaluate the question in the garbage. What are other ways to arrange the same items so that it again asks that question, differently?

P: Rearrange so that the construction also begins to answer the question.

We think, sometimes, that an event is something distinct from the simplicity of time timing and space spacing, for all timing and spacing is determinate: something, *in particular*, is always going on. If there is any such thing as an event, then it is always in the here and now – though let’s not rush to pretend to understand those words – with its framings, its inscriptions and tattoos, its bounding determinations, and with what we might as well call – if only provisionally, out of habit and a continuing curiosity – a subject of consciousness which always has an object of intentionality.

Timing, spacing, subject, object: is that the event? What is the relationship between the process and “an event”? The event *is* particularizing and this has nothing to do with a logical movement away from the generalizable or from universality to the particular. We are attempting to say things in a way that does not depend on such categories that have governed thought since Aristotle, and, more particularly, since Kant. One way to approach the question of what *an* event is to assert that an event has a beginning and an end. It starts at x and is finished at y. The sequence of the alphabet or of the number line of the clock gives us the boundaries of an event. A talk or a movie starts at 7.30 post-meridian – there is the spatializing – and ends at 9.30. A performance runs from 3–5 p.m. or for three days running. A woman is born in 1932 and dies in 2008.

The event of her life opens, runs its course, and is then permanently wrapped up. Scratch her off the list of the living.

There is no more here-and-now for her; no longer can an event, any event, occur for her. All of these statements are true enough, but tell us next to nothing about the nature of an event. They do show that we can number the timing-spacing and thereby construct *an* event, but this is clearly the arbitrariness of the sign at work in a fundamental manner. This sort of sorting, of differentiating into a particular narrative, is artificial through and through, depending on the histories of calendars, popes, clocks, Arabic numerals, the privatization and commodification of time, political domination of one region over another, the railroad schedules, the technology of writing and motors, and uncountable other variables. And yet this is something we should take note of, for this marking of timing-spacing as a narrative, as a complex network of signifiers that tell an infinite network of stories, is one of the great works of art that we undertake as a species and as individuals. The artful is the space in which humans have our being.

We *historicize* ourselves by a saying that, by necessity, differentiates the spaced timing, the rhythm, of the event. We *say* time and space, its particularizing events, as an essential aspect of life. Origins and ends: *telos*. The race is run and day is done. When, however, does the morning begin and end? When the night? Are morning and night events? Something like blurring and blending occurs, something about a different form of boundary than the boundary line. Anytime we create a structure of any sort we create a space-time for *an* event, a boundedness of experience. And anytime we create *an* event, we have a structure. Artificially designated beginning, differentiation extended in duration and extension, and artificially designated ending.

The event-structure is the forward movement that crests, bringing with it the past. Let's re-name the event-structure, and, taking a place in a confluence of traditions, call it, for the time being, a *score*. Events are marked. The score is a scratch, a visible mark upon events, that structures a particular event, but scratching can also defibrillate the score, cause it to come to pieces. Scratch the needle across the old LP, for example, or listen to the scratching of the DJ in the club. Something rips across the fine-lined circles of vinyl and scars the lyrics, the beat. Something tears the rhythm, slides across the singing of the song. Something, then, about materiality, as well as the where and the when. The scoring of the event is

a timing–spacing of a determinate materiality that breaks itself open to enable the next event to appear.

One way, then, to articulate the task of scoring is to understand it as a form of experimenting with the materiality of thinking. A stubbed pencil bearing down hard on paper; a cigarette scorching the skin. Scribbling late at night, alone, when neither logic nor dialectic arrives to console us. There is only static. Philosophy, at that hour, is a joke. A match flares and is flicked aside. Ashes. Scratch, in the end, might not mean a thing, but perhaps if it has a certain swing it indicates something like a non–sensical condition of sense. The ragged surface; sound that disrupts sound; something devilish in all motion and rhythm: the non–foundational support of the scarred, the scratched.

• Notes •

¹ Antonin Artaud, “Ten Years Ago Language Left...” quoted in Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 113.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed August 10, 2013, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

³ “Old Scratch,” *Monstropedia*, last modified February 11, 2009, http://monstropedia.org/index.php?title=Old_Scratch.

⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 227.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶ Michel De Certeau, “Spatial Stories,” in *What is Architecture?* ed. Andrew Ballantyne (New York: Routledge, 2002), 72.

⁷ Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 118.

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 158.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹ Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 65.

¹² Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51.

¹³ Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 85.

¹⁴ Novalis, “Soliloquy,” in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writing*, ed. and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 145.

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the problem of medial specificity in music and sound art, giving particular attention to Seth Kim-Cohen’s call for a non-cochlear sound art based on the notion of “expansion” that has been decisive in visual arts discourses. I argue that Kim-Cohen’s non-cochlear intervention in *In the Blink of an Ear* might be productively pressured towards the concept of a “sonic effect” that acknowledges the material-discursive particularity of sound without recourse to the phenomenological claims of authenticity that Kim-Cohen correctly abhors. In service of this argument, the essay extensively discusses a sound and media artwork – *Exurbia*, created by myself and William Brent – that leverages the metaphors of sound against existing understandings of specific forms of network communication. I argue that the conceptual and material dimensions of the project stridulate in a hum of recursive vectors for considering the constitution and consequences of networked aural interaction. *Exurbia* can thus be parsed in terms of medial specificity precisely because its digital aural materials are themselves discursive.

KEYWORDS

sound studies, media studies, sound art, music, deconstruction, networks

The Sonic Effect: Aurality and Digital Networks in *Exurbia*

David Cecchetto

$$\frac{x}{2} = \frac{x}{200}$$

At first glance, this equation may seem incorrect.¹ After all, how can a number divided by two be equivalent to the same number divided by 200? Of course, not only is the statement not impossible, but it is actually possible to solve for x almost instantaneously, without the machinations of calculation or any contextual information: the only possible solution is $x = 0$.

Notably, zero is an utterly abstract number (sic), in the sense that it does not make even secondary reference to a concrete material base. Thus, while the number two (for example) also doesn't refer to anything we can apprehend with our senses, it is at least apparent how the number's abstraction is theoretically tied to the empirical world; we can't imagine "the two itself," but we can imagine two apples, two cars, two options, etc. such that we can functionally connect the items in the list through their "two-ness." This is not the case for zero, which is utterly foreign to our physical, positivist reality.

The point is, if the variable x doesn't indicate anything that at least subtends a concrete system of logic (wherein x may be abstract, but it is an abstraction of some physical thing that we can at least feign grasping) the details of the surrounding material are precluded from any impact: two might as well be equivalent to 200. In order to maintain their specificity the details depend on the status of the variable because it is the variable x that is invariant in the equation. If x is not understood as being, *a priori*, a positive substantial element then we are unable to logically deduce a difference between two and 200.

If, on the other hand, we reach beyond the equation itself to limit x to being a non-zero number then we have the inverse problem, namely that $\frac{x}{y} = \frac{x}{z}$ only if $y = z$.² The problem here is that if y and z are the same, then the equation is really just $\frac{x}{y} = \frac{x}{y}$, which is nothing more than a tautology. Taken together, then, these equations suggest that without the possibility of unlimited abstraction, the limited abstraction — the ability to reach beyond its grasp — that any logical relation depends on becomes tied to its own particular circumstance and thereby loses its prescriptive power. While we can take note of tautologies, we cannot reason from them; that is, a tautology by definition tells us nothing about the system or circumstances that produce it.

Taken together, we can generalize the problem that this equation points to as a problem of medial specificity in the arts. That is, attempting to make a claim about a medium x requires one to either abstract that medium from direct experience (as in the first reading of our exemplary equation) or to impose an otherwise arbitrary constraint on what "counts" as the medium, which can only lead to confirmation of the constraint's applicability in a given instance rather than to a statement about the medium itself (i.e. if it is true, it will be tautological). Simply put, an aesthetic medium such as imagery, sound, paint, stone, etc. must always

point beyond itself in order to articulate itself as an integral system, as something about which one can make a claim of authenticity. It is both necessary and impossible to insist on medial specificity.

This problem is familiar to visual arts scholars, particularly through the notion of “expansion” elaborated by Gene Youngblood in the context of cinema and Rosalind Krauss with respect to sculpture.³ Related to *différance* as it is outlined in Derridean grammatology, “expansion” is a means of recognizing the porousness of an artwork’s boundaries; the implicit verb in any frame (i.e. a frame is a framing, as Mieke Bal would have it); and the entanglement of artworks, culture, and discourse. As Clement Greenberg puts it, the work of a work is not wholly reducible to the boundaries of the work itself, and neither are those boundaries themselves uncontested or fixed.

While this line of thinking is old hat in the various discourses that make up the visual arts, it remains only peripheral to the dominant discourses of music and sound art. With respect to the institutionalized form of music that is problematically captured by the term “Western art music” (WAM), this is perhaps not surprising. There is, first of all, a foundational social conservatism in such music drawn from its colonial and sacred histories. More relevant to this conversation, though, is the medial purity that music is endowed with through its constitution as music: Walter Pater’s (in)famous and oft-repeated claim that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music” perfectly encapsulates the fiction of music as an abstraction in the first sense of our equation, relating to nothing but itself.⁴ That is, Pater’s claim posits music as the purest of the arts precisely because its “artness” makes reference only to itself; music is positioned as a-semiotic. Seth Kim-Cohen points out that this perception is discursively reinforced by the fact that “only music includes, as part of its discursive vocabulary, a term for the foreign matter threatening always to infect it: ‘the extramusical’.”⁵

Of course, not even a musician (especially not a musician!) would claim that WAM is entirely cut off from the world, and indeed even according to the most idealistic understanding, the musical project would necessarily include some means for music to affect beyond itself. The point, though, is that this affect is not always considered part of music “proper” or “the music itself,” but rather what music does.⁶ What is indicated, then, is an insulation that is constructed via the rhetoric of music.⁷ Thus, it isn’t the case that WAM – to the extent that it results from this genealogy – misapprehends itself as a kind of fixed, extra-

discursive object, lacking a sense of its own contingency (as such a reading would miss the crucial aspiration of Pater's claim), but rather that WAM aligns with the way that the modernist (visual) art project is often characterized, which is to say as evading "'objecthood' ... by being the active (or enacted) site of internal relations" instead of including the external world within its purview.⁸

What makes this a problem for WAM — and indeed for WAM in general rather than just for specific musical works — is that the transubstantiation of sound into music takes place precisely via the activation or summoning of this rhetoric. The problem thus takes the tautological form of our opening equation: the rhetoric of music — which consists in the fiction that sound is "shaped" into a succession of sounds that can be situated on a continuum of musical meaning — is not conceived as supplementing a material base that is already musical, but instead is the very music that it promotes. Put differently, something is musical to the extent that it participates in a rhetoric of music — i.e. in the form of meaning that is particular to music — but this rhetoric, precisely because it is particular to music, only comes to be from something being musical. In this view, "music" comes about only when sounds are made musically meaningful. In this sense, music is always-already simulated music, making reference only to itself.

The point I am working towards is that one cannot address problems of music and discourse by simply expanding music's semantic field. In the language of second-order systems theory, music can catalyze and be catalyzed by extramusical factors, but it cannot cause them; that is, music can activate (and be activated by) social, cultural, and political valences, but to the extent that these factors operate *via* logics that exceed those of music — and *vice versa* — a systematic distinction remains operative.⁹ To characterize the rhetorical (e.g. notated) details of a piece of music (as opposed to the practices and institutions that collect around them) as meaningful is a project that is both necessary (to sustain the implicit value that it is necessary to invest in music) and doomed to fail in advance (because musical details are constituted tautologically, in and through their disconnection from the extramusical world). As I will return to shortly, music's medial specificity will always risk confirming (without necessarily confirming) its a-political valence, which is as sure a sign as any of a subsumption of agencies into a pre-existent politics that is indifferent to local details. That is, like any rhetoric that appears to possess closed borders of signification (i.e. to be constitutively insulated) the genealogy of music that flows through Pater has in fact simply

naturalized the porousness of its boundaries. To the extent that (as Kim-Cohen writes, paraphrasing Derrida) “there is no extra-music” it necessarily follows that there is also no music proper.¹⁰

The decisive example here is the work of John Cage, which would seem to deploy the very expanded field that, I am arguing, music cannot avow. That is, Cage’s extensive use of aleatoricism and his positivistic technologisation of silence are each in service of an understanding that would move music off the page and beyond the purview of an intentional composerly rhetoric. Quite simply, Cage’s intervention expands the musical palette to include sounds that are “physically uniquely themselves” independent of their notation, completely liberated from “abstract ideas about them.”¹¹

However, while such gestures broaden the rhetorical palette available to musicians and constitute an important musical politics in themselves, they do not impact its purview. That is, the expansive inclusivity of such practice is accomplished via a colonizing process that in no way addresses the discursive insularity that prevents music from avowing its contingency. This is the case because an enormously problematic assumption lies at the heart of Cage’s project, namely that sound signifies itself. Thus, as eldritch Priest argues,

Cage’s effort to open musical experience to a wider materiality ... could only be made effective through a rhetorical manoeuvre that ciphered the semiotic remainders of sound first through the measure of duration and then through the supposed paradoxical intentionality of silence. ... Any sound was musical so long as it was intentionally heard as music and *unheard* in its worldliness. That is, sounds are musical to the extent that their being-heard articulates the intentions that constitute the traditional horizon of listening musically while at the same time seeming to disarticulate those intentions that tradition places on the composer.¹²

Douglas Kahn argues a similar point, noting that “under the guise of a new aurality, an opening up to the sounds of the world, Cage built a musical bulwark against auditive culture, one founded on a musical identification with nature itself.”¹³ Kahn argues convincingly that this was accomplished precisely through the techniques that Cage shared with visual arts discourses of expansion: Cage extended the process of musical incorporation to include all audible, potentially audible, and mythically audible sounds, until “there existed no more sounds to incorporate into music, and [he had] formalized the performance of music to where it could be dependent on listening alone.”¹⁴

In short, the medial specificity of sound mobilized in and as the rhetoric of music acts as our variable x , so that additional elements (y and z) that are brought into relation with its redoubled abstraction do so only to the extent that they give up what is elemental to them. In practice, then, music can never be medially specific, since its specificity exists only prior to any particular instantiation of it. Or, by the same logic, music can *only* be medially specific, which amounts to the same thing: if music is only music in the sense (*pace* Cage) that music is only what we hear when we decide that what we're listening to is music, then it's not only the case that particular instances of music can't be medially specific (since even Cageian music would have to be defined according and in relation to something that is not music, i.e. a listener), but also that music must be medially specific if it is to be conceptualized and conceptually expanded (i.e. if even Cage is to speak of it as a limited concept that requires expansion). In the language of contemporary media studies, music thus presents itself as an origin (i.e. a creation myth) rather than a history.

As with our opening equation, the problem that music poses requires either an arbitrarily prescribed limit to the problem or an acceptance of a certain tautology. As may be seen in the blossoming of subject matter that has obtained in musicology since at least the 1980s, sustaining this problem *as a problem* requires at once a means of registering a given musical practice in its particularity – some of which is medial – *and* continually resisting the lure of abstracting from this medial particularity.



To speak of the medial specificity of music, then, is as fraught as speaking of the "truth" of painting, sculpture, photography, etc.. A fascinating distinction – or perhaps difference of emphasis – develops in the case of music, though. In the visual arts, the constitutive entanglement of works with that which exceeds them has been largely addressed through a turn towards conceptualism (in the broad sense) that explicitly engages the paradoxical way in which the discursive valences that subtend works also constitute them.¹⁵ Music, on the other hand, has dealt with its excesses through sound art, which "as a discrete practice, is ... the remainder created by music closing off its borders to the extramusical," the *parole*

that cannot be “comfortably expressed in the *langue* of the Western notational system.”¹⁶ Again, though, this is not the result of different decisions by different actors within the respective discourses: because music is defined exclusively through its internal workings — because music is always in an important sense “pure music,” even though it never is — there is no other option available.

The problem is not so easily solved, though, even from the perspective of sound art. Returning to Cage, Kahn decisively notes the bracketing out of discourse in the apocryphal myth of the anechoic chamber that animates so much of his reception: in addition to the two sounds Cage hears — allegedly that of his nervous system and of his blood circulating, though this has been contested — Kahn notes a third, namely the one asking what the two sounds he is hearing are. This is a crucial insight because “such quasi-sounds were, of course, antithetical to Cagean listening by being in competition with *sounds in themselves*, yet here he was able to listen and at the same time allow discursiveness to intrude in the experience.”¹⁷ Indeed, one could go a step further to insist that insofar as hearing and listening can be distinguished along the lines of concentration, to listen is to listen discursively. Moreover — and in order to preclude counter-arguments constructed around notions like “meditative” or “deep” listening — we should note that this also means that to *have listened* is to listen discursively. Language is the technology through which experience is registered as such, and this registration reveals both language and experience as always-already simultaneously present and absent in their relation.¹⁸

Emphatically, the soft claim that listening and discourse are always-already entangled yields the hard (Derridean) claim against what Kim-Cohen calls the “essentialist reading of the two great bestowals of Cage and [Pierre] Schaeffer — silence-as-sound and sound-in-itself.”¹⁹ That is, Kim-Cohen criticizes a number of sound art practices that leverage translation into and out of the medium of sound for being “based on faith in a fundamental stratum of experience, on some essential ontological state, a metaphysics.”²⁰ Thus, for example, he criticizes Rainer Maria Rilke’s fantasy of playing the groove of a coronal suture with a phonographic stylus in order to articulate its “primal sound” for its implication that “there is a completeness in nature and that our sense of incomplete experience ... is a product of our inadequate perceptual faculties.”²¹ As Kim-Cohen notes, this perspective — which aligns with the broader neo-Romantic sensibility that is made explicit in Rilke’s poetry, but remains implicit in numerous sound art practices that feature similar

translations — is predicated on a belief in the type of foundational metaphysics that Derridean grammatology so thoroughly deconstructs.

Notably, Kim-Cohen's reading of Rilke is motivated directly against that of Friedrich Kittler, from whom the example is drawn in service of an argument that "sense perceptions are revealed as nothing more than neutral data flows."²² While an extensive engagement with Kittler is beyond the scope of this paper, I will note that the connection that Kim-Cohen draws between sound art and Kittler's "interest in authorless media streams" anticipates the way in which I discuss *Exurbia* in the final section of this paper.²³ Kim-Cohen's assertion that "contextless data is gobbledygook" aligns with *Exurbia's* investigation of sound and networks, where the latter explicitly engages with how the relation of the two informs both and helps us to resist totalizing them under the respective signs of their nomination (i.e. "the network" and "the sound itself").²⁴

An implicit question is posed by Kim-Cohen's call for greater acknowledgement of the discursive vectors that are active in sound art practices, and that make authentic self-presence impossible. Simply put: if sound art loses recourse to any kind of sonic authenticity — i.e. to an extra-discursive, categorical, *a priori* difference between sound and other sensorial experiences such as vision — and is entirely captured in discourse in the same way that the gallery arts are, what distinctions remain? Can sonic practices be distinguished from visual ones? Should they be? And of what would such a distinction be in service?

While *In the Blink of an Ear* offers an important intervention into the rapidly proliferating discussions of sound art, it is perhaps a shortcoming of the book that few examples are given that might address these questions. One example that is given, however, is compelling: consider the insightful reading that Kim-Cohen offers of Jarrod Fowler's *Kosuth to Fowler* (2006), a piece that works with Joseph Kosuth's *Text/Context* (1979) as its source material. As Kim-Cohen recounts, the original (Kosuth) work consists of "two adjacent outdoor public billboards [that] display related texts referring to each other and to their respective methods of linguistic and visual communication."²⁵ In Fowler's treatment,

the text's visual indicators (such as "see" and "text/sign") are changed to corresponding acoustic ones (such as "hear" and "speech/recording") and are "then read by a speech synthesizer, with the left text on the left side of the stereo field, the right text on the right."²⁶ Kim-Cohen notes that "the simultaneous transmission of the two texts accomplishes something that would be impossible with Kosuth's original," namely the erasure of the "literal and essential" space between the two texts.²⁷

The provenance of this productive difference is underemphasized by Kim-Cohen, though, which is perhaps a symptom of the book's avowed movement towards a non-cochlear sound art and presumably away from the medial specificity of sound. That is, while it is impossible to insist on something like "the sound itself," it nonetheless remains the case that certain characteristics flow more readily from certain materials; there are material differences, after all, between sound and vision, and it behooves us to be careful not to collapse these distinctions under the sign of discourse as though the latter meant something fixed and concrete. We can note, then, that there is a danger in Kim-Cohen's reading of *Kosuth to Fowler* of implicitly prioritizing the similarity of the *text* that the piece shares with its source material over the different media that distribute it (indeed, such a prioritization is even present in this sentence, which frames the text as the content of the two media). This raises the question: how would one work through an analogous reading if we did not have the alibi of "shared material" created by the a-medial legibility of text, an alibi that is dangerously proximate to the notion that material can be passed between media without being changed? Simply put, if we treated the text exclusively as information (which it undoubtedly is, though not entirely) one could (mis)construct Kim-Cohen's reading of this piece as assuming precisely the type of metaphysical underpinning that he criticizes in Rilke and Kittler.

This is a subtle point, and in no way opposes Kim-Cohen's reading; in fact, he points in this direction by highlighting the fact that Fowler engages the Kosuth piece not only by appropriating its literal content—which would be the informational quality of the text, as opposed to what we might call its signifying capacity—but also by intervening in the conceptual field that the work constructs.²⁸ What I am pointing to, though, is something that is often stressed by systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann: whereas deconstruction emphasizes the final undecidability of any signifying instance, systems nonetheless decide.²⁹

What this points to, then, is a dimension of deconstruction that is regularly neglected but which is integral to it: its performativity. That is, the Derridean claim is not so much that all experiences partake of language's instability and ambiguity, but more that our knowledge of them does (and that they come to be for us only through becoming objects of knowledge). As a result, the inverse is also true: Derridean claims about language are predicated precisely on language's *not* being understood as a system that is closed off from the world, but rather as one that constructs a "border" through which that which it excludes is always-already seeping. That is, extrapolating a process into an observational register (or a predictive or categorical one, for that matter) in order to delve into its meaning is not a neutral endeavor: understanding a process as a process, rather than as a random or even stochastic set of events, necessarily presumes a frame of reference that is privileged linguistically. The paradoxical (linguistic) logic of grammatology is performative in the precise sense that every constative claim enacts something supplementary to itself.

This performative dimension of deconstruction is crucial as it marks the vector of material specificity — even as that specificity remains under threat of erasure — through which we can insist on the specific implications of aural experience without validating the authenticity of that experience, provided we keep in mind that the economy of such experiences is linguistic. In this light, claiming that sound's "phenomenal characteristics — the fact that it is invisible, intangible, ephemeral, and vibrational — coordinate with the physiology of the ears to create a perceptual experience profoundly different from the dominant sense of sight" does not undermine Kim-Cohen's non-cochlear orientation, but rather redoubles it: it takes the materiality of discourse seriously enough to insist not only that all experience is discursive, but also that the paradoxical quality of this discursiveness *necessarily* produces "extra-discursive" experiences as part and parcel of its movements.³⁰ That is, experience is neither reduced nor constructed by language, but intensified as experience even and especially as such experience is under erasure.

Returning to the question of the material specificity of sound, we might speak instead of a “sonic effect,” a term through which we can emphasize a contingent operational frame.³¹ In this understanding, “sonic materiality operates as ‘micro-epistemologies,’ with the echo, the vibration, the rhythmic, for instance, opening up specific ways of knowing the world,”³² so that we might provisionally side-step ontological questions about sound without sacrificing our engagement with its unique material capacities. That is, an operational emphasis invokes a systems perspective that articulates the double-bind of the opening equation as a necessary element – a necessary impossibility, if you will – of the ongoing and ever-changing articulation of a sound/non-sound difference. By framing the problem in this manner we can eschew any definition of sound but nonetheless maintain the validity of questions pertaining to the unique intensities that aurality caresses. In this way, we can at least postpone throwing the baby out with the bathwater by directly equating sound art with the other gallery arts: even if language equally conditions what is thinkable across media, the *effect* of a perceived heightened abstraction in sound is no less real. Instead, the task becomes one of describing these “extra-discursive” effects in their discursivity, which is to say in such a way that they can couple with other metaphors. Such a task is not undertaken in the interest of reducing them to conceptual practices that are already familiar to us, but rather in the interest of catalyzing new forms of nonsense, new vectors of discursive recursion. In short, thinking through sonic effects is an attempt to avow the performative dimension of sound, which is always context-specific.

This is the context in which I’d like to discuss *Exurbia*, which explicitly pressures sonic effects as they obtain in the context of contemporary digital networked communities. What I will show in my analysis of the piece is a way of activating sound’s (contingent) medial specificity, of putting it into play in order to learn something about both networks and aurality that we might not have known without their coupling. If these lessons remain contingent on the local instances of the metaphoric networks that they mobilize (i.e. “sound” and “digital networks”), they will be all the more potent for it. In *Exurbia*, then, the bind of $\frac{x}{y} = \frac{x}{z}$ is not resolved, but rather explicitly sustained.

Put simply, *Exurbia* is a digital sound-editing program that has four distinct features:

- the interface is time-intensive, being predominantly aural and executed in real time;
- editing is destructive (i.e. there is no “undo” feature);
- all of the source materials (i.e. the sound samples) are shared among all users, but are used to produce discrete pieces;
- each edit on a single user’s computer impacts every instance of a single file throughout the *Exurbia* community (i.e. the materials are dislocated).

Taken together, these features introduce a reflexive component to the otherwise practically oriented environment that to my mind situates it as a creative work in its own right, i.e. rather than as a software tool. That is, *Exurbia* is an environment that is oriented towards composing works, but it is equally directed towards an engagement with the process itself of composition as it obtains in an aurally intensive networked digital environment.

In essence, the piece works as follows: participants navigate to a [website](#) where they can download the program, upload short sound samples to a communal pool, and/or listen to other users’ contributions (both samples and pieces that have been composed using the program).³³ After downloading, users open the program and authorize it to synchronize with the current batch of sound samples that are on the server, a process that can take up to five minutes and is necessary each time the program is opened.

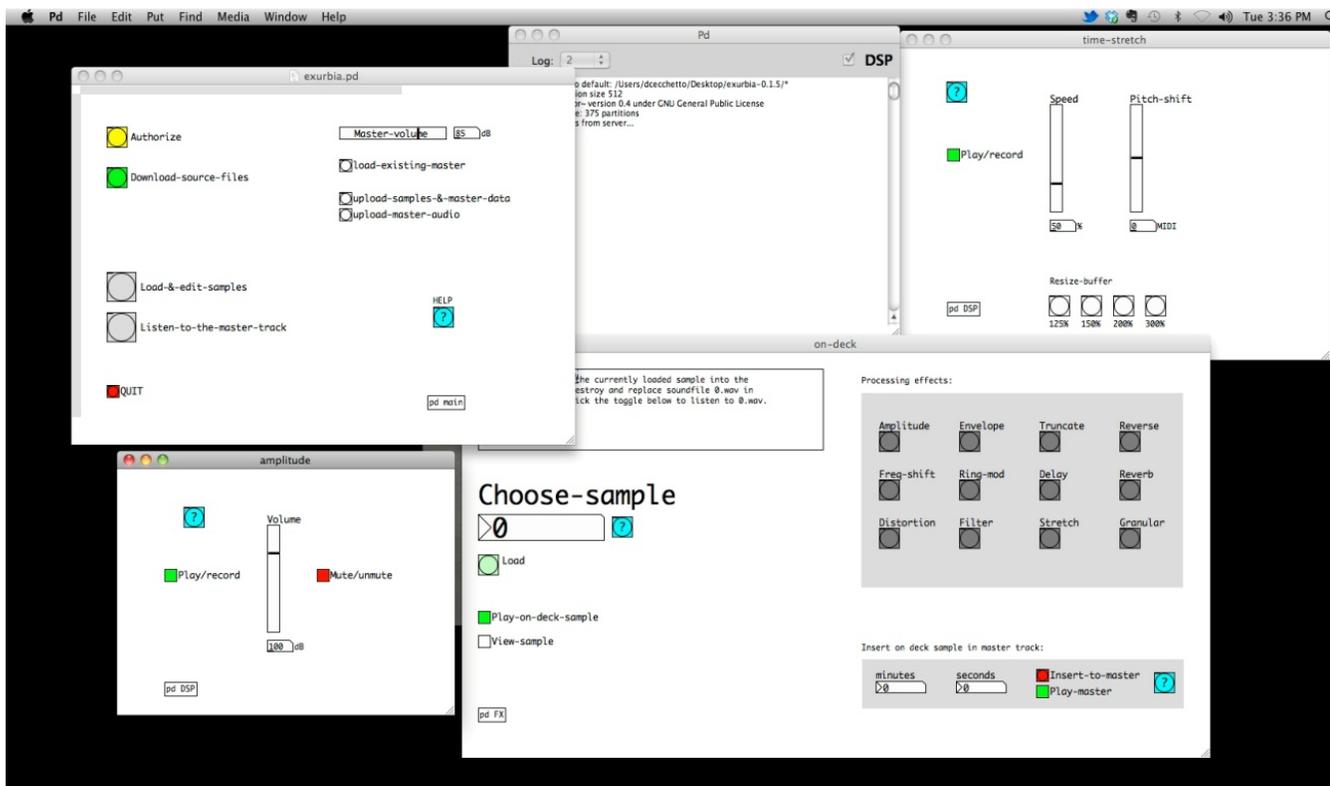


Figure 1. *Exurbia* screenshot featuring the following program windows (clockwise from top left): initialization, synchronization, and saving; system messaging; pitch- and time-shifting; sample insertion, and sample and edit selection; amplitude edit. Image by David Cecchetto.

Once the files are synchronized, participants can begin using the program, which is done by loading any individual sample file and applying any combination of twelve different parametric modifications to it (including multiple iterations of a single modification).³⁴ Importantly, and unlike in conventional editing programs, each time a modification is applied the entire sample is played, and the majority of the modifiers feature parameters that are controlled in real time using the mouse. Thus, for example, if a user wishes to increase the volume of a sample midway through it they must select the appropriate modifier and sample, play the sample, and ramp up the volume slider with the mouse at the appropriate time. Since there is no “undo” feature, if participants are not happy with the outcome they can only reverse the modification by attempting the same process, but attenuating the volume rather than increasing it.

When a user has finished editing a given sample, they insert it into a “master track” (which is completely unique to each user) by entering a start time in seconds into a number box; each time a sample is inserted, the entire master track is played. Notably – and, again, unlike in most digital

editing programs — there are no editing options beyond these insertions: samples cannot be removed or re-edited after insertion, and no global adjustments such as master volume boosts or attenuations are possible.

Crucially, inserting an edited sample replaces all instances of a sample in the collective source material with the one that has just been edited. This means that the changes apply equally to the piece that the local composer is working on and to the compositions of other users. This substitution, however, does not take place until the participant finishes their editing session and shuts down the program, so that it is entirely possible that a user might overwrite material in their own composition without realizing it until the next time they open the program.

The sample that is to be replaced is determined by the program in a predictable series, and is indicated by the time in which the sample to be edited was selected. As such, participants who do not want to alter every instance of a given sample have the option of gaming the system by “substituting” an inaudibly edited version of the same sample as that which is to be replaced.³⁵ This is a cumbersome process, but one that allows a degree of preservation from the consequences of one’s compositional actions in the environment.

Indeed, while it is not possible to insulate one’s composition from the activities of others, it is possible to (imperfectly) predict how editing activities will affect others’ compositions and to act accordingly. That is, participants always have the option of listening to the most recently saved version of others’ pieces (finished or in progress) from within the program environment, so that one can get a sense of how substantially one’s edits will impact other works. This is, again, cumbersome, as it can only be accomplished by listening to the works (i.e. there is no textual component that would tell a person what files are being used), which can only take place in real time. Compositions created in *Exurbia* are also audible [online](#) for non-users.³⁶



It is precisely these technical machinations that constitute *Exurbia*’s intervention into notions of “the sound itself” that are naturalized in digital

technologies. A central conceptual gambit of the computer is to persuade us to think of sound as data, which is to say as extra-discursive content composed of discrete, manipulable, exchangeable units. By working in real time *Exurbia* undermines the implicit fixity of this materiality, an undermining that is further emphasized through the program's collective siting of its "materials," as well as by the way that it conflates the process of creating with the creative outcomes. Consider again: any alteration of a sample requires a complete, real-time reiteration of the sample, and this reiteration by definition alters the broader context of the sample's articulation (by overwriting another sample that exists elsewhere) such that the outcome of the edit exceeds the desired change that precedes it both within the individual composition and the broader community. In short, *Exurbia* disrupts the injunction to categorize that is implicit in the quotidian notion of data by emphasizing the excesses and slippages that are constitutive of categories insofar as the latter are always reiterative.

Exurbia's mobilization of the sonic effect is in this sense a material-discursive intervention, one that amounts to a participatory experience of digital musical composition that is fundamentally different from the way that sound is typically treated in digital settings. If it is cumbersome then — and even in some senses a failed work as a result — these impediments to smooth usage are as much positive markers of the work's difference as they are negative indications of its failure to actualize.³⁷

At the center of *Exurbia's* conceptual gambit is an obvious downplaying of visual graphics and other forms of data visualization, most notably manifested through the absence of visible sound waves. In this, the work explicitly contrasts related editing programs (ProTools, Garage Band, Audacity, Logic, etc.), as these are all built around the waveform as the basic interface for manipulating sounds (Figure 2). In constructing objects that can be manipulated according to their own instantaneous logics of manipulation, such programs spatialize the temporal element of sound. Thus, for example, a waveform editor treats a stereo output in ways that are inconceivable in real-time acoustic settings, i.e. as a composition of independent sound files that can easily and almost instantaneously be recombined, disarticulated, stretched, reversed, compressed, moved, muted, "paused," etc., as though the piece is merely an object or an image on the screen.

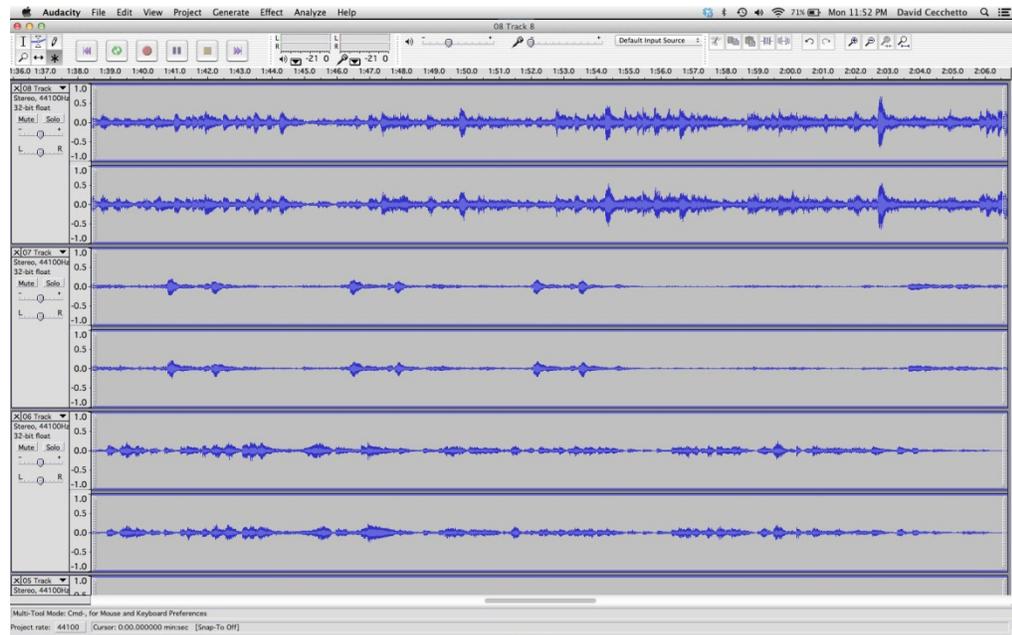


Figure 2. Screenshot of Audacity editing environment, a standard waveform editor. Image by David Cecchetto.

To be clear, this is not to say that waveform editing somehow robs sound of an essential quality, but rather points to the way that sound — which, again, is always-already mediated by discourse in any setting — is constructed in the context of the computer’s metamedial metaphors, which is to say by the computer’s invitation to think of media as interchangeable through the language of ones and zeros.³⁸ In this way, waveform editors invite a conception of sound that aligns with the dominant (visual) paradigm of the computer wherein the informational content of a message — in a definition of information famously inherited from Claude Shannon — is literally divorced from its content. Data — the *lingua franca* of the computer, and a synonym for information on the computer — is atemporal in the precise sense that it is constitutively context-less: data is that which can be moved from one setting to the next seemingly without being changed.

This atemporality of data is of course not an extra-discursive fact, but rather constitutes the fiction through which human-computer interaction is possible. Thus, we can more specifically say that human agency *vis à vis* the computer takes place at the fulcrum of its two realities: a computer is both an ongoing computational process (literally voltage flows, but also the programs that are constantly running) and a series of discrete states (i.e. the window and icon metaphors, but also the

translation of voltage flows into changes in voltage tracked through ones and zeros). To use a computer, then, is to map these two incommensurable realities into the impossible totality that we call a “computer,” a mapping that is achieved by spatializing temporal vectors.

It is not surprising, then, that digital sound is conventionally overdetermined by its visual components. For example, one can sensibly speak of “moving” samples around and, moreover, anyone who has taught such programs will likely have received student works constructed around the appearance of the waveforms (i.e. through visual symmetry, or the appearance of a narrative arc through the addition and subtraction of active tracks).³⁹ *Exurbia* contrasts this tendency not by eradicating visuality through a dark interface (which would, in any case, not eradicate visuality at all but merely expand its purview *à la* Cage’s positivization of silence), but instead by using visuality to instigate the types of temporal processes that are constitutive of sound in analogue settings. Users click, drag, and even type numbers in the *Exurbia* interface, but the effects of their actions — in the sample, the composition, and in the networked community — are only registered aurally.⁴⁰

One result of this temporalized interface is that individual opportunities to edit in *Exurbia* literally go by in an instant, since they take place in real time. Editing, then, becomes less a process of “cutting and pasting” and shifts instead towards “channeling and remixing,” metaphors that promote the constitutive entanglement of the edited sound and the act of listening/editing. Moreover, this phenomenon is heightened by the exclusive use of destructive editing, which again works to resist the reversibility of signs that visual editing programs assume, and that visuality in general institutes in its spatializing capacity.

Indeed, sound in general tends to be resistant to being represented as data in at least two ways.⁴¹ Firstly, it is differentially and temporally embodied in that, as Aden Evens points out, “to hear is to experience air pressure changing ... One does not hear air pressure, but one hears it change over time [such that] to hear a pitch that does not change is to hear as constant something that is nothing but change.”⁴² Put simply, this means that “to hear is to hear difference,” a quality that is not captured in the positivist framework of data, but that is activated in *Exurbia*’s editing procedures.⁴³ Indeed, when returning to the program one can only listen for other users’ interventions by listening for differences that are not verifiable.

A second way in which sound resists being expressed as data is through being relational, in the sense that it resists being placed; not in the sense of Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" but rather in that it is never quite where it purports to be. For example, in contrast to a beam of light panning across a screen, a recorded sound is spatialized via a relative difference in intensity between two polarized loudspeakers: if it is perceived to be 80% to the right, this speaks to the fact that the right loudspeaker is four times as intense as the left. The twist that makes sound relational rather than simply relative – and which extends this element even to mono sounds – is that the sound also isn't where it appears to be (i.e. coming from the loudspeaker[s]) since it only comes to be as a sound through the differential act of hearing discussed above, which is the very act that would place it where it isn't. That is, the sense that the sound is coming from the loudspeaker is created by the physical palpation by that sound of the listener's auditory system (usually and most prominently their ears, though never entirely); since this touching is only (paradoxically) made possible by a (systemic) separation between the "source" and its reception, it is not really sensible to speak of the sound as originating in the source.⁴⁴ In the case of *Exurbia*, then, this is emphasized through the impossibility of composing in isolation from other users' interventions, even though all editing is performed within the fiction of such isolation.

In both these cases, a key factor is *Exurbia's* emphasis on "real time," which acts in the program through an aesthetics of speed and dissipation. That is, the "real-ness" of *Exurbia's* editing is articulated through the perpetual vanishing of the present, through a constant evaporation of the "sound object" – the fiction of a sample that exists as a sound outside of its sounding articulation – that takes place precisely through its (aural) appearance. And yet, the reverse is also true in that the cumulative effect of this approach is a painfully slow experience of digital music composition. According to anecdotes from users, pieces take roughly 40 to 50 times as long to create as they would in a standard waveform editor. Whereas with the latter, for example, one might make any number of edits to a recording prior to even listening to it, in *Exurbia* each of these takes the full time of the sample and/or the piece into which the sample is being inserted.⁴⁵ Here again, then, this slowness in editing amounts to a qualitative difference independent of the different compositional decisions that flow from it, because it temporalizes a process that is regularly thought spatially (indeed, even the term "sound file" suggests atemporality).⁴⁶

If important elements of *Exurbia's* intervention can be captured under the sign of temporality, this by no means exhausts its metaphors. In this case, we can additionally note that only registering edits aurally means that they are held mnemonically in a different manner than they are in a waveform editor; insofar as users are composing "pieces," these pieces are made of markedly different "matter" than is typically the case. There is firstly the dramatic vulnerability of each piece to every other – due to their use of a shared set of samples that is constantly changing in ways that are difficult to control – the result of which is a constitutive and unavoidable impermanence. More interesting, though, is the way that this forces participants to internalize their compositions in an unconventional manner. Unlike improvisational contexts that feature similar levels of contingency and ephemerality, *Exurbia's* compositional orientation demands that one remember one's piece as an entire piece since the only way to know if there have been changes since one was last in the environment is to remember what it sounded like when one last left it: edited samples are inserted into a "master track," so that the implicit injunction is to remember the piece as one has composed it, to provisionally bracket out the contingencies built into the system, or to at least conceptualize them as something that happens to the composition rather than as something that is integral to it.

Combined with the slowness of working in the *Exurbia* environment, this emphasis on memory creates a sense of intimacy with the work by giving the impression of a greater portion of the piece being stored "directly" in one's memory. Here again, the cultural dominance of visuality is pushed against itself: we are so accustomed to using visual abstractions – textual, iconic, etc. – as mnemonic devices that their absence gives us the sense of a "more embodied" experience. Thus, for example, we typically have the sensation of conscious cognition somehow taking place independently of the actual workings of our bodies, in contrast to which non-conscious forms of memory – commonly called "muscle memory" – are often constructed as the self to which we should be "true" in our decision-making. The speciousness of this claim in no way undermines its effects, and indeed it is no less beguiling when, for example, an individual with advanced Alzheimer's can still sing a childhood song while accompanying themselves on the piano. It is precisely this fiction of a mind-body separation – integral to so many of our quotidian activities, despite its unsustainability – that generates intimacy in *Exurbia*. I might go so far as to suggest that participants in *Exurbia* have the opportunity to "know" their compositions in a "deeper" affective register,

in the same sense that an earworm can be said to crawl more deeply into our psyches than a memory of a visual image because it is persistent and involuntary.⁴⁷ Accepting that any ascription of agency is predicated on a (necessary) fiction, we might say that the conventional fiction of “using the computer” is supplemented in *Exurbia* by one of the computer aurally “investing” us with our compositions.

In the same way that the piece pressures the metaphorical dominance of vision in contemporary understandings of sound, it also leverages numerous assumptions about the nature of community as one component of the immaterial origin of online social behaviors. Importantly, one should note that sociality is not a contemporary add-on to the computer (i.e. coming to be with the advent of social networking sites like Facebook) but a crucial component of its history. As Alexis Madrigal argues, with social networking sites “We’re not giving our personal data in exchange for the ability to share links with friends. Massive numbers of people already did that outside the social networks. Rather, we’re exchanging our personal data in exchange for the ability to publish and archive a record of our sharing” in part because the knowledge of having successfully shared is as important as the sharing itself.⁴⁸ This raises the question: to what extent are the communities that spring up as both the cause and effect of this sense of sharing specifically dependent on a record created in alignment with the dominant tropes of computational visibility?

Exurbia gestures towards this question by making the strange, aurally modulated individual compositional experience that it offers contingent on the behaviors of an online community. On one hand, *Exurbia’s* communal experience is characterized by a vulnerability to others that recalls, say, a multi-user online game: one invests a significant amount of time and energy creating an avatar — in this case a composition — that is from the outset oriented both internally and externally. That is, the avatar acts as a kind of manipulable virtual mirror through which one amplifies and attenuates certain features, while at the same time acting as a screen through which one negotiates a social community. Vulnerability, then, emerges in part from the recursive discrepancies between these two identities, between the signifying ecologies of the mirror and screen, which catalyze activity in one another without being able to cause it.⁴⁹

Exurbia certainly engages this paradigm, but is peculiar in that its vulnerability doesn’t necessarily coincide with any acknowledgment of one’s impact on others. That is, at every level of the program visual and textual cues of the community’s actions and desires are absent. Unlike

most online community art projects, there are no chat forums, comment boxes, or even counters. There is, in short, no way to collectively narrate the connections between communal flows, pulsations, and mutations and the individuals who instigate them. The ethical worlds of each individual and the community are isolated from one another: the community acts on the participant by interfering with their relatively intimate compositional process, but the participant is able to choose whether or not they will be aware of or even acknowledge their own agency *vis à vis* the larger community. That is, the link between digitally networked activities and online communities is denaturalized: unlike most digital settings where the community is the necessary and *a priori* stage for articulations of individuality, participants have to actually choose to seek out the ramifications of their actions for other individuals in *Exurbia*.

In beta-testing, there was little evidence that such considerations played an active role (an exception being instances of “griefing”), which raises questions about the relation between sound and online communities.⁵⁰ *Exurbia*, for example, might be considered a means of testing whether a predominantly aural environment can provide sufficient ground for users to develop a sensibility and/or ethics with respect to other members of a digital network. If so, what changes in this configuration, and how can we begin to listen to these voices? If not, how might this help us to unpack the complex considerations that are built into the word “community” as it obtains online? While it is a cliché that Internet technologies have the potential to both kill and cultivate communities, *Exurbia* realigns this problematic to suggest ways in which Internet communities are conventionally constituted through an exaggerated visuality, specifically through vision’s spatializing capacity.

What this points to – borrowing from Rosalind Krauss – is the expanded field of online community, the way that the discourse of community takes part in the materiality of digital networks.⁵¹ In this, *Exurbia*’s relation to network communities aligns with a general tendency of sound to be semiotically parasitic: sound tends to be implicated in other systems and rhetorics of meaning (such as music and language) but is not itself meaningful, except through the recursions that it introduces into these systems. Put differently, sound tends to intensify; we can note, for example, that better quality audio in audiovisual presentations encourages viewers to perceive visual displays as having higher resolution, while the opposite is not true.⁵² In the case of *Exurbia*, then, the compositions become avatars by virtue of the networked community, but in so doing

desubliminate the visual orientation of “avatar” as a locus of material-semiotics.

If the very nature of online communities is thus tied to a specific medial expression, this suggests that mediality constitutes a potential site for political activity even (and especially!) as it remains under erasure and contingent on its discursive context. Thus, aurality – as a material-discursive mode of affecting – might in itself constitute a politics. Beyond the specific challenges that it raises, then, *Exurbia* demonstrates the broader potential of thinking the problem of medial specificity through specific practices, putting the medial specificities of sound and digital technologies into play in a way that emphasizes their operational rather than categorical dimensions. In this, a sonic effect is not only produced, but is specifically produced in the context of that which it affects and which affects it.

In the context of a paper about the problematic of medial specificity in music and sound art, *Exurbia* thus demonstrates the performative dimension of medial specificity as that which both undermines any constative ontological claims about sound and reinforces such claims’ impacts. If we are to speak in a specific and historically informed way about art, technology, and culture, keeping the imbrication of materiality and discourse at the front of our minds is a political necessity. Doing so does not consist in bracketing out discourse, but it also must move beyond the implicit tautology of saying that everything is discourse *as though this means something concrete and limited*: it is true that we know things only through language, but the term “language” in this statement greatly exceeds mere text. Deconstruction is not a theory of textuality, but rather a theory of media and meaning of which literal textuality is but a sub-variety.

• Acknowledgements •

I'm grateful to the reviewers for their helpful comments, and especially to the journal editors – Mandy-Suzanne Wong and Joanna Demers – for their extensive, insightful, and challenging (in the best sense) feedback. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada).

• Notes •

¹ This example borrows its impulse, if not its actual text or examples, from David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*, Great Discoveries (New York: Atlas, 2010), 30–32. In the cited section Wallace exemplifies the way that mathematics texts can tend to be “abstruse and technical ... because of all the specifications and conditions that have to be put on theorems to keep them out of crevasses.”

² This is the implicit drive of our initial diffidence towards the equation $\frac{x}{2} = \frac{x}{200}$, namely that we know that if both sides of the equation are equal, and if both sides feature the same numerator, then the denominators should be the same.

³ See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1970). And Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

⁴ Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione,” accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/pater/renaissance/7.html>.

⁵ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 39. One might argue that “paratextuality” marks a similar vector in literary interpretation, but Kim-Cohen’s general point stands.

⁶ I’m grateful to the editors for reminding me that there is increasingly work that takes up the position that music cannot be considered to be distinct from the physical-psychical experience of making and listening to music. Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Sensing Voice: Materiality and the Lived Body in Singing and Listening,” *The Senses and Society* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 133–155, which treats music as an experience of the total sensorium, is particularly fascinating in this respect. I agree wholeheartedly, but would also point out that it is telling that even as recently as 2011 (and in a journal that is not particular to musicology, no less!), Eidsheim feels compelled to begin her argument by distinguishing her methods from “common methods of musical representation and analysis [because these tend to] evidence Western culture’s preoccupation with what notation can capture and preserve” (134).

⁷ In this paper I use the term “rhetoric” in the broadest sense, to indicate methods of persuasion. Thus, for example, music is a method that persuades us that sounds can be selected and ordered such that they become meaningful, and specifically musically meaningful. In this approach to the term I am grateful to Marcel O’Gorman.

⁸ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 59.

⁹ To be clear, this is not a critique of music *per se* nor is it a situation that is unique to music, but is rather a statement about how systems operate. There is an obvious parallel here to Luhmann's famous argument that "Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate." Niklas Luhmann, "How Can the Mind Communicate?," in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, Writing Science (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 371.

¹⁰ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 107.

¹¹ John Cage, quoted in Richard Kostelanetz and Joseph Darby, eds., *Classic Essays on Twentieth-Century Music: A Continuing Symposium* (New York ; London: Schirmer Books ; Prentice Hall International, 1996), 185.

¹² eldritch Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 58–59, emphasis original.

¹³ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵ Or, more accurately, *turns* towards conceptualism, as I am not referring to Conceptual Art specifically. In the context being presented here, Duchamp's urinal is as "conceptual" as Morris's boxes or Pollock's action paintings; in each case, the rhetoric of the work is explicitly taken up in discursive logics that exceed the work proper. Considered from this perspective, then, we can separate the movement of Conceptualism that gains prominence and then fades (as does Cubism, for example) from the legacies of making the role of discourse explicit that remains an active component of visual arts practice today.

¹⁶ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 107.

¹⁷ Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 190, emphasis original.

¹⁸ I exemplify this as follows in "Deconstructing Affect ...": "my digestive system might well behave extra-linguistically, but my experience of it as a functional operation (i.e. a system that digests my food) is linguistic; I can say neither that my digestive system preexists, for me, its meaning (which would be to say that it pre-exists itself), nor that the meaning of my digestive system pre-exists it (because I can only know it insofar as I can experience it)." David Cecchetto, "Deconstructing Affect: Posthumanism and Mark Hansen's Media Theory," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (September 21, 2011): 9.

¹⁹ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

²² *Ibid.*, 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233. As an example, offered by Kim-Cohen, the text on the left side of the billboard begins with "What do you see here? The text/sign to the right presents itself as something else, something we could normally take for granted," while that opposite it on the left reads "Can you read this? This text/sign to the left expects you to read more than it provides, but it provides more than is needed to mean what it does."

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ For example, he argues that the simultaneity of the Fowler "problematizes the cross-referentiality of the two texts" in the Kosuth. *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁹ For an excellent introduction to the relationship between second-order systems theory (SOST) and deconstruction, see Cary Wolfe, "Meaning as Event-Machine, or Systems Theory and 'The Reconstruction of Deconstruction'," in *Emergence and Embodiment: New*

Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory, ed. Mark B. N. Hansen and Bruce Clarke (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). Wolfe interrogates the work of Luhmann, who situates SOST — which builds on Derrida’s damning critique of systems theory in “Structure, Sign, and Play” and elsewhere — as “the reconstruction of deconstruction.”

³⁰ Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4.

³¹ This term is reappropriated from my colleague Caroline Langill’s term “living effect,” which she in turn borrows from Norman White. Hereafter, all uses of the term “sound” stand in for a nexus of sonic effects; I use the short-form “sound” in some instances only for the sake of grammar.

³² Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xxv.

³³ <http://www.audioexurbia.net>. Accessed September 17, 2013. Link used by permission.

³⁴ These modifications are all standard digital audio manipulations, including changes in amplitude, reversal, granulation, reverberation, etc.. Such modifications would commonly be called “effects,” as in an “effects unit” used with a guitar. I’ve used the less common terminology here to avoid confusion with the way the term “effect” is otherwise used in this article.

³⁵ For example, one could do an “edit” play-through of the volume parameter without making any alterations.

³⁶ <http://www.audioexurbia.net/upload.php>. Accessed September 17, 2013. Link used by permission.

³⁷ Of course, other approaches to electronic music can also be cumbersome, and microsound and tape composers often see their work as physical, messy interactions with actual material, even though their work is digital. See, for example, “Minimal Objects in Microsound” in Joanna Teresa Demers, *Listening through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). However, I would argue that the frustration of working with *Exurbia* I am discussing here is distinct from such cases and is in some senses the opposite: it is difficult to feel as though one is making a mess because one’s actions are diffused through an interface that makes them slow and coarse. This is more akin to the frustration of trying to fix a computer by rebooting it than it is to the trope of playing in a digital sandbox.

³⁸ See Lev Manovich, “Understanding Meta-Media,” *CTheory* (October 26, 2005), www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=493.

³⁹ This claim is admittedly anecdotal.

⁴⁰ There is an interesting resonance in this respect between *Exurbia* and early electronic instruments developed prior to screen-based user interfaces. A key difference remains the network component of the piece, though, which acts like an (unprecedentedly large) inter-computer patching system.

⁴¹ Although I do not use the term “sonic effect,” certain observations about sound’s medial specificity in the section below are borrowed from the Introduction to David Cecchetto, *Humanesis: Sound and Technological Posthumanism*, *Posthumanities* 25 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Specifically, I argue there that sound can be characterized as a simultaneous palpation of four medial vectors: it is semiotically parasitic; differentially and temporally embodied; relational; and multiplicitous.

⁴² Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience*, *Theory Out of Bounds* v. 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Tinnitus offers a special, fascinating, and not yet entirely understood exception to this scenario that, in Steven Connor’s hands, redoubles the paradox I’m alluding to. See

Steven Connor, “Auscultations” (presented at Sonic Acts XIII: The Poetics of Space, Amsterdam, 2010).

⁴⁵ Pre-listening edits would routinely include cutting of excess material at the beginning and end of clips, volume normalization, noise cancellation, etc..

⁴⁶ Moreover, this slowness isn’t just a matter of the pieces’ taking more time to make and to listen to, but also manifests in the sounds of the works produced: the decreased editing acuity that is a paradoxical companion to this slowness results in a kind of coarseness or clunkiness that is particular to the environment. Where compositions produced with ProTools might dance lithely across the stereo field, *Exurbia*’s compositions tend to stumble along with the impotently brute movements of a toddling child.

⁴⁷ This is of course not always the case as there is significant variance both within and between individuals. However, there is some evidence that music seems to more regularly induce involuntary semantic memories. Victoria Williamson conjectures that this may be because “music is more deeply encoded than words. Music activates multiple brain areas (usually more than simply hearing words) and can activate some of the deepest reward centres. And if something has more connections in the mind then it is more likely that it will be re-activated compared to something with fewer connections.” See Victoria Williamson, “Earworm Interview,” *Music Psychology with Dr. Victoria Williamson*, July 3, 2012, <http://musicpsychology.co.uk/earworm-interview/>.

⁴⁸ Alexis Madrigal, “Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web Wrong,” *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/dark-social-we-have-the-whole-history-of-the-web-wrong/263523/>.

⁴⁹ That is, the excitation is heavily mediated by the constraints and affordances of the system that is perturbed.

⁵⁰ “Griefing” is a term typically used in the context of online gaming to indicate a harmful action done to another player through the means provided by the game’s design. In the case of *Exurbia*, one composer overwrote a large number of samples with silence. See “Urban Dictionary: Griefer,” accessed August 16, 2013, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=griefer>.

⁵¹ The question of whether this goes both ways is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is certainly worth asking: to what extent does the discourse of digitality — independent of any “actual technologies” — inform our offline understanding of community?

⁵² Brenda Laurel, cited in Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 140.

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COLLISION

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013)
Animals and Aesthetics

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Griggs, J. Marie. "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative."
Evental Aesthetics 2, no. 2 (2013): 64-77.

ABSTRACT

For this collision, the role of nonhuman animals as woodland theater and naturalizing agents is questioned. In remediated sites, animals are actors that legitimize everyday pollution, oppression and violence. How can the lived realities of nonhuman animals be embraced without naturalizing the discourse that externalizes those lives? As life and industrial-nature cohere, how might aesthetics engender agency in recovery?

KEYWORDS

ruination, animal life, environmental remediation, the everyday, aesthetics

Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative

J. Marie Griggs

A colleague recommended a blog post by Jared Green (2013) recounting a tour of Chicago's wildlands that have been ecologically restored and remediated. Restoration practices attempt to reset a ruined landscape to some previous time, usually to just before a place became toxic and degraded. Environmental remediation practices attenuate the accumulation of toxics in water, soil and air. My associate mentioned this post in part because I focus on the life that persists in sites of ruination, but also because she was worried about the birds: Who tells the birds to not eat the toxic fish?

- Ruination and remediation • _____

Laura Ann Stoler (2008) describes ruination as an explicit, capitalist and colonial formation. On multiple spatial and temporal scales, ruination

damages skin tissue, in utero conditions and global industries; it brings about epistemic violence and fragmented communities. Every day, lived ruination is embodied, cohered and transforming. Ruins perpetuate as they are taken up into bodies, soils and water. Life within ruination exists in post-industrial landscapes like those featured in Tim Edensor's (2005) prose on life in abandoned factories. Human and nonhuman life also persists in active sites of ruination.

The toxics of ruination insist that planners, politicians, researchers, designers, corporations and artists consider ecologies rather than sites. Pollutants metabolize in currents and accumulate, causing bodily transformations and epistemological transmutations. This means that ecological remediation as a process is only ever partially complete as toxicity cannot be contained nor made static. When considering ecology rather than form, aesthetics of built environments could lead to other ways of knowing or understanding. Yet restorative design often engages established fictions of wild, unencumbered harmony. Even the toxic wild is a place where we may shed our modern life and, through this change of scene, clear the industrial city from our minds even as we inhale methane fumes.

• Toxic river as theater •

Chicago's Beaubien Woods set a scene of forest, hillocks and a meandering thread of water. Yet the hills are covered trash dumps, the air has a scent of methane, and the river is still so polluted that people are warned not to eat the fish. These woods are at the center of a "toxic donut."¹ There are 180 different avian species in these woods, and it is this population my colleague is concerned about. Birds absorb fishy nutrients as well as an accumulation of fishy chemicals. Yet as long as the toxics don't kill them, birds fulfill the aesthetic and biological functions of restoration. Visitors come to these woods to engage nature, a nature constructed by governments, scientists, planners, designers and management teams even as dynamic processes shape it. Within this framework, each element is an agent fulfilling a role. Trees, rivers and rocks complete the scene; birds add a flutter of excitement and authenticity.

Neil Smith (1990) articulates the ways industrial capitalism defines and produces nature. Summarizing Karl Marx, Smith explains that humans so continuously produce nature that if we stopped the physical world would shift radically and this human, or second, nature would be defunct and something new would emerge.² This extinction is not imminent; in those places where anthropocentric damage is being alleviated, Rebecca Lave explains (2012), neoliberalism produces and commercializes systems of knowledge regarding restoration and remediation. Remediating chemical runoff does not liberate streams or landscapes, but resituates them within different types of human use and need, like fishing or tourism. Instead of alleviating anthropocentric influence the environment must bear more; two decades of restoration work has made the Beaubien Woods's river capable of supporting fish, even as it continues to carry effluent downstream.

In these landscapes, discourse has not been remediated; a scaled nature still places greater value on some humans over others, and on human life over the nonhuman. The other-than-human bodies are but sites to see and a recreational pastime. In this design, we humans are outsiders to the nonhuman animals' lives, bodies, and work. As spectators we can separate human from nonhuman by pretending there is some line of non-affect between the physical world and our cultural relationships. Catherine Ingraham (2006) writes of this externalized space as the "animal-field."³ This field is enacted when place and life are removed from the material environment, at which time the lived world transforms into a space of discourse. Other-than-human animals cannot enter this discourse with their lives fully intact, as the photographs of Chris Jordan (2009) attest.



"Forest Story: The Doe," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013. Modified from "Deer," photograph by Jared Green.

Within this drama, the life of birds is stopped midair, as is the life of fish and metabolism of toxics. Ideologies engender a one-point perspective, whereby the woods are seen through a singular understanding of recovery and life. The Beaubien Woods have their own cadence, a flowing river and trees that change with the seasons. Yet this diorama of activity is set within a staunch metanarrative that continues to perform a story of everyday violence. At issue is a perspective framed by un-remediated neoliberal ideologies set within a continued reality of toxic capitalist industrialization.

We walk to the edge of the pier, sit patiently on a wooden bench, and take in a kinetic diorama. The animals perform the act whereby nature returns and we might all be saved. We collect mementos with our cameras and tally the species we've seen. The sun begins to set and we talk about how smart the actors were, how resilient animals are, the beauty of the scenery, and wonder that they aren't charging admission. No one comments that the fish passing under the pier are fully embodied in our pollution.

What options are available beyond the woodland theater or a biological survey of species? When the choice is between a polluted wastescape and a polluted wildscape, what does agency look like that chooses neither? What unpredictable lives might emerge even as larger structures decide how recovery will function and what it will look like? How might the rolling palisades of garbage and lively imbrication of toxics be imaged differently?

• A response from the fish • _____

... they are "relatively OK to eat given they aren't in there too long."

– Jared Green⁴

We live inside structures that reduce and condense life. The milieu of the body's occupation is simply erased or scribbled over. Hegemonic aesthetics dictate not only the representation of nature, but also our perceptions of the everyday environment. The symbolic forest is capped with the smoke of oil refineries. Forest stories are filled with genetically compromised does. These places do not reflect the sublime landscapes showcased by Edward Burtynsky (2006), but a picturesque design by Capability Brown with latent chemical adaptations.

Fish, as food, is no longer understood without toxics, typically mercury but also PCBs and lead. The Department of Natural Resources restocks the rivers with fish again and again; these fish are unwillingly inserted into our ideological constructs of a restored nature. Their compromised health is a response to this forced imbrication; a hailing, in

the words of Donna Haraway (2008). Their inedible flesh is another effect of the animal-field.

As industrialized theater, remediated land provides that space where we can continue to pretend that the river isn't in our blood stream.

Seeing a young family fishing off an embankment, she turns to her friend and remarks, "I would never eat these fish. I only buy the fresh-caught organic ones at the supermarket." He only has to nod his agreement.

• Put a bird on it!⁵ • _____

Hegemonic processes such as capitalism, industrialization and neoliberalism not only engender ruination, but also already articulate how to attend to the recovery. These processes are sited in a polluted river teeming with schools of fish that are taken up by birds as well as humans. Other-than-human animals play a pivotal role in the biological success of remediation, like oysters used to filter toxins within the water; nonhuman animals also act out human ideas of scenic beauty. The recovery of place requires a cohered involvement with other-than-human life.

While many animals are present, birds are a vital part of how we, human animals, understand our environment. Biologically birds are a keystone species and socially their calls define territories and place. Birds are also "heavily burdened symbolically" as they are part of a long history of representation, standing for freedom, purity, hope, nature, goodness, peace, the soul as well as capturing, collecting, knowing and controlling.⁶ It is difficult to imagine a sky without birds, whether this sky is framed by a painting or remediated forest. In these Chicago woods, life has been becoming-pollution for decades and in this remediated place birds unwillingly naturalize everyday, structural violence. The physical presence of birds evokes an understanding of that space as natural and quotidian; by

naturalizing the current reality of those woods visitors may forget why remediation was, and still is, necessary, and all the life, both human and nonhuman, still being negatively affected.

A bird swooping down and catching a fish demonstrates the transformation of these woods from dead and degraded to a lively, engineered ecology, and the act can be stunning to behold. This act is not a representation; it is the life of the everyday persisting within realities continuously defined by capitalist nature, and neoliberal science and design. "Putting a bird on it" becomes a vulnerable illusion as individual birds plunge through the boundaries of air, land, and water. Birds in remediated landscapes flutter between boundaries of life and symbol, between life and the animal-field. When birds inhabit remediated places, human animals can forget how the landscape became polluted and naturalize how science and engineering made it life sustaining again. Yet, by acknowledging the bird's body as symbol, we can also witness the way birds rupture this representation as they take up toxic fish.

Astrida Neimanis (2007) addresses Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of becoming-animal in a smaller physical form: the molecule. The molecule points to becoming as a comingling, whereby the molecularity of the human and the molecularity of the nonhuman mix and form an irreducible, new singularity. Importantly, becoming dispels a metanarrative of a stable entity, and the molecule lets cohered realities such as "lung-becoming-smog" be articulated.⁷ In this way we may talk about bodies becoming-pollution; a becoming that influences how the individual will engage lived realities of ruination as expressed through environmental degradation. To become-pollution is a mutation of consciousness and body whereby life forcibly responds to the persistent realities of industrialization and markets. Becoming-pollution describes moments wherein the fish and birds that unwillingly engage toxicity may rupture perspectives of the restored animal-field.

- A disrupted experience •

James Corner (1999) describes these hidden hegemonic narratives as overly aestheticized, amnesiac landscapes where the visitor can forget and escape the politics of their construction.⁸ When aesthetic experience focuses on beauty violence is erased. Judith Halberstam (2011) instead searches for practices that embrace failure and fragmentation rather than their reintegration as a way to imagine alternatives to hegemonic systems.⁹ Remediation is an impossible task; pollutants do not disappear, and memories of a scaled nature persist alongside the embodied knowledge of environmental injustices. As remediation and restoration are constructive actions for making degraded places inhabitable, it does not preclude the persistence of everyday violence. This means we cannot relax into the views of a restored river, but must also confront the destruction that continues within and beyond the boundaries of the trees.



"A Strategic Landscape," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013.
Modified from "Donut2," photograph by Jared Green.

The hegemonic narrative of healing and recovery needs to fail as it often naturalizes violent realities when communicating stories of resilience, remediation and conservation. One example of this naturalization is discussed in Shiloh Krupar's piece, "Where Eagles Dare: An Ethno-fable with Personal Landfill" (2007). In this article, Krupar denaturalizes the nationalist narrative of what happened to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal when eagles came to roost on a sacrificed piece of land. Never mind the unexploded nerve gas bomblets and eight million cubic yards of contaminated soil, this area is now a refuge, preserve and tourist destination.

Accentuating fragmentation and failure can help express pollution, remediation, violence and place-making while providing a disruption that allows the other-than-human animal to break free from the woodland theater and into life. Kathleen Stewart (1996 & 2007) articulates lived intimacies that point to larger processes and structures. In many cases this connection is not always concrete but oftentimes a feeling or moment of *some-thing* not being quite right. Perspectives and understandings are distinctive and saccadic within a single narrative, and they are essential even as they are subtle.

A failed aesthetic stems from the notion that appreciating a restored scenic view while we stroll down a constructed pathway is not enough. This partial experience is a simulated aesthetic of a strategic landscape; neoliberal markets defined how this place would be remediated as the place was designed to evoke capitalist ideologies of nature. Understanding this aesthetic as a failure, to see beauty as a failed response to everyday violence or to refuse to believe that the woods are somehow set apart from everyday life, opens up the potential to understand how the Beaubien Woods came to be constructed. There can be a full aesthetic experience with this engineered, toxic wildness by understanding the truth of its construction.

There can be a full aesthetic appreciation of bird life as it persists within the animal-field and breaks free within the toxic, physical environment. This aesthetic requires a becoming-with, a living/lived, bursting, saccadic awareness of and appreciation for processes and lives. Pastoral depictions of ruins most often evoke utopia/dystopia; ideally, a full aesthetic experience does not engage either/or dualities. Ruptures do not erase the metanarrative they disrupt, nor does acknowledging a failed aesthetic produce a singular perspective or approach to understanding. Noticing how disruptive practices of violence, injustice and degradation

coexist with rupturing practices of beauty, recovery and life, means recovery cannot exist without being situated within an understanding of violence. Distinctive moments, sometimes dynamic and sometimes ordinary, accumulate into an embodied understanding, an understanding necessary for a full aesthetic experience.

A final response comes from the spiders in Nina Katchadourian's documentation of "The Mended Spiderweb Series" (1998) from the sequence *Uninvited Collaborations with Nature*. Nina spent six weeks trying to repair broken spider webs with segments of red string. The spiders' responses indicate that the desire to fix degraded or ruined places through human-aesthetic interventions means that attempts at recovery will fail. Katchadourian describes the experience:

The morning after the first patch job, I discovered a pile of red threads lying on the ground below the web. At first I assumed the wind had blown them out; on closer inspection it became clear that the spider had repaired the web to perfect condition using its own methods, throwing the threads out in the process. My repairs were always rejected by the spider and discarded, usually during the course of the night, even in webs which looked abandoned.¹⁰

Even as Katchadourian's strings prompted the repair, the spider asserted its own agency in the web's ultimate reparation, creating a rather successful failure.

Methodologies for building awareness make evident the politics of a site's construction, its meanings, present living realities and potential futures; this milieu is absorbed into our perceptions, understandings and imaginings.¹¹ Active participation is a subtle practice, and requires us, humans, to understand the recovery of place as a co-constitutive series of actions of human and nonhuman life and abiotic processes. Such understanding involves remaining open to how full aesthetic experience of toxic and remediated places can re-position values and imaginings for future becomings. In this way, aesthetics is located in an understanding of how other-than-human life persists within and prompts the recovery of places. Building an embodied knowledge of the ways nonhuman life lives within and shapes the everyday opens up a full aesthetic experience, regardless of whether a landscape is sublime, pastoral, picturesque or ruined.



"Fishy Metabolisms," by J. Marie Griggs, 2013. Modified from "Powderhorn," photograph by Jared Green.

• Notes •

¹ Jared Green, "Wilderness South of Chicago: Beauty Amid Industry," Accessed May 22, 2013, <http://dirt.asla.org/2013/05/08/chicagos-wilderness-beauty-amid-industry/>, §7.

² Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 53, 66–67.

³ Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 201.

⁴ Green, §8.

⁵ Tag line and sketch featured on *Portlandia* on IFC, uploaded to YouTube January 2011. In this satire, two characters place abstract birds on common items to spruce them up. At

the close, a real bird gets into the store, and considering it vermin, the characters beat it to death by throwing their pretty bird objects at it: accessed September 17, 2013, <http://youtu.be/oXM3vWJmpfo>.

⁶ Ingraham, 154.

⁷ Astrida Neimanis, "Becoming-Grizzly: Bodily Molecularity and the Animal that Becomes," *PhaenEx* 2 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 289.

⁸ James Corner, "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes," in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, ed. James Corner (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 156 – 158.

⁹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 138, 89.

¹⁰ Nina Katchadourian, "Mended Spiderwebs," Accessed September 11, 2013, <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/uninvitedcollaborations/spiderwebs.php>

¹¹ Allen Carlson and Barry Sadler, "Towards Models of Environmental Appreciation," in *Environmental Aesthetics: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Allen Carlson and Barry Sadler, 160 – 162.

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ABSTRACT

Two Greek myths attest to the power of music to blur distinctions between humans and nonhumans: Orpheus made music that inspired human-like attention in animals, trees, and stones, while the Sirens reduced passing sailors to the level of animals incapable of resisting their song. Recast in terms employed by Lacan, these myths portray music as calling forth a *response* in creatures thought merely able to *react* and, contrariwise, stripping away the capacity for *response* in humans, leaving nothing but *reaction* in its place. Critiquing Lacan's dogmatic distinction between human and animal behavior, Derrida questioned the "purity and indivisibility" of reaction and response and recommended that critics explore the involvement of both in "the whole differentiated field of experience and of a world of life-forms." In this essay, I take up Derrida's challenge with regard to music as it has been understood in the European aesthetic tradition. While music has long been considered capable of provoking highly refined cognitive and emotional responses, it also acts upon the body in a wide variety of ways, many of them involuntary – a fact that has struck music's advocates as alternately promising and disturbing. Revisiting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentaries by the philosophers and critics Johann Georg Sulzer, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Eduard Hanslick, I first illuminate persistent anxieties over the admixture of reaction and response in musical listening. I then turn to recent ethological studies in order to argue against any decisive separation of the human from the nonhuman in the arena of musical aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

music, animals, affect, Jacques Derrida, Eduard Hanslick, Johann Georg Sulzer, Friedrich Nietzsche

Music Between Reaction and Response

Holly Watkins



In league with the melodiousness of birds and the periodicity of ocean waves, music stands at the crossroads where human and nonhuman sound-making meet. Humans fabricate wind chimes and Aeolian harps for nonhuman players, while imitations of bird calls and rushing streams in pieces of music lure the natural world into the cultural space of the living room or concert hall. Yet music also blurs distinctions between humans and nonhumans, as two familiar myths attest. Orpheus was said to make music that inspired human-like attention in animals, trees, and even stones. The Sirens, by contrast, reduced passing sailors to the level of animals powerless to resist their enchanting song.

Recast in the terms which called Derrida's deconstructive ire down on Lacan, these myths portray music as calling forth a *response* in creatures thought merely able to *react* and, contrariwise, stripping away the capacity for *response* in humans, leaving nothing but *reaction* in its place.¹ For Lacan, giving a response depends on the presence of the Other as witness to truth, something he presumed to be absent for animals because they lack language (or, more precisely, access to the symbolic order). Responding thus involves what Derrida calls a "second-degree reflexive power" reserved for humans, a power that suffuses such tactics as pretending to pretend.² Derrida questions the "purity and indivisibility" of reaction and response in Lacan's thought, a purity which strikes him as untenable given that, among other things, the psychoanalytic hypothesis of the unconscious complicates any claim that human responses can be fully transparent to themselves.³ The unconscious, posits Derrida, injects "some automaticity of the reaction in every response," no matter how free that response may seem.⁴ Indeed, the current interest in preconscious, biologically rooted affects lends further significance to Derrida's investigation of "the reactionality in the response."⁵ Viewing the problem from another angle, recent studies of animals, especially primates, suggest that their cognitive abilities go far beyond the passivity implied by the concept of reaction. The apes that primatologist Frans de Waal describes in moving detail in his book *Our Inner Ape*, for example, appear to treat him, as well as fellow apes, as others to whom, in non-linguistic fashion, questions are posed and responses owed.⁶

In challenging Lacan's dogmatism, Derrida recommends that, rather than dispense with any and all distinctions between reaction and response, critics should explore the workings of the two "within the whole differentiated field of experience and of a world of life-forms."⁷ Music would seem to be an apt locus for such inquiry. At first glance, responding to music in something resembling Lacan's sense would seem to demand a hermeneutic practice – that is, an interpretative or analytical attempt to divine "what it means" or "how it works." Both approaches overlap with *Problemsgeschichte*, a methodology that conceives artworks as solutions (or answers) to particular creative problems (or questions). In either case, music sets in motion that "second-degree reflexive power" which pushes back at immediate reactions as it weighs plausible responses. But while music can be the occasion for such reflexive and highly refined cognitive responses, it also acts upon the body in multiple ways, many of them involuntary.⁸ When music is playing, feet and fingers may begin tapping without conscious instruction. Someone within earshot of music may

begin to sing along, and, worst of all, end up with the tune stuck in her head. That intrusive tune, or “earworm” (borrowed from the German *Ohrwurm*), thumbs its nose at the notion of free will, its unbidden repetitions triggered by some hidden impulse. And yet, such experiences manifest enough of a cognitive dimension to forestall classification of them as reactions to stimuli on the order of jerking one’s hand away from a hot burner.

While music’s capacity to elicit reactions involving both body and mind is currently valued not only for its invigorating or soothing results but also for its therapeutic potential, musical aesthetics historically has had a hard time finding the good in the situation. From Eduard Hanslick’s consternation over “pathological,” feeling-centered listening in the mid-nineteenth century to Theodor Adorno’s comparison of the jitterbug’s dance moves to “the reflexes of mutilated animals,” music has served as an unsettling reminder of the difficulty attending any decisive separation of the human from the nonhuman.⁹ This essay attempts to erode that boundary even further by using recent ethological insights to disturb key suppositions of European musical aesthetics. To prepare the ground for this endeavor, I revisit two influential treatises dealing with music – Johann Georg Sulzer’s *General Theory of the Fine Arts* (1771–74) and Hanslick’s *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854) – in order to illuminate persistent anxieties over the admixture of reaction and response in musical listening, an admixture that carries with it the further threat of confusion between animal and human modes of apprehension. This threat became all the more urgent as humanity’s “second trauma” – Derrida’s name for Darwin’s post-Copernican blow to human self-esteem – began to sink in (*On the Origin of Species* was published only five years after Hanslick’s book, in 1859).¹⁰ If humans had in fact descended from apes, then indulging physicality via aesthetic experience might be a sure way to devolve to that distant origin.

II.

By suggesting that music occupies a particularly tendentious position with respect to the categories of reaction and response, I do not mean to imply that the other arts simply engage one or the other in uncomplicated fashion. Ever since its inauguration by Alexander Baumgarten, the discipline of aesthetics has been dogged by the problem of art's sensuousness, which had to be synthesized with cognition in order to neutralize its capacity to stimulate inappropriate reactions (especially that of desire). But the principles of Kantian disinterestedness or Hegelian sublation are more difficult to maintain in the face of music, which often invites direct physical engagement. In his remarks on music, Sulzer pointed to the ancient lineage of work songs and dance, remarking that "musical sounds themselves always imply an idea of movement," an insight backed up by recent research on music and the brain.¹¹ Later commentators continued to grapple with music's ability to grip the body like no other art. For Friedrich Nietzsche, the orgiastic revelries orchestrated by Dionysius, flute in hand, challenged the serene order of Apollo and his lyre.¹² Adorno framed the problem in more physiological terms, writing that "music represents at once the immediate manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming."¹³ Adorno's phrasing suggests that reaction itself calls for a response — the response of taming, or, more literally, softening (*Sänftigung*).¹⁴ In one stroke, music illustrates the dialectical nature of the civilizing process.

What was it about music that made it so troublesome? First of all, aestheticians had long realized that music's sensory medium — sound — wielded great physical power and thus could stimulate strong reactions in listeners. "An out-of-tune note," Sulzer mused, "is incomparably more disagreeable and disturbing than is a clashing color." "The ear," he continued, "can be so smitten by inharmonious sounds as to drive one almost to despair."¹⁵ Such remarks call up scenarios of fingernails on chalkboard or metal on glass, in which the immediacy of one's physical reaction to sound crowds out the possibility of reasoned response. Yet the immediate impact of sound, its ability to inspire involuntary reactions, also contributed to music's superior expressive force. "Nature," wrote Sulzer, "has established a direct connection between the ear and heart."¹⁶ The mystery of this connection, marveled at by so many writers on aesthetics,

could be traced in Sulzer's view to an even greater conundrum – namely, the relationship between the body and the soul, between the seat of reaction, so to speak, and the seat of response. "The aural nerves," Sulzer explained, "transmit to the entire body the impact of the shock they receive ... Hence it is understandable how the body, and consequently the soul, can be intensely affected by sounds."¹⁷ Stimulation of the nerves residing in the ear appears to lead seamlessly to the humanizing responses of sentiment.

Elsewhere in the *General Theory*, however, Sulzer singled out disruptive effects very much like the "shock" described above as belonging to the lesser category of "accidental" versus "essential" aspects of aesthetic experience. Such effects compel rather than persuade, stun or surprise rather than move listeners, thus violating music's mission to touch the heart by way of the body instead of the body alone. The contradiction becomes acute when Sulzer speculates on behalf of music's beneficial influence on the "savage." He posited that music, because of its physical efficacy and direct connection to feeling, could succeed better than the other arts in civilizing the uncivilized. Swayed by accounts of Orpheus which described him as not only animating nonhumans but also taming wild men, Sulzer believed that music, alone among the arts, could awaken finer sentiments in the beast-like savage heart, sentiments which could then serve as the foundation of morality. But, as Matthew Riley points out, Sulzer never quite managed to distinguish that ability from the compulsive aesthetic forces which short-circuit the faculty of reason – forces with which music was well endowed and that work more by inciting reactions than inspiring responses.¹⁸ Although music appeared ideally equipped to elicit moral or sentimental responses from uncultivated listeners, it did so paradoxically through its very capacity to bring about involuntary reactions.

Despite music's evident impact on the reactive, animal body – or perhaps because of it – Sulzer took great pains to separate the art from the realm of nature in general. Dispensing with the idea that humans learned to sing by imitating birds, Sulzer linked the rhythmic regularity of music to human activities like walking and physical labor, and he located the origin of melody in the expression of "passionate emotions."¹⁹ But Sulzer's categories of humanity and nature begin to blur when it comes to the origin of such passions: "The individual sounds that comprise song are the expressions of animated sentiments ... and the sentiments aroused demand to be expressed, even if against one's will, by the sounds of song, not speech. Thus the elements of song are not so much the invention of

man as of nature herself."²⁰ At times involuntary and authored by nature, music has its origin in the physiological and affective conditions of human existence, and it evidently carries the trace of that origin no matter how refined the sentimental responses it inspires.

Further complicating matters, Sulzer suggested that human music can devolve to the status of nonhuman nature. Overdeveloping the technical side of music, for instance, threatens to lead back to the animal realm from which Sulzer had detached it. Virtuoso compositions demanding great physical skill, he observed, too often come off "like a horse running in full gallop."²¹ Yet Sulzer concluded that such compositions are "no more natural than Agesilaus's mimicking the song of a real nightingale."²² The naturalness of art derives from the second nature of human creativity rather than mimetic accuracy. But when the physical capacities of the performer are pushed to their limits, music becomes no more than an animal, a body devoid of soul. In a similar vein, Sulzer noted that one can write a piece of music that conforms to "mechanical rules" but lacks expression, a notion entirely consistent with lingering views of the animal body as more like a reactive machine than a responsive being.²³ Well-crafted but inexpressive music darkly insinuated that humans were perpetually in danger of reverting to the same.

Just before Sulzer began work on the *General Theory*, the critic and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder was also pondering the relationship between human and animal modes of expression, but with a surprising twist. In contrast to Sulzer, Herder explained the mysterious connection between ear and heart in explicitly animalistic terms. The *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1770) opens with the unforgettable sentence, "While still an animal, man already has language."²⁴ Herder means not specifically human language, but the natural language of expression — the "screams" and "wild inarticulate tones" of early humans. These sounds, which arise automatically from the "mechanics of sentient bodies," emerge in reaction to bodily sensations and affects such as pain or fear. But it soon becomes clear that such reactions constitute the phylogenic prerequisite for response. "Even the most delicate chords of animal feeling," Herder remarked, "are aligned in their entire performance for a going out toward other creatures. The plucked chord performs its natural duty: it sounds! It calls for an echo from one that feels alike, even if none is there, even if it does not hope or expect that such another might answer."²⁵ This is a language "meant to sound, not to depict," a phrase that echoes Sulzer's injunction against trying to represent objects or ideas in music.²⁶ Animal sounds, in short, are both grounded in involuntary reactions and expressive

calls awaiting a response. Although Herder argued that such sounds do not account for the origin of human verbal language, the close bond between reaction and response lived on for him in music, a situation that, as we will see, offers another means of dismantling the opposition between Lacan's two categories.²⁷

III.

By 1854, the Viennese music critic and aspiring academic Eduard Hanslick was no longer convinced that music's moral influence was wholly positive. Whereas Sulzer had been comfortable with the notion that "music is written not for the mind or imagination, but for the heart," Hanslick, appalled by the behavior of Richard Wagner's enthusiasts, was disturbed by how Sulzer's position (and others like it) left the body at the mercy of music.²⁸ Believing that music amounted to an "intelligible language of sentiment," Sulzer had charted a path from the physical impact of sound to the stirring of sentiment to the cultivation of morality.²⁹ Hanslick, on the other hand, envisioned a quite different trajectory for music, one that necessitated the suppression of its physical and emotional impact. Seeking to establish a "scientific" idiom of music aesthetics true to the values of the post-1848 academy, Hanslick elaborated a mode of engagement with music that placed the dispassionate mind rather than the feeling body at the center of reception, thus disqualifying the body's animal reactivity from the sphere of aesthetic legitimacy.³⁰

To promote his mind-centered reception, Hanslick distinguished between music's "material moment," which he considered to reside in the "natural power of tones," and its purely intellectual "artistic moment."³¹ Like Sulzer before him, Hanslick recognized music's peculiar power all too clearly. "The other arts persuade," he wrote, "but music invades us."³² And with invasion comes surrender, as music proceeds to overpower the nervous system, especially that of the psychologically abnormal listener.

The "unfathomable affinity" Hanslick posited between the physicality of music and the human body resembles Sulzer's "direct

relationship between ear and heart," but the heart in this case has shed its broader metaphorical significance and collapsed into the all-too-material body.³³ In Hanslick's view, the body reacts to music's "elemental" components — sound and impressions of motion that mimic the "dynamics of feeling" — while the mind responds to its intellectual content, including the construction of themes, phrase structure, harmony, and other formal properties.³⁴ When insufficient attention is paid to such content, the elemental in music "shackles the defenseless feelings" of listeners, lulling them into the "passive receptivity" of "pathological" listening.³⁵ "Slouched dozing in their chairs," Hanslick jibed, these enthusiasts "brood and sway in response to the vibrations of tones, instead of contemplating tones attentively."³⁶ Their needy bodies guzzle down arias like champagne and consider music little more than a fine *digestif* or an intoxicating drug.³⁷ Highlighting the body's unthinking reactivity to music, Hanslick recommended ether and chloroform as alternatives to the "effortless suppression of awareness" afforded by music.³⁸ Abusing music in such fashion puts the art in the (for Hanslick, degraded) category of natural entities and substances that take advantage of the body's receptivity but do not "make us think."³⁹ Pleasant reactions are no substitute for the rewards of "pure contemplation," which consist in the measured responses of aesthetic evaluation.⁴⁰

"Pure" is the operative word here, because — and this is a point on which Hanslick differs substantially from Sulzer — being moved to moral action by music constitutes a reaction just as automatic as succumbing to music's drug-like effects. If music makes us want to *do* anything, whether perform a kind act or get up and dance, then we have not acted out of "free self-determination."⁴¹ While Hanslick conceded that it would be "pedantic" to deny the animating effect of dance music and marches, it seems that the cultivated listener is obliged to resist such invitations.⁴² Comparing someone moved by a musician's performance to forgive a debt to a "sluggard" motivated to dance by a waltz, Hanslick found "neural stimulation" rather than a love of beauty at the root of both actions.⁴³ In a classic expression of the humanist devotion to rationality, he concluded, "To undergo unmotivated, aimless, and casual emotional disturbances through a power that is not *en rapport* with our willing and thinking is unworthy of the human spirit."⁴⁴

So much, then, for Sulzer's Orphic scenario of cultivation by way of music. Even moral uplift falls under Hanslick's axe as an essentially unwilling byproduct of music's wiles. Arguing that music makes the greatest moral impact on those possessing "coarseness of mind," Hanslick

remarked that “music exercises the strongest effect upon savages,” an achievement that does the art no credit.⁴⁵ Ancient accounts of the power of music can be explained by the fact that humanity in its more primitive stages was “more at the mercy of the elemental.”⁴⁶ In this respect, humans used to be more like animals. After repeating decades-old (and rather questionable) reports of the music-inspired feats of animals, Hanslick asked, “is it really so commendable to be a music lover in such company?” In contrast to animals and savages, modern Western humans “cherish a contemplative kind of pleasure in the products of music art which paralyzes [*paralysirt*] music’s elemental influence.”⁴⁷

Paralyzes music’s elemental influence. Put away the ether, listeners, and grab the Novocain (synthesized by a German chemist in 1905, one year after Hanslick’s death). If you wish to be civilized, turn off your body when listening to music, shut down the affective mechanisms responsible for transforming musical sound into subjective feeling. Such an achievement, if that is what it is, depends on strictly channeling sensations into the safer territory of the mind. Midway through his treatise, Hanslick promised not to devalue the sensuous, as had “older systems” (such as Hegel’s) which emphasized art’s moral import or the ideas it conveyed.⁴⁸ Hanslick even claimed to see no problem in taking “naïve” pleasure in music’s “merely sensuous aspect,” as long as one did not engage in the unseemly translation of sensations into feelings.⁴⁹ But what Hanslick really wanted to establish was a direct path leading from sensation to the “auditory imagination,” where the mind contemplates the “rich variety of the succession of sounds in itself.”⁵⁰ Music’s “tonally moving forms,” as the art’s only content and the source of its beauty, may indeed resemble the dynamics of feeling, but they must not be taken as representations of particular feelings.⁵¹ Such powers of depiction elude music, or at least, as Sulzer felt, tempt it down an alien path. From the standpoint of reception, any straying from the conduit joining sensation and mind to the realm of feeling ends up, for Hanslick, in the dead end of pathological listening. In sum, Hanslick’s treatise constructs an imaginary body for whom objective sensations lead directly to equally objective cognitions without stirring up any subjective feelings along the way.

The aesthetic position endorsed by this imaginary paralyzed body is formalism. That music is seriously limited when it comes to the representation of specific feelings or ideas, as Hanslick claimed, is not especially controversial. The troublesome issue is that Hanslick’s imaginary body arises not out of convincing aesthetic or physiological realities but out of objectivist disavowal of the reactive, affective body’s

contribution to musical experience. Hanslick knew full well that nearly everyone experiences some sort of feeling when listening to music. The searching questions his treatise asks about how “the sensation of tone becomes feeling or mood” show that this is indeed one of his primary concerns.⁵² But he did not believe that physiology was prepared to answer such questions, which again boil down to the single burning question of “how the body is connected to the soul.”⁵³ Musical formalism, then, arises out of an injunction. What one cannot know the causes of, Hanslick’s argument goes, one should not talk about. Better simply to describe (if description is ever simple). But this does not change the fact that formalist descriptions of music are discursive constructs sitting atop an abyss – the abyss of bodily reaction.

IV.

After giving modern musical formalism its decisive impetus, Hanslick abandoned his objectivist project in disillusionment, returning instead to the more journalistic idiom of music criticism.⁵⁴ Yet Hanslick’s about-face does not mean that all tenets of formalism should be discarded, particularly not its objection to representational aesthetics. Music, for Hanslick, did not represent anything; rather, its kaleidoscopic mobility transposed the dynamics of feeling into an artistic medium. But Hanslick then drew the unfortunate conclusion that music at its most cultivated should serve exclusively as an object of contemplation rather than a stimulus to feeling or action, a position just as limiting as the theory of representation he tried to refute. Complementing a formalist understanding of what music *is* with a physiological and existential conception of what it *does* helps to clear a path beyond the intellectual biases of Hanslick’s treatise and its scholarly descendents.⁵⁵ This path converges with Nietzsche’s recasting of the “subject as multiplicity,” a subject for whom art excites manifold regions of the body susceptible to pleasure.⁵⁶ *The Will to Power* describes art as stimulating the “feeling of life,” as a form of intoxication that respects no distinctions between mind and body.⁵⁷ Scorning the “absurd overestimation of consciousness” that underwrites human exceptionalism, Nietzsche cast aside the prejudice according to which any embrace of unconscious or involuntary dimensions

of existence is viewed as equivalent to “becoming animal.”⁵⁸ In contrast, the philosopher portrayed the reception of art as an explicitly animalistic affair, and art itself as a reminder of “states of animal vigor.”⁵⁹

What would it mean to “respond” to music in a manner consistent with Nietzsche’s animalization of the aesthetic? For Nietzsche, music inspires an upwelling of affect that invigorates the entire organism. As a “doctrine of intoxication,” music has very little to do with calling forth the kind of linguistic responses that interested Lacan and very much to do with channeling bodily reactions toward a state of power-drenched “perfection.”⁶⁰ In opposition to Hanslick, Nietzsche viewed the body’s reactivity as an active rather than a passive force, one that generates the feelings of intensity, plenitude, and overflowing sensuality inspired by aesthetic experience. Yet something is missing from this one-sided self-aggrandizement, and that is the position of music as other. Consider once again Herder’s account of animal sounds as both the product of bodily reactions and bids for a sympathetic response. Revisiting this theme thirty years after the origin of language essay, Herder argued that a human being is able to “lend his sympathy to every aroused being whose voice reaches him,” while animals respond primarily to the sounds of their own species.⁶¹ Music, as the sonic arousal of resonant bodies, is one such voice — “the *answering voice* of the one who is feeling.”⁶² Herder’s alternative to Nietzsche’s solipsism construes human affect as a silent call to which music is primed to respond. When listeners “answer” music with yet another round of feeling, they both react to music’s sonic power and respond to it as the voice of an other. *Sympathy* is Herder’s name for the fusion of reaction and response that underpins the aesthetics of sound.

An embodied conception of musical experience in which reaction and response flow into one another opens out onto the wider field of animal sound production in a manner suggestive for aesthetics after humanism. Herder’s notion of music as a special kind of voice implies that the technique of call and response not only infuses many different styles of music but is also embedded in music’s very reception. In this respect, music shares an affinity with activities deeply rooted in animal behavior. Like humans, many animals engage in vocalizations meant to be recognized and responded to by others, although these others do not occupy the position of Lacan’s Other. Numerous species deploy “contact calls” whose unique character serves to keep a group or family together. Some animals, such as elephants and meerkats, use different calls to indicate current location versus the intention to move, while disc-winged bats native to Costa Rica emit separate “inquiry” and “response” calls during roosting.⁶³

Flying bats of this species can distinguish between calls belonging to members of their own or another group, an ability that helps them to choose where to roost for the day. Such behavior far exceeds the narrow scope of involuntary reactions and may even resemble practices that were essential to the origins of human music. Thomas Geissmann's work on gibbon songs proposes that apes and humans shared an "ancestral form of loud call" that served to define territory, intimidate others, broadcast location or announce danger, and promote group cohesion. "Probably the most likely function of early hominid music," Geissmann asserts, was to "reinforce the unity of a social group toward other groups," a purpose still discernible in hymns, military marches, sporting songs, and allegiances to particular musical styles.⁶⁴

That's all well and good, a Hanslick-style formalist might retort, but functional music, with its baggage of vestigial animality, does not represent the most cultivated form of music, which is predicated on autonomy. Yet the points of contact between human and animal music-making are not exhausted by their social functions. Ethologist Peter Marler has proposed the term "phonocoding" to describe the recombinant vocalizations of certain birds and whales, whose calls are ripe for the kind of formal analysis so far reserved for human music. Unlike calls that transmit information such as location or impending danger, phonocoding involves stringing together sound patterns in differing orders by learning from the songs of others. As Marler explains, "animal songs that are learned and that depend on phonocoding for signal diversity are, like human music, primarily nonsymbolic and affective."⁶⁵ Given Hanslick's recognition that music regularly inspires feelings in listeners (although he did not believe such feelings should be a matter for learned discourse), music under his formalist description could very well be deemed nonsymbolic and affective. Marler's conclusions confirm that formal manipulation of sound patterns, the *sine qua non* of autonomous music, is not an exclusively human ability. Indeed, Marler's description of the songs of male winter wrens stirs thoughts of the recurring melodic and rhythmic motifs of human music:

Each song in the repertoire contains phrases drawn from a large pool that recur again and again, but in each song type they are arranged in a different sequence. Evidently what happens when a young male learns to sing is that he acquires a set of songs from the adults he hears and breaks them down into phrases or segments. He then creates variety and enlarges his repertoire by rearranging these phrases or segments in different patterns.⁶⁶

While such songs serve to identify the singer and may benefit the animals in other ways, they do not appear to serve functions typical of “lexicoded” vocalizations, which encode meaning into individual vocal units. The wealth of birdsong repertoires, Marler writes, generates “sensory diversity” rather than “enrich[ing] meaning.”⁶⁷

The growing body of work on animals suggests that Derrida’s skepticism regarding Lacan’s separation of human response from animal reaction should also be directed to the distinction between human music and animal sound, especially when that distinction turns on specious conjectures concerning autonomy versus functionality. In one of the bolder passages of his essay, Marler encourages readers to hear the repertoires of phonocoding birds “as providing aesthetic enjoyment or as alleviating boredom in singer and listener.”⁶⁸ Perhaps Hegel was not entirely wrong, then, to imagine that birds sing for the “immediate enjoyment of self,” just as humans noodle around on instruments or hum snippets of song while they work.⁶⁹ Hegel’s and Marler’s thoughts are speculative, to be sure. But for those who envision more harmonious relations between humans and nonhumans, a speculative aesthetics that folds human music-making into the broader sphere of animal physiology while admitting animal sounds into an expanded notion of the aesthetic may represent a vital step forward.

• Notes •

¹ Jacques Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe, 121-46 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

² *Ibid.*, 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128. Affect theory has its roots in the physiologically oriented work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins (see the four volumes of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* [New York: Springer, 1962-92]). Much of what is currently pursued under the rubric of affect theory in the humanities, however, makes little reference to empirical studies in physiology or psychology; it more often takes its bearings from certain strains of cultural studies (say, the work of Raymond Williams) or philosophy (especially Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987]). See, for example, the diverse set of approaches collected in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For a critical perspective on affect theory, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 434-72, and responses by Adam Frank and Elizabeth A. Wilson, Charles Altieri, and Leys in *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2012): 870-91.

⁶ Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005). In a meditation on Derrida’s essay, Donna Haraway suggests that animals can “engage one another’s gaze responsively,” an ability that in her view demands more searching responses from philosophers than Derrida’s own. See *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 22, emphasis original.

⁷ Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” 128.

⁸ For example, music has been shown to affect the autonomic nervous system by inducing changes in such vital measures as heart and breathing rates, although these effects are little understood. See Robert J. Ellis and Julian F. Thayer, “Music and Autonomic Nervous System (Dys)Function,” *Music Perception* 27, no. 4 (2010): 317-26. Ellis and Thayer note that “Humans interact with music, both consciously and unconsciously, at behavioral, emotional, and physiological levels” (323); research into music’s origins tends to focus on the mechanisms supporting this interaction. See Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004); David Huron, “Is Music an Evolutionary Adaptation?” in *The Biological Foundations of Music*, ed. Robert J. Zatorre and Isabelle Peretz (New York: The New York Academy of Science, 2001); and the collection *The Origins of Music*, ed. Nils L. Wallin, Björn Merker, and Steven Brown (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000).

⁹ Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” trans. Maurice Goldbloom, in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 292.

¹⁰ Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” 139, emphasis original.

¹¹ *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition in the German Enlightenment: Selected Writings of Johann Georg Sulzer and Heinrich Christoph Koch*, ed. Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82. For a current perspective on music’s close ties to movement, see Jessica Phillips-Silver, “On the Meaning of Movement in Music, Development and the Brain,” *Contemporary Music Review* 28, no. 3 (2009): 293-314.

¹² In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche wrote, “The music of Apollo was Doric architectonics in tones ... The very element which forms the essence of Dionysian music (and hence of music in general) is carefully excluded as un-Apollinian – namely, the emotional power of the tone...” See *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 40.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” 270.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, “Über den fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 14.

¹⁵ Baker and Christensen, *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition*, 81.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸ Matthew Riley, *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2004), chapter 3 (“Sulzer and the Aesthetic Force of Music”).

¹⁹ Baker and Christensen, *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition*, 91. Taking the opposite view, the English music historian Thomas Busby wrote in 1819, “The notes of birds, as a living melody, a melody not subject to chance, but no less constantly than agreeably saluting the sense, could not but excite human imagination.” He quotes Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* as the source of the idea: “Then with their liquid lays the birds began / To teach the ear of imitative man.” See Thomas Busby, *A General History of Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 4.

²⁰ Baker and Christensen, *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition*, 93.

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² Ibid. Agesilaus II was a Spartan King whose exploits were described by Plutarch; see *ibid.*, n. 1.

²³ Ibid. Derrida places much of the blame for this view on Descartes (“And Say the Animal Responded?” 121, 143). A century later, the influential Swiss physiologist Albrecht von Haller limited “sensibility” in animals (“in whom the existence of a soul is not so clear”) to their capacity to experience pain, ascribing the rest of their seeming responsiveness to mere “irritability.” See Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 21.

²⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 87.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 91.

²⁷ Herder thought that human language originated in the power of reason or “reflectiveness” (*Besonnenheit*), which he believed to be unique to mankind. Yet he remained remarkably attuned to the kinship of all animals. In the article “On Image, Poetry, and Fable” (1787), Herder proposed that “metaphysics, that prideful ignoramus, ought to give up the arrogant delusion that the humblest animal is *wholly* unlike man in its activities and aptitudes, for this notion has been amply disproven by natural history. In their whole *disposition of life* animals are organizations just like man is; they merely lack human organization and the prodigious instrument of our abstract, symbolic memories: speech.” See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 368, emphasis original.

²⁸ Baker and Christensen, *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition*, 90.

²⁹ Ibid., 85.

³⁰ Nina Noeske has emphasized the gender bias evident in Hanslick’s endeavor to subordinate the body to the mind; see her essay “Body and Soul, Content and Form: On Hanslick’s Use of the Organism Metaphor,” in *Rethinking Hanslick: Music, Formalism, and Expression*, ed. Nicole Grimes, Siobhán Donovan, and Wolfgang Marx, 236-58 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013).

³¹ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 58.

³² Ibid., 50.

³³ Ibid., 58.

³⁴ Ibid., 58, 20.

³⁵ Ibid., 58.

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

³⁷ Ibid., 60.

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁴¹ Ibid., 61.

⁴² Ibid., 54.

⁴³ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 62.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 63. For the original German passage, see Dietmar Strauss, *Eduard Hanslick: Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, vol. 1 (Mainz: Schott, 1990), 136.
- ⁴⁸ Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 29.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 60.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 29.
- ⁵² Ibid., 54.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 56.
- ⁵⁴ See Kevin Karnes, *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Modern Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Part I. In an essay titled “Aesthetic Amputations: Absolute Music and the Deleted Endings of Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*” (*19th-Century Music* 36, no. 1 [2012]: 3-23), Mark Evan Bonds explores the tension between Hanslick’s stated objectivism and the Idealist overtones of his treatise.
- ⁵⁵ Christopher Small recommends a similar approach in his thought-provoking book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).
- ⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 270, 422.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 422, 434.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 285 - 86. I take the notion of human exceptionalism from Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 32. Deleuze and Guattari develop Nietzsche’s trope of “becoming animal” – and associate it intimately with music – in chapter 10 of *A Thousand Plateaus*.
- ⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 422.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 439 n. 145, 422.
- ⁶¹ The quotation comes from Herder’s *Kalligone* (1800); see Edward A. Lippman, *Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader*, vol. 2 (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1988), 34.
- ⁶² Ibid., 36, emphasis original.
- ⁶³ See Gloriana Chaverri, Erin H. Gillam, and Thomas H. Kunz, “A Call-and-Response System Facilitates Group Cohesion Among Disc-Winged Bats,” *Behavioral Ecology* 24, no. 2 (2013): 481-87.
- ⁶⁴ Thomas Geissmann, “Gibbon Songs and Human Music from an Evolutionary Perspective,” in *The Origins of Music*, 119.
- ⁶⁵ Peter Marler, “Origins of Music and Speech: Insights from Animals,” in *The Origins of Music*, 31.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 39.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 40.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 409. Some birds also appear to dance for the immediate enjoyment of self. See the study of Snowball, the sulphur-crested cockatoo, by Aniruddh D. Patel et al.: “Experimental Evidence for Synchronization to a Musical Beat in a Nonhuman Animal,” *Current Biology* 19 (2009): 827-30.

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COLLISION

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013)
Animals and Aesthetics

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Hageman, Andrew. "Dead Whale Watching." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 98-110.

ABSTRACT

This collision explores ecological aesthetics through two encounters with dead whales: one literary and one osseous. The literary animal is the taxidermied whale that drives the narrative of László Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, and the osseous encounter involves a bench made of one jawbone and one rib from a baleen whale. Considered together, the immense totality of the taxidermied whale and the metonymic bones provide unsettling aesthetic insights into ecological matters of interconnectedness – of the relationships between parts and wholes and amongst parts within a whole or wholes. Through analyses of the visual, literary, and haptic aspects of these encounters, this paper raises questions about what it means to perceive and think about ecology through aesthetic encounters with non-human animal bones and taxidermied bodies.

KEYWORDS

ecology, László Krasznahorkai, whale, taxidermy, bone

Dead Whale Watching

Andrew Hageman



This collision emerges from two encounters with dead whales: one literary and one osseous.¹ The literary encounter takes place in László Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, which is about a rural Hungarian town where revolutionary unrest has been fomenting for some time. When a traveling circus that features a taxidermied whale arrives, the cetaceous spectacle unleashes pent-up local forces in widespread and anarchic violence. The second, osseous encounter entails my direct haptic interaction with a whale-bone bench comprised of a jaw-bone seat and a rib-bone back (Figure 1).

While Krasznahorkai's novel depicts the whale as a visual spectacle, this bench of bones combines the visual with the tactile. In fact, I read the novel over the course of several sittings with my back resting in the curve



Figure 1. Whale-bone bench comprised of a jawbone seat and rib back. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

of the rib, and I would set the book down occasionally to explore the smooth flat surfaces and rough porous tips of each bone with my hands.

Both of these dead whales prompt us to experience, imagine, and theorize the aesthetics of our encounters with non-human animals. This particular collision of a whole whale with two whale parts gives us two different aesthetic experiences that are both tied to ecology – to the relationships between parts and wholes and amongst parts within a whole or wholes. The novel’s protagonist experiences the whole whale as a massive totality, too immense to view and comprehend completely. By contrast, the dual-bone bench functions metonymically as a reference to an absent whole or wholes since we do not know if these remainders come from one whale or two. Both of these postmortem beings-turned-art provoke us to ask what messages we might be sending to ourselves, via their remains, in this Anthropocene era of mass species extinction. I want to suggest that we must examine both dead whales to begin answering this question as their collision invokes a complex response to parts and wholes together (Figure 2).

• Dead Whale Whole •

The taxidermied whale in Krasznahorkai's novel makes two crucial appearances. Each appearance creates an ecologically significant literary aesthetic impact. Initially, the townsfolk see an image of the whale printed on freshly-pasted advertising posters that exclaim: "A SPECTACLE! AN EXTRAORDINARY SPECTACLE! THE BIGGEST WHALE IN THE WORLD AND OTHER SENSATIONAL SECRETS OF NATURE."² The posters frame the animal as an object to look at with fascination and wonder. In particular, the visual image at the center of the poster underscores the whale's position in the visual or scopic realm, as it depicts not only the whale but also two adult people and a child looking and pointing at it. What makes the poster especially significant, though, is the way its inclusion as a full-page image within the novel draws our attention to the highly extraordinary style of the prose that it disrupts. Throughout the entire novel, individual sentences may extend over multiple pages, and Krasznahorkai does not use paragraph breaks to provide readers with predetermined opportunities to pause. This relentless verbal flow presents an account of lives entangled in overlapping narratives without dividing the presentation into units of meaning ready for consumption. Instead, the novel, like a taxidermied whale's body, presents a massive body covered in lines that tell in various ways of lives lived and lived with others. As such, the literary aesthetic experience of reading Krasznahorkai's unremitting prose style formally parallels the experience of looking at the immense and immensely textured body of a taxidermied whale.

To examine the ecological element of this literary form paralleling an encounter with a whale, I turn to a specific point of comparison with Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*. Many readers have remarked how *Moby Dick* is an aptly bulky novel for the bulky eponymous animal driving its narrative.³ While we could go into the specific limits of that claim, I want to emphasize the construction of *Moby Dick* as a series of 130 quite short chapters.⁴ Melville's highly individuated form approaches the totality of the whale through a combination of analytical frameworks that each break the animal down into units for study and comprehension — anatomy, taxonomy, its placements within human economies — in direct contrast to Krasznahorkai's unbroken approach that, as an example illustrates below, revels in the overwhelming impossibility of total views or comprehension.

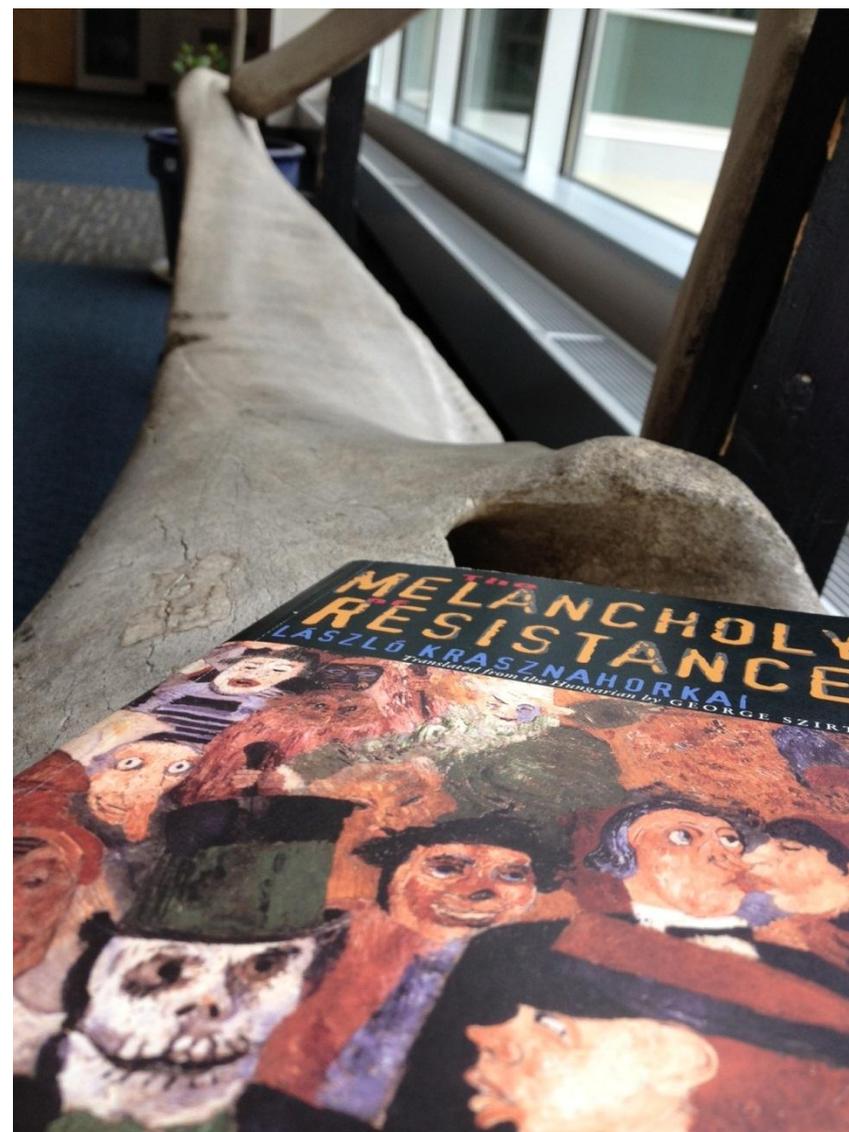


Figure 2. The whales collide. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

Here I am referring to the unbroken prose that is brought into sharp relief by the circus's promotional poster. The poster, after all, promises the revelation of secrets of nature to those who come and see the whale. Yet, Krasznahorkai depicts revelation only through the eyes of Valuska, and the secret he sees is one of impossible comprehension. Thus, even as both novels depict people driven by whale encounters to extreme thoughts and bodily actions, *Moby Dick* formally contains the whale as an animal object approached via dissection and empirical study, while *The Melancholy of Resistance* depicts the whale as an animal object that fascinates us even as it remains beyond our full comprehension.

In the following passage, Krasznahorkai's whale encounter forces humans to acknowledge that, regardless of what we can make an animal other mean to us, it is also a totality that remains ultimately unknown and unknowable to us. The protagonist, Valuska, walks to the circus, pays the admission fee, and encounters the animal:

Seeing the whale did not mean he could grasp the full meaning of the sight, since to comprehend the enormous tail fin, the dried, cracked, steel-grey carapace and, halfway down the strangely bloated hulk, the top fin, which alone measured several metres, appeared a singularly hopeless task. It was just too big and too long; Valuska simply couldn't see it all at once, and failed even to get a proper look at its dead eyes.⁵

Valuska connects with multiple lines, fissures, opaque parts, and the ungraspable entirety of the whale but not with its eyes. This provocative exclusion diverges from a common literary convention whereby human beings make powerful, meaningful eye contact with non-human animals. One of the most well-known example of this convention is the passage in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, where he recounts recklessly shooting a wolf and being deeply moved when he approaches the dying animal and sees "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes."⁶ Leopold's passage has exerted a powerful environmental aesthetic influence on the literary convention in which human beings experience epiphanies by connecting with non-human animals eye-to-eye. Such eye-contact scenes typically deliver an epiphanic recognition of the animal's individual subjectivity and/or the impression that the animal studies the human observer just as much as she presumed to study the animal other.

But the power of Valuska's aesthetic experience of the whale has precisely nothing to do with its eyes as he does not even respond to the unblinking glass eyes installed by the taxidermist.⁷ I will claim here that this failure to make eye contact is a liberating precondition for the aesthetic response we experience through Valuska. The eye-contact convention almost always leads to a recognition of the non-human animal's equality relative to humans. While assertions of equality may help to critique anthropocentric hierarchies, they permit fundamental assumptions on which the assertion of equality is based (for instance the presumed superiority of forms of consciousness that manifest in a creature's gaze) to remain in place; and these assumptions have proven all too effective as foundations for the exploitation of human and non-human

beings alike. If we neglect to examine what equality entails, we cannot reach truly radical insights into what it means to live together in the overlapping meshes of ecosystems.

Because Valuska bypasses the whale's eyes and responds instead to the cracks in its fins and desiccated carapace, his aesthetic experience of the whale includes the stories of its lived experience and its perpetuation in taxidermy after death: stories that, in lines and fissures, are written into the whale's body. Crucially, Valuska does not respond to the enormous corpus covered in myriad marks by trying to organize them into a comprehensive order – a totality. On the contrary, Valuska seems to perceive the whale as, paradoxically, a whole in itself and as a discrete part of multiple grander wholes. The narrator informs us that "it wasn't so much the mouth, nor the sheer incomprehensible size of the creature that most astonished him, but the full and certain general knowledge purveyed by the publicity that it had witnessed the wonders of an infinitely strange and infinitely distant world," and after Valuska leaves the whale he continues to imagine it before him,

unfocused yet somehow in its entirety, that innocent carcass vaster than imagination which even now filled up his mind, and left him thinking, "How enormous! ... How extraordinary a creation! What a deeply mysterious person the Creator must be to amuse himself with such extraordinary creatures!"⁸

He imagines the existence of structures and systems, from ecosystems to planet to universe, in which he and the whale are parts, yet he does not imagine that he could fully see or know them.

This is significant because the whale, suspended as it is between its unified organismic life and its post-*rigor mortis* transformation into a de-organized mass teeming with life and emerging ecosystems, could be considered an object rendered fully available for human observation, comprehension, and control. Taxidermy is commonly disparaged along these lines as a blunt and brutal exertion of human domination over once-living animals. But in Valuska's eyes, the whale remains out of control and utterly uncanny as a thing both dead and alive, such that in its state of decelerated and modified decomposition, this animal has become an object of startling aesthetic power.

• Dead Whale Parts • ---

Valuska traces the textures of the dead whale with his eyes, but my own experience of sitting on a whale-bone bench entailed haptic explorations of the surface textures and structural curvatures of whale parts. Although the origin of this particular bench is lost, it is a doubly rare artifact.

Nicholas Redman, the foremost whale-bone art expert, has found only ten bone seats in all of the British Isles during more than thirty years of research.⁹ These are predominantly stools made from individual vertebrae, and most are quite intricate and ornate. Unlike its typical companion seats, the whale-bone bench discussed here exhibits a clean, simple design, without complex architecture or scrimshandered carvings. In the absence of complex patterns to attract our attention or suggest some kind of narrative whole, the metonymic functions of these bones are laid bare. Unlike Krasznahorkai's taxidermied whale, these unadorned bench bones are presented as fragments, parts of a disassembled whole repurposed into a new whole that overtly refers to the earlier and one might say fuller whole.

Thus, one metonymic function of the bones is their allusion to a particular once-living whale – this individual that had a family, ate, swam, communicated, and was perhaps working on projects. Conjuring images and thoughts of this particular whale with the weight of one's body supported by its disjointed jaw-bone, I recalled the "Observing Reason" section in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where Hegel discusses bone and Spirit.¹⁰ In the process of dismissing phrenology, Hegel claims that haptic contact with bone – feeling its weight, contours, and textures with one's hands – provides a necessary material aesthetic catalyst for theorizing what it means to be and to become. In the case of the bench, with the soft brain tissues and eyeball jellies long gone, these bones remain, rigid matter taken from a dead body and assembled into apparatuses of rest and contemplation. Jaw and rib have been joined together to invite us to think upon them, even to read about dead whales upon them.

While sitting, reading, and thinking upon them, I was struck, like Valuska, by cracks and crevices. In my own experience, I felt and followed the lines written into each bone with my fingers, but they also stippled



Figure 3. Contours and textures of the jawbone at its joint. Photo by Andrew Hageman.

temporary patterns into my living flesh as it pressed into them. And yet, in this highly intimate moment of contact, I felt like Valuska as I encountered not communication or communion with the dead whale, but the untraversable chasm between myself and the whale. In place of epistemological totalization of the whale, the bench offers a synthesis of

opaque surfaces and mysterious black holes at the bones' ends where the animal's very marrow formerly pulsed and oozed (Figure 3).

Amongst the parts of the whale that remain inaccessible to human observers is its embodied experience of being in the world. It lived as a part of numerous interpenetrating ecosystems. But while human beings intersect with animals in many of these ecosystems, the contacts made consist of forces exerted within structures rather than intimate empathetic access to non-human animal others. As Hegel implied, the bony metonym of the bench points past the individual towards grander wholes, which, having to do with being, include ecology. Krasznahorkai's whale did that too. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it was as a taxidermied object in a circus tent far from the ocean that this whale de-naturalized Valuska's ideas of whales and opened the way for a revolutionary aesthetic encounter. The whole whale body and the bony parts each offer human beings aesthetic contact with whales, but even as they provide certain kinds of access, a critical mind will perceive these artifacts as the ultimate inaccessibility, or withdrawnness, of the whales, leaving us to work with the territory we do find in common.

To pursue the osseous ecological aesthetic still further, the notion that people might pass through a whale's jaw *en route* to epiphanies about grander wholes and one's role within them is quite familiar. Recall the Jewish prophet Jonah finding confirmation of his belief in God deep inside the stomach of the whale. Or, less theologically inclined, it was inside the whale that the woodcarver Geppetto recognized the structure of familial love so deeply that Pinocchio was ultimately granted human status by the Fairy with Turquoise Hair. Yet Jonah's and Geppetto's revelations arrived after they had passed through the jaws into the warmth of living tissues, and the womb-like effect re-contains their epiphanies within a canny human framework. But anyone who sits on this bench lingers on the bare jaw-bone, feeling the palpable yet ultimately intangible structure of human reality. Just as the taxidermied whale applies a handbrake to the momentum and dynamics of individual and systemic flows, the aestheticized bones disrupt material ebbs and flows, creating a temporary eddy where people can sit and begin to glimpse the compelling but ultimately elusive structures of ecology.

• Dead Whales Meet •

To conclude without closing this dead whale collision, I leave you with the following sets of questions in which the whales' impact reverberates.

(1) Do aesthetic encounters with dead animals transmit distorted messages, like dreams, that we keep sending ourselves because we have not yet fully received them? Whether or not these aesthetic encounters emanate from a kind of ecological unconscious, can they help us to avoid ecological catastrophes? (2) Besides whales, which other non-human animals circulate as ecological symbols in the social imaginary? How can we exfoliate the symbolism we have attached to them in order to respect these beings anew, in the true meaning of *re-spect*: to see them again? (3) What does it mean to identify preserved dead animals as powerful ecological aesthetic objects? And, what are the ethical stakes, ecological and otherwise, of dead animal art and aesthetics?

• Notes •

¹ Thanks to Judit Fabian for inspiring an interest in Hungarian literature, to Amanda Hamp for responding to an early draft, and to the *Evental Aesthetics* reviewers for insightful feedback.

² László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, trans. George Szirtes (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2002), 26.

³ Two common phrases that appear in writing about Melville's *Moby Dick* are "Whale of a Tale" and "Big Book about the Big Whale," the former also referring to a musical adaptation of the novel, and both expressions positing equations of the novel's bulk and its eponymous sperm whale. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Viking, 2011) makes its own whale-novel juxtapositions while using Melville's own words from Chapter 104 "The Fossil Whale."

⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or The Whale* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1981).

⁵ Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 88.

⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 130.

⁷ Bela Tarr's brilliant 2000 film adaptation, *Werckmeister Harmonies*, does include two shots of people looking into the whale's glass eyes. The scenes of greatest moment, however, use medium and long shots of people next to the enormous body set against the town square in post-uprising ruins.

⁸ Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, 89-91.

⁹ Nicholas Redman, *Whales' Bones of the British Isles* (Wiltshire: Nicholas Redman, 2004), 129-130. Redman tells also of a bench made from a whale's skull and its first vertebrae in St. Nicholas's Cathedral in Great Yarmouth nicknamed "Devil's Seat." For centuries, people perpetuated the story that ill fortune would befall anyone who sat on the bone bench, and they kept it just outside the church.

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 185-210.

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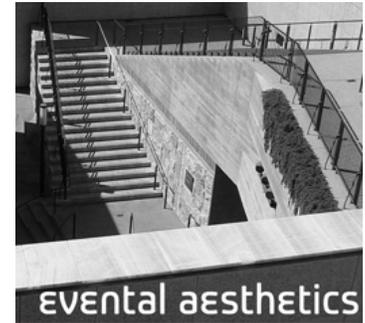
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ABSTRACT

The process of optimizing psychical distance to achieve the best possible aesthetic effect has been well-known among philosophers of art ever since Edward Bullough formulated the concept in 1912. Although it is typically analyzed as a one-way process, it nevertheless becomes a reciprocal or intersubjective process when the object of our aesthetic perception is our "other." This is equally true for animal "others" as for our fellow human "others." Anything animate can fix us in its gaze and thereby prompt or even force us toward self-confrontation as an object of someone or something else's perception. This reciprocity may be manifest as a sort of psychological *pas de deux* between the two confronting subjects, each confronting the other as object, each recognizing the other as subject, and each confronting its own self as recognizer of this relationship and recipient of this attention. The level of our awareness of our being an object for some "other" subject has a proportionately significant impact on our aesthetic perception of this "other," i.e., the fact that an "other" perceives us adds a dimension of "unnatural" intersubjectivity which changes our aesthetic appreciation of that "other."

KEYWORDS

aesthetic distance, phenomenology, intentionality, Edward Bullough,
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Bullough, Pepper, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenology of Perceiving Animals

Eric v.d. Luft

In 1912 Edward Bullough introduced a profound concept in the philosophy of art.¹ He pointed out that our perception of a fog at sea differs markedly according to whether or not we feel that our ship is in danger. His insight moved beyond even that of Edmund Burke, who wrote: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."² Extrapolating from this extreme maritime case to experience in general, Bullough says that if we can create between subject and object an artificial "psychical distance" which allows us to ignore any present danger, utilitarian considerations, etc. – i.e., block out reality, as it were – then and only then can we gain aesthetic pleasure, the "intense relish and enjoyment" of the phenomenon *per se*.³ Such a perceived or invented distance is not so much between oneself and the fog as "between our own self and its affections."⁴ It is transformative and unnatural. The process of creating this distance is not relativism; it is intentionality. That is, it is

not a meaningless Protagorean choice of how to perceive things; nor is it a nearly automatic Burkean process which produces an “unnatural tension” between the perceiving subject and the dangerous object of perception and thus engenders an aesthetic feeling of the sublime; but rather it is the crucial choice which determines whether or not we can enhance our subjectivity by appreciating something in terms of sublimity, grace, or quality.⁵ In other words, Bullough’s intentional unnaturalism may be seen as a development of Burke’s “natural” unnaturalism.

Burke argues that what seems to our senses vast, overwhelming, strong, inescapable, dark, gloomy, terrifying, rough, or painful may appear “sublime,” while what seems relatively small, delicate, weak, ethereal, bright, cheery, harmless, smooth, or pleasurable may appear “beautiful.” He speaks of the “force” of objects producing “effects” on our “passions,” but his theory is nevertheless subjectivist because of its focus on human differences in perceptiveness, receptivity, and taste. Yet no subjectivity or individual difference could deny the power of imminent danger, e.g., shipwreck in fog, consumption by fire, or attack by a wild animal. Unlike Burke, Bullough realizes that the power of danger could be transformed or – pardon the pun – sublimated. Danger may be overcome, even if it is staring us in the face, by intentionally or creatively changing the very nature of the experience, and thus gaining aesthetic appreciation of a phenomenon. To ignore the danger would be foolhardy and perhaps even insane, but we can often, even while striving to keep ourselves safe, call upon our imagination to render the danger less “dangerous” and more “aesthetic,” i.e., we can turn ourselves toward an experience of sublimity, beauty, power, or grace, even when danger lurks within the very experience.

More philosophers since then have addressed this question of distance between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, most of them reacting from some kind of naturalistic point of view against Bullough’s unnaturalism while at the same time conceding his main point that distance matters. Naturalism holds that art is co-extensive and continuous with the rest of the world, that it is of essentially the same character as the rest of the world, and that, accordingly, it is and should be experienced in just the same way that everything else is experienced. Unnaturalism holds that art is epistemologically or even metaphysically distinct from the rest of the world and that, accordingly, the experience of art is in essence different from all other kinds of experience. Among the naturalists, Stephen Pepper writes of distance as purely physical, i.e., we enjoy a painting best when the lighting, viewpoint, and angle are just right; we enjoy music best when

the tone, volume, and acoustics are just right; etc.⁶ Hence physical distance feeds, informs, and to some extent determines psychical distance. For example, a distant fog at sea differs not only in degree of danger, but also in degree of sublimity and other aesthetic values, from an enveloping fog at sea. Pepper achieves such optimal distance for aesthetic appreciation not, as with Bullough, by psychological acrobatics inside our minds or by denying reality, but by trial and error in the normal physical realm, finding the best place to stand in the gallery or the best place to sit in the concert hall. We thus create a "consummatory field" which is entirely natural in both process and result. Yet this field becomes instantly psychical. Pepperian distance is thus central to and prerequisite for Bulloughian distance, i.e., Pepper's naturalism and Bullough's unnaturalism connect with, contrast to, complement, and illuminate each other.

When our object of immediate perception and potential aesthetic enjoyment is animate like ourselves, then Hegel's dialectic of the self and its "other" comes into play; i.e., hereby ensues the direct confrontation of two self-consciousnesses, which may become manifest as a life-and-death struggle. Even though such confrontations are often existential crises, they, being at least partially sensuous, are also not without their aesthetic dimension. Any animate "other," whether human or animal, can fix us in its gaze and thereby prompt or even force us toward self-confrontation as the object of the other subject's perception. In the particular subject/object duality of self and "other," a certain mutuality or reciprocity obtains. This reciprocity may appear as a sort of psychological *pas de deux* between two subjects, each confronting the "other" as object, but each at the same time recognizing the "other" as subject, and each confronting its own self as recognizer of this relationship and recipient of this attention. That is, we are not only subject each unto ourselves, but also potential object capable of becoming some "other's" experience; and likewise, our animate object is not only object but also subject for itself, for which we are its object. It is its self and we are its "other." This point is worth remembering in any of our dealings with animals. Nevertheless, for Hegel and many other philosophers, reciprocity or intersubjectivity is not possible between humans and animals.

German idealism originated the idea of intersubjectivity and Hegel brought the philosophical concept of the self and its "other" to a high level of sophistication, but neither Hegel nor any German idealist acknowledged any genuine "other" for a human except another human.⁷ For Hegel, animals were creatures of instinct and intuition, inclined only to find and consume food, with no capacity for intersubjectivity, and self-evidently

beneath the human ontological level of self-conscious introspection.⁸ But however much we may wish to go against Hegel on this point and anthropomorphize animals or attribute to them “human” characteristics such as intelligence, empathy, loyalty, love, etc., we must admit the likelihood that any intersubjective relationship between human and animal, even if mutually communicative and thus beyond a mere subject/object relationship, is not only asymmetrical but also probably approaches a master/servant relationship. In general, such a relationship would apply only between humans and domestic animals, since intersubjectivity does not usually exist between humans and wild animals except, in a limited way, in confrontational circumstances. Genuine reciprocity would be impossible in an asymmetrical relationship, i.e., in any relationship in which the two parties are not ontologically or socially equal.⁹ Surely Timmy and Lassie, the Lone Ranger and Silver, Koko and All Ball, and other famous pairs of loving interspecies friends would disagree.

We have no direct knowledge of any subjectivity except our own, and to know intersubjectivity is even more problematic. We do not experience the subjectivity of the “other”; rather, we infer it. The “other” is, first of all, an object, yet an object which we may creatively transform, to the mutual advantage of both self and “other,” subject and object, by inferring that the “other” possesses subjective traits of consciousness, self-consciousness, and sensitivity such as we already know to exist within ourselves as subject. As far as we can verify, such inferential transformation is a function of our imagination, and readily slips into anthropomorphism if our perceived object is an animal. With human “others,” our natural familiarity with our own humanity makes it easy for us to assume that they are like us as sentient, intelligent beings; but with animal “others,” this assumption is perhaps not quite so easy. Yet in order to transcend the merely sensual relationship between any two living bodies, at least one of them must move from experiencing the “other” as object to believing in this “other” as subject. This requires using the imagination to create a working belief in symmetrical intersubjectivity.

The phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty toward intersubjectivity, subject/object perception, and interspecies relationships moves beyond Hegel and helps to elucidate these issues as well as whatever tension might exist between Pepperian naturalism and Bulloughian unnaturalism. Merleau-Ponty claims a fundamental difference between human and animal perception, i.e., humans intentionally perceive the whole world, or their particular chosen part of it, while animals instrumentally perceive only their own immediate environment.¹⁰

Moreover, following these two distinctive modes of perception, both humans and animals form associations within their own species and use linguistic and quasi-linguistic symbols toward this end, but humans “haunt” one another with a level of intimacy that animals do not achieve.¹¹

The phrase, “perceiving animals,” in the title is deliberately ambiguous, referring both to our directing our powers of perception toward animals as objects, and to animals themselves as perceivers, directing their powers of perception toward their own worlds, which include as objects of perception: us. Insofar as we know that animals are capable of perception, we, at least in our encounters with them, should give them the benefit of the doubt that they can also interpret, imagine, and think creatively, even if only instrumentally or in their own self-interest. Consider this true story:

[Isabel Stearns] was always calm in desperate situations, never flustered, never at a loss for what to do. ... [W]hen she was young, ... hiking alone in Yosemite National Park, she was suddenly confronted by a bear blocking the narrow path. She reached into her knapsack, unpacked her lunch, and threw a few sandwiches beyond the bear. When the beast went to retrieve the food, she continued along the path. Of course, in her natural modesty, she claimed that this was in fact only a small bear, and so that there had never really been any cause for fear.¹²

Here is a clear example of a Bulloughian creative transformation of a potentially dangerous experience. Burke’s book considers animals in some depth, discusses the sublimity or beauty of their various species, and analyzes the terror, pity, disgust, and other emotions that they might inspire in us; yet nowhere does he imagine anything like this. The encounter between Stearns and the bear is an exception to the general rule that intersubjectivity does not exist between humans and wild animals. The handling and result of the situation was entirely due to both Stearns’s and the bear’s perception and interpretation of it. They implicitly cooperated for a resolution. She did not control the bear, as she might control a pet dog, but influenced it, manipulated the situation, and was thus the dominant actor in this bilateral drama. Theirs was not a master/servant relationship, but was nevertheless asymmetrical and intersubjective. The distance between them was both Pepperian or physical and Bulloughian or psychical. In either case, it could be interpreted as optimal. While maintaining optimal Pepperian distance,

Stearns's intentionality created optimal Bulloughian distance which transformed the dangerous state of affairs into one which both she (through the sense of sight) and the bear (through the senses of smell and taste) could enjoy aesthetically. We might say that their encounter was more a dance than a confrontation. There was no winner and no loser, but both went away happy, perhaps even reconciled. We are reminded of Dewey, for whom the preserved integrity and individuality of confronting or dialectical opposites is at least as important pragmatically and psychologically as their reconciliation, and who writes that reconciliation is the immediate harmony that is felt when humans cooperate with their world rather than compete with it.¹³ Such felt harmony, *qua* reconciliation, is an aesthetic experience insofar as our sensitivity is heightened when we open ourselves to cooperation, i.e., when we see qualities in our object which are neither immediately obvious nor in fact "objective."

Merleau-Ponty's fellow phenomenologist and near disciple, Mikel Dufrenne, claims that some phenomena tempt us to perceive them as aesthetic objects, rather than as utilitarian instruments, practical helps or hindrances, uninteresting stuff, imminent dangers, or according to any of the rest of the subjective meanings that we typically assign to perceived objects.¹⁴ Similarly, albeit further removed from Merleau-Ponty, Arthur Danto writes that some objects, such as Andy Warhol's assemblage of Brillo boxes, can be "transfigured" into artworks that possess aesthetic or metaphorical properties, even as they remain everyday objects with commercial associations their and instrumental value, their everyday character, their crude appeal, or how we may prefer to perceive them.¹⁵ This is what he means by "transfiguring the commonplace," shifting our perception from the "vulgar" to the aesthetic, even though the perceived object does not change physically or fundamentally – *in itself* – but only situationally or psychologically *for us*.

Imagination is the key to aesthetic appreciation in all these cases. What we do with the phenomena of our perception is what makes them what they are. Imagination is the bridge, if we choose to travel it, from naturalism to unnaturalism. We can increase, decrease, or change the quality of the distance between subject and object, either physically *à la* Pepper or psychically *à la* Bullough, or both. The process is more complicated when our object is also a subject in its own right treating us as its phenomenological object, but it is still essentially the same process. It need not be weirdly unnatural or contrived, but only a wild flight of imagination such as the mercurial postmodernist William H. Gass depicts

in the various associations, connotations, perversions, and transformations of the word "blue."¹⁶

Our perception of an animal could – and perhaps should – be conditioned by what we imagine to be the animal's perception of us. Three examples: (1) the case of Stearns and the bear; (2) at the same physical distance between ourselves and a lion, the content of our imagination would be quite different in a zoo from what it would be in the middle of the Serengeti; and (3) Captain Ahab's various psychoses were the direct result of how he imagined Moby Dick to be not only evil, but also directing this evil specifically at Ahab. These three examples represent, respectively, differences in (1) pragmatic attitude, (2) environment, and (3) psychological pathology, all of which are imaginatively shaped aspects of the human subject's intentionality.

A fruitful exercise might be to imagine that we are looking at the world through the gaze of the "other," e.g., to imagine that we are the caged ape, lion, or rhino staring out at us from behind bars at the zoo. We need not anthropomorphize in order to do this. Animals have sensitivity already. Think of Harry Potter's reciprocal encounter with the boa constrictor in the chapter called "The Vanishing Glass," in which the two converse as equals because Harry, unlike most humans, not only speaks Parseltongue, the snake's language, but also has intuitive knowledge of the snake's thoughts and feelings.¹⁷ That is, Harry has created a symmetrical intersubjective relationship by being open to hearing the language of the "other," whom nearly all humans would regard as only an object. He did not expect the snake to come "up" to the human level of consciousness; rather, he was willing to go "down" to the snake's level, and thus to experience the snake in an entirely new way. Similarly, Stearns transformed her situation by seeing it from the bear's point of view. Again we are reminded of the Deweyan subject creating harmony and reconciliation with the world by cooperating with it rather than by trying to master it.

Phenomenology, for Merleau-Ponty, is not the Hegelian or idealistic account of the content of consciousness, but rather an existentialist approach which holds that the phenomena of experience are to be neither objectified nor idealized, but treated as elements of the "lived body" or "embodied consciousness" in the "life-world." All phenomenology is anti-dualistic, which means that phenomenologists reject the Cartesian view that mind and body are fundamentally and

irreconcilably different kinds of things. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is simply given.

Since, for Merleau-Ponty, the whole human is an organic unit, he is concerned to describe the metaphysics of the uniquely human process of "seeing," involving both mind and body together as an integrated perceiver. He gives a phenomenological account of "vision," whereby the human eye is literally "seen" as an essential element of the human body and thus of the whole human animal as a visible thing in the world among all visible things.¹⁸ Thus it is the natural situation of the artist as a lived body in the world which enables the conception and production of art works, just as it is our natural situation as lived bodies in the same world which enables us to enter into meaningful aesthetic relation with the artist's vision by being intelligent or sensitive beholders of the work. Art such as painting, for example, is a spontaneous derivative of a special kind of "vision" which only artists possess. Although such "vision" is part of the ontological constitution of all humans, and is accordingly "natural" in that sense, it remains latent in most of us, is refined to a proportionately sophisticated degree only in artists, and thus could be considered "unnatural" only in non-artists, who cannot actualize it.

We can apply Merleau-Ponty's analysis of human artistic vision to human-animal encounters as well, *mutatis mutandis*. The piercing or arresting gaze of the "other" is unique in its power to impel us toward immediate self-confrontation. The gaze of the animal is at least as powerful as the gaze of the human in this regard. Moreover, as we recognize, accept, and respect the power of this gaze, whether human or animal, we grow proportionately better able to appreciate the validity or even the sanctity of the "other," not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a "lived body" in its own right or an "embodied consciousness" in its own "life-world," like the bear *vis-à-vis* Stearns or the snake *vis-à-vis* Harry Potter.

In the end, even after phenomenological analysis, we are left with Bullough vs. various species of naturalism. From a pragmatist point of view, Richard Shusterman finds affinity between Dewey's "privileging of art over science" and Merleau-Ponty's focus on the "lived body."¹⁹ All three, as well as Pepper, could paraphrase Socrates to claim that the un-lived life is not worth examining.²⁰ That is, unless we creatively engage the world, and are willing to push beyond the relative shallowness of the typical subject/object relationship toward the deeper aesthetic and psychological experience of the subject/subject relationship – whether the

two subjects are equal or not, i.e., whether the newly imagined intersubjectivity is symmetrical or asymmetrical – then we are not really living, but merely existing. Such engagement may occur either naturally, as we like to think it does among humans, or unnaturally, as it seems to do between humans and non-humans, either animate like Harry's snake or even inanimate but quasi-personified objects like Bullough's fog. We may contrast the experiential naturalism of Dewey, the aesthetic naturalism of Pepper, the phenomenological naturalism of Merleau-Ponty, and the pragmatic naturalism of Shusterman to the intentional unnaturalism of Bullough and the simply awestruck unnaturalism of Burke. With the first four, aesthetic experience and its enjoyment are a natural aspect of the natural world; but with Bullough (and to a lesser extent Burke) we must selectively bracket reality – or even ignore it – in order to generate aesthetic experience or to enjoy anything aesthetically. However, even if we do not wish to go as far as Bullough and even if we wish to remain in the naturalist camp, we still should admit, with Mary Warnock, the foremost expositor of the concept of imagination in the Kantian, idealist, romantic, and phenomenological traditions, that in order to signify anything new, both the perceiver as artist and the perceiver as spectator have to detach themselves at least to some extent from the phenomenal world as given, so that they may set their imagination in motion.²¹

In conclusion, the several unresolved dichotomies in this paper – subject/object, symmetry/asymmetry, human/animal, naturalism/unnaturalism, master/servant, etc. – beg for resolution. In whichever way they may someday be resolved, that resolution in each case will have to involve the full depth of both parties involved, i.e., it will have to be reciprocal or mutual, without compromising the integrity of either side. The subject on each side will have to use their imagination to transform the object on the other side, inferring the subjectivity of the "other" that cannot be directly experienced, thus creating intersubjectivity and the opportunity for communication or constructive encounter. This program for resolution may sound like a mystical pipe dream, realizable only in fantasy fiction like the Harry Potter stories. Nevertheless, a good start would be to try – imaginatively and unnaturally – to experience animals as they experience themselves. By analogy, just as our aesthetic appreciation of, say, *Guernica* is qualitatively enhanced by seeing it "in person" at the Reina Sofia in Madrid and thus "hearing," as it were, Picasso "speak" to us through his work, rather than merely seeing a reproduction of it in an art book; so our aesthetic appreciation of an animal is qualitatively enhanced when we feel that we are somehow communicating

or cooperating with it, rather than merely looking at it in a zoo or cringing in terror of it in the wild.

• Notes •

¹ Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, 5, 2 (June 1912): 87-118.

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: George Bell, 1889), p. 26.

³ Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957), p. 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵ Burke, pp. 97-99.

⁶ Stephen Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 50-59.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Science: First Part: Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard, accessed September 10, 2013, [https://dl.dropbox.com/u/21288399/Articles for Webpage/Phenomenology of Spirit in English and German.pdf](https://dl.dropbox.com/u/21288399/Articles%20for%20Webpage/Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20in%20English%20and%20German.pdf), passim, but especially section B.IV.A. on self-consciousness and the master/servant dialectic.

⁸ *Ibid.*, § 109, 205, 225, 246, 258, 560, 689-690; pp. 96-97, 185, 201, 221, 233, 510, 629-630.

⁹ Robert R. Williams, *Recognition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 289-290.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 25, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Cf. Bryan E. Bannon, "Animals, Language, Life: Searching for Animal Attunement with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty." *Environmental Philosophy* 6, 1 (Spring 2009): 21-34.

¹² Eric v.d. Luft, "Editor's Introduction" in Isabel Scribner Stearns, *The Nature of the Individual* (North Syracuse, New York: Gegensatz Press, 2011), pp. 23-24.

¹³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1934), pp. 185-186. Cf. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 313.

¹⁴ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 93. Cf. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 256-257. Cf. Yin Hang, "On the Connotation of Inter-Subjectivity in Dufrenne's Aesthetic Thought" (PhD diss, Shandong University, 2010).

¹⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 44, 207-208. Despite Danto's denials, false rumors persist that Danto was Merleau-Ponty's student in Paris.

¹⁶ William H. Gass, *On Being Blue* (Boston: Godine, 1991).

¹⁷ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 33-36.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception*, pp. 159-190.

¹⁹ Richard M. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 6-7, 10-11, 53, 270-272.

²⁰ I am indebted to my ancient colleague John Morris for this twist on Plato's *Apology*, 38a.

²¹ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 197.

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