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“White-heating the Real” – On Music’s Force Towards Impossible Nudeness

In what follows I would like to develop some thoughts about music and – maybe – a force towards a utopian and impossible state of nudeness that the experience of music can bring about, as I would like to argue. For this argument I will reconstruct something Alain Didier Weill first brought up in 1976 in the form of an intervention at Jacques Lacan’s seminar.¹ This intervention is a particular – even singular – one in all of Lacan’s seminars, as it is about music. While Lacan – and Freud – famously commented many times on literature or the visual arts – music almost never functions as a field of reference in Lacan’s speaking and writing. And that is also true for the other way around: In the aesthetics of music psychoanalysis has not played a major role – at least not to the extent that it has done so in the aesthetics of the visual arts, the aesthetics of cinema, or literature studies.²

The lack of references to music in Lacan is, as François Regnault has pointed out, not due to the fact that Lacan was not interested in music. On the contrary: According to Regnault, Lacan was an eager follower of contemporary music, which at the time in Paris was very much a lively scene. Regnault offers another explanation for the lack of musical reference in Lacan: Whatever Lacan does

¹ He has later published a script for his intervention: Alain Didier Weill, “Quand la musique nous entend. Contribution à la question de la pulsion invoquante.”, accessed 23 May 2017, https://www.alaindidierweill.com/app/download/5782699042/Quand+la+musique+nous+entend_1.pdf. As far as I am aware, there is no English translation of Didier Weill’s text. Every quotation is therefore my own translation from the original French text. There is also another version of Didier Weill’s intervention available at *staferla*: Alain Didier Weill, “Intervention”, in: *L’Insu que sait de l’une bévüe s’aile à mourre*, 21–25, accessed 31 July 2017, <http://staferla.free.fr/S24/S24%20L’INSU....pdf>. I will use this version when indicated, again in my own translation.

² For the purposes of this article, I will not give a definition of what I take to be music in the first place. As these thoughts are still tentative and preliminary, I would for the moment rather have it the other way around and try to think different forms of organised sounds via the notion of music that I would like to outline here. Certainly, for a more detailed argument both a more precise definition of music and the implications of its positioning in the symbolic order would be necessary.

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with art, it never functions as a philosophical comment; he is not interested in the field of aesthetics as such. If art is mentioned, it is always used to make it somehow productive for Lacan's sole purpose: a return to Freud in psychoanalysis. So maybe the point is – Regnault claims – that music is in no way *useful* for psychoanalysis.³

And at first glance that seems rather convincing: Psychoanalysis, the talking cure, depends on signifiers that can be metaphorised and metonymised. It works with double meanings, sliding meanings, ambi- and polyvalences. In short: if the unconscious is structured like a language, music might just not be something useful in order to advance psychoanalytical theory. While the concept of the gaze as object cause of desire is partially developed by analysing or at least referencing actual paintings, the voice as partial object and the singing voice may be something completely different: Jacques-Alain Miller once said that the voice as *objet a* in no way belongs to the register of sound.⁴

On the other hand, “psychoanalysing” music also has its difficulties: either it is done mostly by focusing on the lyrics (in the case of music with words) or the drama (in the case of opera) or it plays around with associations that are themselves uttered and then treated as signifiers. Or – and that option is certainly the opposite of psychoanalysis – it makes sense of music or detects a deeper meaning of music, be it in respect to the composer or the lyrical Ego of the poem that was set to music. None of these strategies are able to point out in which way music differs from language. All of them treat music as if it were a language. Insofar as music is something that differs from language, music and psychoanalysis might just be of no use to each other.

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There have been many attempts to read music as language. In fact, one might even say that conventional (and by conventional I mean conventional in the second half of the 20th century) analysis of music is always structural. It is about rhythms, harmonies, single tones, relations, repetitions, structures. And of course there have been refinements and criticisms of such an analysis, which still refer to themselves as a “semiology of music”. Jean-Jacques Nattiez in his

³ See François Regnault, *Lacan'sche Ästhetik: Vier Vorlesungen*, trans. Christoph Sökler, Turia + Kant, Vienna, Berlin 2016, p. 36. Again my translation.

⁴ See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Jacques Lacan et la voix”, *Quarto*, No. 54 (June 1994).

“Discourse and Music” widens the scope of his semiology by including not only the structural analysis of the work, but also its history and perception.⁵

It does not come as a surprise that in recent years neuroscience has also offered theories as to the relationship between language and music and as usual falls back on paradigms that seemed to be out-dated long ago. I do not want to dive into this more deeply, but I would like to argue one point: There is no doubt that music speaks to us, that music can be thought in relations of signifier and signified, that a structuralist or a semiotic or even a linguistic approach to music is possible. Music can be thought of and it can be researched as a language. But I do think that this approach to music misses what is most musical in music. Music is not reducible to any symbolic order. And it is certainly not – and I quote here from an interview with the neuroscientist Francis A. Sooy – another means of communication, which communicates “some message of significance using sound” and it does not simply involve “the sharing of ideas and experience.”⁶

I agree with Nattiez that the relation between music and language (and again: a great deal of musicology depends on just that relation) has to be thought by including the listening subject. But I think the analysis has to be taken a step further: I want to suggest that music is situated at the rim of language, at the border between language and non-language. Music is neither just another language with its own rules, conditions, and possibilities, nor is it a universal language, as the above-quoted neuroscientist would have it. But neither is it the opposite of language as that which can communicate what is not communicable in words, or as that which could facilitate an experience of the sublime.

Music – to quote and refute one last position regarding the relationship between music and language – is certainly not the paradisiacal precursor of language. In a speech Peter Sloterdijk delivered at the opening of the Luzern Festival in 2005, he claimed that music is a regression towards our being inside the body of the mother, her heartbeat and the sound of her voice being the referent for what we

⁵ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1990.

⁶ “Music as the Brain’s Universal Language”, accessed 19 May 2017, http://www.dana.org/Briefing_Papers/Music_as_the_Brain_s_Universal_Language/.

basically hear when we listen to music.⁷ I do not want to go more deeply into an analysis of Sloterdijk's claim here, but from what I will say it will become clear that what I think is quite the opposite of that position.

I want to present an account of listening to music that could be (and has been by Alain Didier Weill) called experimenting with lack. One way of saying this is to put it topologically: Music is always on the other side. If you think of it as language, it will make your thinking collapse; if you think of it as the other of language, it will do the same. And only as this neither/nor could music – I think – facilitate another kind of thinking or another relationship to the Other.

That is my claim and, as I said, I want to call on Alain Didier Weill as a witness – via a reconstruction of his intervention at Lacan's seminar. Didier Weill distinguishes certain logical times in the experience of listening to music. They are logical times because they cannot be put into any chronological order, they sort of happen all at the same time and are only distinguished for the sake of their "*Darstellbarkeit*", their ability to be represented. They are times because they happen as relations or as "torsions between the subject and the Other."⁸ To be clear: he is talking about the experience of *listening* to music, about the effects that are produced in a listener. It is not about making music, performing music, or composing music.

The first logical time of the listener's experience according to Didier Weill is characterised by music responding to a question that inhabits the listener without him knowing it. Or to be more precise: music makes this question appear as antecedent. The listener is inhabited by a lack and music makes this lack appear by responding to it without filling it. It just "says it directly."⁹ So it is as if there were a "music-making subject"¹⁰ that responds to a lack that inhabits "me" as a listener. The response is somehow inspired by that lack which is unconscious – I do not know anything about it. The only thing I know is that music responds

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⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, "La musique retrouvée", in: *Der ästhetische Imperativ: Schriften zur Kunst*, Peter Weibel, Fundus-Bücher (eds.), Philo & Philo Fine Arts, Hamburg 2007, pp. 10ff.

⁸ Didier Weill, "Intervention", p. 21.

⁹ Didier Weill, "Quand la musique nous entend. Contribution à la question de la pulsion invoquante.", p. 2.

¹⁰ Didier Weill, "Intervention", p. 21.

to this lack that I have not known before. But the music that responds does not know anything about that lack either. It is in no way a question of knowledge.

Maybe that lack that inhabits the listening "me", Didier Weill goes on, is the lack of the music itself. It was maybe music's own lack that made the lack in the listening subject appear in the first place.

With the meeting of these two lacks Didier Weill comes dangerously close to the notion of fusion: Via music it would be possible to fuse with the Other. It would enable the listener to get rid of that alienating lack, which finally would dissolve in an oceanic feeling. If it were like that the non-chronological series of torsions would either end here or repeat itself on and on. No matter how impossible it would be to remain fused with the other, music would be an occasion of experiencing this never-to-be-realised state of completeness. In short: music would be a narcissistic experience. Is not the child in front of a mirror in Lacan's text about the mirror stage experiencing such an imaginary fusion?¹¹ Music as imaginary completeness would function as nothing more than a mirror, a pacifying response to the split subject.

Or – and this would be just the reverse side of the same thing: Music as a feeling of fusion would function as the dissolution of the subject, as a Dionysian feeling of the subject, which would be falling apart into affects, intensities, and becoming. The fusion of lacks could either fantasmatically stabilise the subject or dismantle him. And it could do both at the same time. Stopping here would bring about identity *and* dissolutive repetition. We could here recall the famous passage in Deleuze's and Guattari's "A Thousand Plateaus": "Music is never tragic, music is joy. [...] Music has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation."¹² This thirst for destruction that is attributed to music brings to mind the strong connection between narcissism and aggressiveness so predominant in Lacan, for example in "The Mirror Stage" when he speaks about the "evident connection between the narcissistic libido

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", in: *Écrits: The first complete edition in English*, Norton, New York; London 2006, pp. 75–81.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996, p. 299.

and the alienating function of the I, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other.”¹³

But for Didier Weill the two lacks do not fuse with each other, not as a narcissistic experience and not as a Dionysian feeling – they remain separated, as the lacks are not “identical” but “similar”¹⁴. This leads to a second relation (again, not in a chronological way) – quite the opposite of the first one: The listening subject now responds to the lack in the musical Other. The subject uses the very notes that responded to him, which “were chanted for him”, to “enchant” the other.¹⁵ At this point Didier Weill recalls the strange motion that while listening to music it is as if the music were produced by the listening subject himself: “The subject can cease to be the one who is apprehended by the desire of music to become the one who desires to make himself heard.”¹⁶ This is the first torsion in the relation between the subject and the Other.

It is at this point that Didier Weill – being the Lacanian that he is – points to an analogy in structure. If listening to music were based on this first torsion and if it circled around these two separated, non-identical but similar lacks, the relation between music and the listening subject would simply have the same structure as love. Is not Lacan’s myth of love in the seminar on transference exactly this: The hand that reaches for the ripe fruit or the flower in full bloom only to discover that the ripe fruit or the flower becomes a hand that is reaching itself for the other hand, which then becomes a fruit or a flower? And Lacan is careful not to stop here as this could be misunderstood as some kind of symmetry: “The structure in question is not this symmetry and this return. So that this symmetry is not really one. Insofar as the hand stretches out, it is towards an object. It is in the hand that appears from the other side that the miracle lies.”¹⁷

¹³ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, p. 79.

¹⁴ Didier Weill, “Quand la musique nous entend. Contribution à la question de la pulsion invoquante.”, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, “The Seminar of Jacques Lacan VIII”, trans. Cormac Gallagher, 46, accessed 23/5/2017, www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-VIII-Draft-21.pdf.

But Didier Weill does not stop there either. He describes yet another logical time, another torsion, another relation between the subject and the Other. He thinks of this third logical time as a possibility for the subject to experiment with two different lacks – its own lack and the lack of the Other “without the mediation of a fantasmatic object.”¹⁸ Music – so he claims – opens up the possibility of directly enjoying the barred Other, the Other that is fundamentally inconsistent and lacking. Let me quote a longer passage here:

The subject – after having encountered the impossibility of meeting both the object that the Other lacks and the object which he himself lacks – [decides to jump] into the void by not tackling one *or* the other lack, but both of them: In this moment the subject and the Other would not fuse. On the contrary, their separating lacks would be put together. At this point the real as impossible would be set alight, it would be white-heated in a shared experience: the subject and the Other both as close as possible and as far apart as possible as well. Time, therefore, ceases and in this sublimation of time we could advance the hypothesis that everything that happens is a sort of commemoration of the founding act of the unconscious insofar as it is snatched from the real via a fundamental symbolisation that is carried towards the impossible embracing of the two voids.¹⁹

So what can this passage tell us about my initial claim, i.e. that music is situated at the border of language and non-language? What could non-language even mean? In the second part of this paper I would like to make an attempt at interpreting this quoted passage. I will do that tentatively and with the help of Deleuze – not the Deleuze of the *Anti-Oedipus*, nor the Deleuze of the *Logic of Sense*, but with the help of Deleuze's early book on Kant, particularly its introduction, which was added much later. I will also use Deleuze's development of the rather short introduction in his seminar on Kant.²⁰

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Let us focus for a moment on this rather strange deduction in this longer passage from Didier Weill's intervention: The real would be set alight, it would be white-heated – and “time *therefore* ceases.” How is it possible to understand

¹⁸ Didier Weill, “Quand la musique nous entend. Contribution à la question de la pulsion invoquante,” p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, “On Kant”, accessed 23 May 2017, <http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.com/2007/02/on-kant.html>.

that, if we do not just take it as an obscure reference to a certain feeling of timelessness we sometimes experience when we listen to music?

It is at this point that I want to call on Deleuze's notion of time in Kant. Kant, says Deleuze, introduces an understanding of time that is completely new. Up until Kant time was measured by movement, it was subordinated to movement, whereas Kant liberates time from its subjugation to anything: "time is no longer coiled up in such a way that it is subordinated to the measure of something other than itself, such as, for example astronomical movement. [...] time is liberated, stretches itself, ceases to be a cosmological or psychological time, [...] to become a formal time, a pure deployed form."²¹

So now that we have time as a "pure deployed form", what does this time do to the subject? This liberated time, Deleuze goes on, is the "form of auto-affection, the form under which I affect myself."²² For Deleuze, the problem of the transcendental Ego is a problem of time. He starts with Descartes: "I think therefore I am. I am a thing that thinks." And he goes on:

If it is true that the *I think* is a determination, it implies in this respect an indeterminate existence (I am). But nothing so far tells us under what form this existence is determined by the *I think*: it is determinable only in time, under the form of time, thus as the existence of phenomenal, receptive, and changing ego. I cannot therefore constitute myself as a unique and active subject, but as a passive ego which represents to itself only the activity of its own thought, that is to say, the I, as an Other which affects it. I am separated from myself by the form of time.²³

Of course, Deleuze is referring to Kant's notion of the "inner sense" which is time and also the "*Inbegriff aller Vorstellungen*". In English: "For the original apperception is related to inner sense (the sum of all representations), and indeed related *a priori* to its form, i.e., the relation of the manifold empirical consciousness in time."²⁴ It is crucial to note here that the pure form of time is filled with activity and passivity. It is the form of time that determines the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, A23ff. / B37ff.

split between "passive ego which represents to itself only the activity of its own thought." Something is at work here, something is moving – determined by the form of time.

So what happens to this movement, the movement of the split subject, when "time ceases"? Does the subject fantasmatically cease to be split and acquire fullness and completeness at last? Are we referred back to the first logical time in experiencing music and its implied and then refuted notion of fusion? Not at all, because there is a third aspect of Deleuze's interpretation of Kant's conception of time that is important here.

Deleuze speaks about one chapter in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the "The Anticipations of Perception". This chapter is about "*Empfindungen*", i.e. sensations, and the conditions of their possibility.²⁵ For Kant, time and space are extensive magnitudes, which means that everything that is perceived in space and time is perceived as a multiplicity and as a unity at the same time. "An extensive magnitude is one whose parts are apprehended successively so that [...] extensible or extensive magnitude will be defined in the following way: The multiplicity refers to a gathering of parts into a whole."²⁶

But space and time are not only filled with extensive magnitudes; they are also filled with intensive magnitudes, such as temperature, for example, and Deleuze points out two characteristics of intensive magnitudes: They are perceived instantly (and not successively) and the multiplicity perceived in them no longer refers to a succession but to a degree, which is to say, it "refers to a variable proximity to degree zero."²⁷ So every intensive quantity implies a "degree zero". Every perception in space and time is also one of intensive quantity and is thus related to "degree zero". And therefore the question is not "if there is an empty space or an empty time," but "if there is an empty consciousness of space and time."²⁸

²⁵ *Ibid.*, A166 / B207-A176 / B218.

²⁶ Deleuze, "On Kant".

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Now I would like to suggest that the “ceasing of time” Didier Weill talks about has something to do with this “degree zero” implied by the perception of intensive quantities. If the split subject in his activity and passivity is determined by the form of time, “degree zero” could mean just that: pure form of time without the mediation of the activity and passivity of the split subject. It is tempting here to analogise “passivity of the subject” (the subject is sought by the desire of the Other), “activity of the subject” (the subject now seeks the Other by way of its own desire), and “pure form of time” (time ceases) to the three logical times in musical experience.

Let us take this back to a more Lacanian perspective: There can be no doubt that for Lacan, following Freud, activity and passivity are parts of what Freud calls the “vicissitudes of the drive”, “*Tribschicksale*”. The first torsion in Didier Weill’s account is nothing more than a “*Verkehrung ins Gegenteil*”, a reversion of the drive. But let us not forget: The very fact that there are subjects and drives is due to the subject being a “*parlêtre*”, a being that speaks. If we follow Didier Weill and discern a third torsion in the relation between subject and Other in the musical experience, in which the subject can experiment with both lacks, his own so-to-speak, and the lack in the Other “without the mediation of a fantasmatic object,” what would that “degree zero”, this sublimation of activity and passivity, mean for the speaking subject? The subject, in this third logical time, is led to a state in which he can almost no longer be called a subject, as this “degree zero”, the ceasing of the activity and passivity of the subject managing his split, is like a pre-subjective state of the subject in which intensity is brought to its full potential, which means to degree zero, as the reference of every intensity. So it is the opposite of fullness, it is emptiness. As for Lacan a subject is not thinkable without language (let us just recall his definition of the subject as that which is represented by a signifier for another signifier), the ceasing of the subject’s time, its reduction to degree zero brings it to this border I discussed earlier: the border between language and non-language.

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To be clear: it is certainly impossible to cross that border. The subject has always been and will always have been a “*parlêtre*”, but he can get close to this border between language and non-language via the experience of music. Let us also not forget that the third logical time is not to be severed from the first two times. It is neither their result, nor their aim or their goal. They all happen at once and bring the listening subject to that border without ever letting him cross it.

To end my paper I would like to make another connection between this border position – I am, by the way, not sure if the border between language and non-language is the only way of thinking that borderline position of music – and possible consequences on ways towards another thinking.

In her paper "Dying of Shame, Consumed by Anxiety: Moods and the Body",²⁹ Ruth Ronen calls shame a "primordial affect" (along with anxiety), which is to say that the relationship to the Other is different than with any other affect: "The primordial affect relates to the Other's presence without falling back on the protection of the Other as a source of meaning and value." The Other as symbolic is not only that which inaugurates a lack, an alienation and a separation. It is also something that protects – although never enough and always too strongly. Being affected by shame and anxiety means losing this protection. When Didier Weill calls the third logical time of listening to music "a sort of commemoration of the founding act of the unconscious insofar as it is snatched from the real via a fundamental symbolization," he speaks about this borderline between being protected and being helpless. I think it is possible to experiment – in a playful way – at this borderline by experiencing music.

Let me – on a less theoretical note – illustrate this with a work of art: In 2015 the artist duo Anna Romanenko and Björn Kühn presented a work called "Blush"³⁰. They asked their fellow students to sing a short part of a Schubert song while being videotaped. After that, they made them watch the video and took pictures of them watching it. The artists drew on some study that had tried to find a way to make people blush. The best way the scientists could find was to gather a group of friends and make them do exactly what Anna Romanenko and Björn Kühn did with their fellow students. While the scientists found out that this works best with a group of friends, the artists tried the experiment the other way around: Would this collective blushing create friendship?

I am not interested in the empirical outcome of this experiment, but in the subjective structure it deals with and in the hypothesis it formulates. First of all, the blushing – and for the moment I would like to take blushing as an index of

²⁹ Ruth Ronen, "Dying of Shame, Consumed by Anxiety", *Hurly-Burly* 4 (2011).

³⁰ I did have the honour of helping the artists with that work by teaching singing to the students. That is why I can give a first hand account of the process of the work.

shame – did not occur when people sang, but only when they listened to themselves singing. Obviously, there are many things at work here: There is an intersubjective dimension as well as an intrasubjective dimension. But I would like to focus on this one thing: Singing as perhaps the most imminent way of making music (and *making* music in this case, as in Didier Weill's account, means *re-making* it by listening to it – in this case helped by the fact that it was in fact the students themselves who had produced the music in the first place) might be able to produce a helplessness that is experienced as playful (the blushing while listening was not accompanied by crying or shock, but by laughter and jokes) and that might recreate intersubjective relations.

Obviously, one does not feel bare shame and anxiety when listening to music – if not in a playful way. Music rather seems to function as a last resort against that abyss of shame and anxiety that enables us to experiment or to play right at the border. It could well be called a becoming-music of another type than Deleuze and Guattari might have imagined. Not as positive disintegration and unavoidable reintegration, but as a playfulness in the face of the abyss.