SUBLIME BORDERS: MODERNISM, MUSIC AND THE NEGATIVE

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ABSTRACT

"After the fall of formal beauty, the sublime was the only aesthetic idea left to modernism" (Adorno 1997: 197). Positioning at its core the category of the sublime, the modernist aesthetic famously engenders a problematic relationship between music – characterised as an autonomous, self-relating agent of nonrepresentational negativity pursuing on its own terms a powerful critique of the Western metaphysic of presence – and its embeddedness in cultural contexts. At its most radical, like in Lyotard's aesthetic, music's 'immaterial matter' becomes a traumatic, 'in-human' Otherness, a sublime, otherworldly sound-event, "which is not addressed […and] does not address" (Lyotard 1991a: 142). The musicologist Susan McClary recently highlighted how in the last few decades a new generation of composers has arisen, which by still drawing on the modernist tradition nonetheless engages more directly with signification and the cultural inscription of music. On this basis McClary calls for rehabilitating the allegedly feminine category of the beautiful, thus relocating music's essence within the anthropological boundaries of pleasure and opening it for cultural diversity and contextuality. Yet, is the beautiful the more apt category for aesthetically framing this artistic development? As Catherine Belsey has pointed out, the specific twist at the core of Žižek's philosophy consists in its conflating Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of sublimation with Kant's concept of the sublime (Belsey 2005: 141). Žižek's sublime object thus intermingles not only pleasure and pain but also the absolute negativity of the Lacanian Real and the positive features of its cultural inscription. In my paper I explore the potential this theoretical frame offers for reading these recent artistic developments neither in terms of a domesticated modernism nor as a return to the aesthetic category of beauty as a culturally embedded fit between form and content. Instead, I will propose that we read them as the exploration of a specific, twisted space at the crossroad of the 'meaningful' positivity of culture and that 'sublime' negativity that the modernist aesthetic sees as the nonrepresentational essence of music.

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"What, if anything, lies beyond the human […] is matter for great disagreement."

T. Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime

Please mind the gap! On barricades and related mysteries

Picking up again her old polemical stance from 1989 against the modernist aesthetic of the sublime dominating the avant-garde in the second half of the 20th century, Susan McClary recently highlighted how, in the last few decades, a new generation of composers like Kaija Saariaho, George Benjamin and Salvatore Sciarrino has arisen, which though still drawing on the modernist tradition, nonetheless engages more directly with signification and the cultural inscription of music (McClary 2015: 32-33). On this basis McClary dismisses what she dubs "the lure of the sublime," a fundamentally 'male' aesthetic category promoting – from Richard Strauss' *Salome* to the latest computer game – an escalation of violence mostly directed against women. Instead, McClary advocates rehabilitating the allegedly feminine category of the beautiful, thus relocating music's essence within the anthropological boundaries of pleasure and opening it up for cultural diversity and contextuality. If Saariaho, Sciarrino, Benjamin etc. "have returned to techniques and sonorities pioneered by Messiaen, Boulez and others," they nevertheless "openly acknowledge the expressive and rhetorical power" of this music and thus "*humanize* its post-tonal idiom, making its power intelligible to audiences" (McClary 2015: 22, my emphasis). But, is the beautiful really a more fitting category for aesthetically framing this artistic development?

From a different perspective, more focused on re-reading the 20th century modernist experience *in toto*, Stephen Downes proposes in an essay from 2014 what appears to be a more viable solution. If more recent philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy have outlined the porous boundaries between the beautiful and the sublime, Downes unearths an entire tradition of aesthetic thinking, from Jean Paul to Friedrich Nietzsche, consistently intermingling the two categories and attempting, by highlighting their reciprocity, to elaborate ways of grasping – and at the same time debasing –

their entanglement (Downes 2014: 84-95).[2] Shifting attention to the musical field, Downes very convincingly exemplifies his findings by considering the music of Francis Poulenc and concludes: "For Poulenc, the end was to establish a repertory of strategies that facilitated new musical variants - inversion, subversion, one might even say perversions - of those aesthetic qualities traditionally assigned to the beautiful and sublime" (Downes 2014: 105).

This may wonderfully fit the aesthetic gist of Poulenc's music, let's nevertheless consider a brief example from one of the contemporary composers McClary seems to refer to, at least implicitly, in her essay . In 1994 the British composer Thomas Adès arranged François Couperin's famous cembalo piece *Les barricades mystérieuses* for an ensemble of five instruments (clarinet, bass clarinet, viola, cello and double bass). It is, of course, an oddly peripheral example, a minor work and not an original composition, but the 20th century modernist tradition has deeply engaged with this task of re-arranging past works: From Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* or *Le baiser de la fée* to Birtwistle's *Machaut à ma manière*, we witness how the predecessors' pretensions of beauty and formal closure, of pleasure and accomplishment have often been torn apart (ironically, melancholically etc.) or bent towards the troubled waters of "let's pretend (nothing happened)" like in Richard Strauss's *Tanzsuite from keyboard pieces by François Couperin*. Now, how do we account for Adès arrangement?

Adès doesn't clearly frame Couperin's piece in terms of the beautiful as an accomplished aesthetic experience (the muted strings and clarinets as well as the vanishing *pianissimo* in the last couplet confer a spectral, ghostly character to the piece, as if the music and the players aren't really there, actually present), but neither does it transform the *trompe l'oeil* quality of the original piece into the source of a sublime sense of awe and pain or a self-reflexive statement in which music deconstructs itself, as in Anton Webern's transcription of the *Ricercare a sei voci* from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Musical Offering*. Nor can we

[2] On this point see also Beech 2009. Beech highlights how contemporary artists "have taken pleasure and critical purchase from the confusion and collapse of the distinction between beauty and a vast range of its antonyms, such as ugliness, the banal, ideology, chaos, and so on" (Beech 2009: 17-18).

detect any kind of debasement strategies aimed at entangling in a Poulenc-ian gesture our all-too binary aesthetic categories: no irony, no sentimentality, no rhetoric excesses, not even kitsch with a critical edge are at work here. At its most fundamental, what we perceive is only that something is slightly amiss, that the somehow pleasurable back and forth of the off-beat melodic line with its syncopated development sounds awry. And we promptly find ourselves asking what is actually missing what? Is it Adès's arrangement, which here and there smoothly misplaces an internal voice, suddenly forgets the right harmony or inadvertently underplays the closure of a phrase? Or was this already in the original piece, which, after all, is entitled "The *mysterious* barricades"? A porous ambiguity, a dizzy feeling of a somehow enjoyable inconsistency takes hold of us: Pleasure, pain, melancholy, sublime?

What this arrangement makes poignantly clear, as we will see more clearly at the end of my paper, is precisely my point regarding Downes' reflections, not specifically on Poulenc, but considered in their more general implications: If we want to overcome the binary opposition between the beautiful and the sublime, making way for a more sympathetic and less exclusivist reading of the 20th century musical experience and at the same time developing a more apt understanding of contemporary compositional developments, our focus should not lie on the entanglement, on the *jeux croisée* of the two categories. Instead we have to consider carefully that which Adès's arrangement makes so impressively clear, i.e. that behind the very dichotomy between the beautiful and the sublime and all the compositional strategies aiming at their debasement there is a gap. The awkward sense that an indefinable something is missing, not in the right place, permeating Adès' arrangement, effectively circumscribes that empty, meaningless space, that minimal distance, which the two categories of the beautiful and the sublime as well as their reciprocal opposition rely upon. And what is ultimately this empty space if nothing but the unfathomable void of the Real lying at the very core of Žižek's concept of the "sublime object"?

At its most fundamental, Žižek's concept of the "sublime object" is the result of a somehow counterintuive theoretical move, conflating in the same

breath the Kantian sublime with Freud's sublimation.[3] What may appear to be some kind of truism in English is in fact nothing of the sort: Indeed, already at the etymological level, in German *das Erhabene* (the sublime) has nothing in common with *Sublimierung* (sublimation). And at a conceptual level, too, the intermingling of the two terms is a twisted one: What does the negative form of aesthetic pleasure Kant calls the Sublime, and which he defines as the pleasure arising from the twofold moment of a sensory and imaginative failure to grasp an event like an earthquake immediately followed by the re-assertion of our intellectual superiority through its subsumption under the category of infinity, have in common with that operation by means of which what is socially excluded 'returns' to the subject in a displaced, socially acceptable form (arts, scientific work etc.), that operation Freud refers to as sublimation?

From Žižek's standpoint, the former has everything to do with the latter:[4] Our entire social and individual life revolves around what he calls "sublime objects," i.e., mysterious, ungraspable 'things' (persons, ideas, functions, items etc.) which precisely by being ultimately nothing more than empty signifiers canalize and focus our enjoyment, our libido and thus ultimately guarantee the experience of a 'meaningful' universe. From 'humanity' to 'freedom', from 'terrorism to '*la Femme*' in the continuous shifts of their 'ungraspable' meanings behind the stability of their names/appearances, all these sublime objects offer perfect because nearly bottomless vessels for the unstoppable, meaningless pulsing of our enjoyment. At the same time they nevertheless sublimate this very enjoyment by offering a point of reference, an ultimate authority to refer to, that 'quilts' all the other signifiers and thus guarantees the existence of a meaningful life-world. Even if for instance there are dozens and dozens of conflicting and mutually exclusive definitions of 'freedom' we all *feel* that this is what Western civilization is ultimately about, and we are prepared to engage ourselves (in very different ways and in different degrees) in its name.

With regard to aesthetics Žižek's theory of the sublime object thus not only accounts for the libidinal hold the aesthetic object exerts on us, but also it overcomes *en bloc* the opposition between beautiful and sublime: Sublime

[3] See in particular Belsey 2005: 141-148.
[4] See in particular Žižek 1989: 201-209.

objects being empty, pure functional vessels capturing our enjoyment within the symbolic network, can indeed be aesthetically "beautiful" as well as purely negative, sublimely connoted objects (like timbre in the case of Lyotard and of the Darmstadt based musical Avant-garde of the 1950s and '60s, as we will see in more detail farther into the text) and are often both at the same time.

So, in short, our task in trying to grasp what seems an odd, ambiguous intermingling of beauty and the sublime – like Adès in our example – is to directly address the gap itself, the Real lurking at the core of the sublime object. In a way, our critical task is nothing but simply asking how 20th and 21st century music constructs this gap, this void continuously undermining and debasing our aesthetic experience of the sublime as well as the beautiful. How did different composers and aesthetic orientations envisage and deal with it? But what does this mean in concrete terms? And speaking of gaps, void, emptiness etc., i.e. putting a fundamentally negative magnitude at the core of our aesthetic endeavour, are not we in spite of everything still stuck within the old, modernist logic of the sublime, thus invoking (once again), mostly contrary to public taste, a renewed hecatomb of composers and compositional styles in the name of some abstract, chauvinistically male, fundamentally violent aesthetic category based on negativity like the sublime, as McClary would have put it?

To clarify my position let's take a brief, critical look at what, in many ways appears to be a fundamental moment in the aesthetic reflection on modernism under the guise of the sublime: I'm referring to what it is probably the most Lacanian and in a way most extreme formulation of aesthetic modernism, i.e. that of Jean-François Lyotard; a particularly intriguing formulation that at first raises hopes of, as McClary puts it, "a break away from the modernist trajectory," but in the end seems to have engendered a perverse dynamic by means of which – and I'm quoting McClary once again – a second generation of "Oedipal successors" arose, "which often felt the need to push the already distended envelope yet further in order to claim the right of ascendency" (McClary 2015: 23). So, how did Lyotard conceive that negative magnitude, that gap we intuitively referred to with our musical example? And, to put it bluntly, where did he go wrong?

The Thing and its discontents: Lyotard's Kantian sublime

If Robert Solomon was ever right in highlighting in 1991 a masochistic strain of modernism and asking if "is there any room left in our jaded and sophisticated lives for the enjoyment of simple innocence and 'sweet' affection" (Solomon 1991: 13), then Lyotard's reformulation of modernist aesthetic fits this strain perfectly. So, how did it happen? The outstanding role Lyotard ascribes to timbre in his few but nevertheless quite substantial essays on musical subjects lies in the very fact that timbre appears to him, like nuance in painting, to be the stand-in for that paradoxical invoking of the unpresentable within presentation itself the sublime feeling stands for.[5] Timbre is nothing more than the inscription within the acoustic field of the 'sublime' gap between reason and imagination, nothing but an agent of differentiation, a *différend*, continuously defying identification, continuously suspending the "active powers of the mind" and as such the very acoustic sign of modernity (Lyotard, 1991a, p. 140). As Lyotard puts it:

> Within the tiny space occupied by a note or a colour in the sound- or colour-continuum, which corresponds to the identity-card for the note or the colour, timbre or nuance introduce a sort of infinity, the indeterminacy of the harmonics within the frame determined by this identity (Lyotard 1991a: 140).

So, at first sight, we are dealing here with a postmodern form of sublime, fundamentally open, rejecting formal closure. Nevertheless, it seems to me that particularly when it comes to music something like an unresolved tension within Lyotard's conceptualization of the sublime and of its ties to the avant-garde becomes particularly conspicuous. Indeed, at the very end of the essay *Obedience* (a title which, by the way, already says something about masochism), Lyotard quotes approvingly the following lines from Giacinto Scelsi's short text *The Look of the Night*:

> There is also another music of a transcendental character which escapes all analysis of its organization, as it escapes all human understanding. Certain privileged beings have

[5] On this point see also Leipert (2012).

> heard sounds, melodies and harmonies that can be described as 'out of this world' (Lyotard 1991b: 179).

Besides Scelsi's perilous concluding drift toward that kind of Hegelian 'pure intuition' that Lyotard himself is always all too eager to criticize as the seminal moment of every form of totalitarianism, Scelsi's formulation clearly places true music, sound itself, in a noumenal region of transcendental unreachability. And this 'noumenalization' of timbre as an unreachable beyond of pure sound-matter appears even more strongly in Lyotard's own formulations. In *After the sublime* Lyotard adopts Lacan's most 'Kantian' conceptualization of the Real as 'the Thing', as "the beyond-of-the-signified" (Lacan 1992: 54) and defines timbre as that "which is not addressed, what does not address itself to the mind (what in no way enters into a pragmatics of communicational and teleological destination)" (Lyotard 1991a: 142).

The very fact that Lyotard uses Lacan's concept of the Thing here is intriguing: Soon after the seminar of 1959-60, where this notion first appears, Lacan almost entirely drops this notion, probably concerned about its all too Kantian implications. Indeed in the same years of the seminar Lacan explicitly warns in another text of the risks on somehow blurring together Kant's concept of the noumenon with his own concept of the Real. As he puts it:

> This notion [of the Real, A/D] is not at all Kantian. I even insist on this. If there is a notion of the real, it is extremely complex and, because of this, incomprehensible, it cannot be comprehended in a way that would make an All out of it (Lacan 2005: 96-97)

Even if Lyotard doesn't explicitly draw the two notions together, well aware of their fundamental incompatibility, nevertheless, to put the matter in Alain Badiou's terms, a "logic of purification" (Badiou 2006: 26-28) is at work in Lyotard's conception of timbre as 'inhuman' sound-matter lying beyond our all-too-human experience; a logic that, even if it doesn't really 'make an All out of it', nevertheless engenders a whole poetic of music as the act of freeing some kind of noumenal 'inner life' of sound itself and with it an extreme defence of the autonomous, self-relating character of music and of the work of art. Even in his late essay *Music and Postmodernity*, Lyotard on the one hand openly criticizes the *grand récit* of the history of music as the progressive

emancipation of sound. He acknowledges the embeddedness of timbre as inaudible sound-matter within immanence, affirming that "the inaudible is an act in the space-time-matter of sound" (Lyotard 2009: 41). But on the other hand he's not interested in following up on or explicating how this intriguing embeddedness of the two planes concretely works. He never truly poses the question of how timbre/sound as the Real concretely interacts with music itself.

Precisely this noumenal understanding of sound/timbre forces Lyotard to structure his thinking along a series of aporias: the avant-garde is defined by successfully "causing the ear to sense sound-matter – timbre – freed from all destination" (Lyotard 2009: 43) and thus it revolves around the aporia of "making heard that which escapes in itself all hearing" (Lyotard 2009: 43, slightly modified). Music itself appears split between music per se, in its noumenal autonomy, what Lyotard calls *Tonkunst*, and its being there, as perceived by our phenomenal ears, in Lyotard's terms, *musique*. So, whenever the task is to account for the interlacing between the phenomenal as the space where sound happens and concretely resounds on the one hand, and its noumenal, transcendental roots on the other, Lyotard, like Kant, has no other choice than to structure this relationship in the form of disjuncture, of an aporia between two distinct, non-communicating levels of reality.

In this way, Lyotard lays bare the Kantian roots at the core of the modernist sublime and their problematic consequences. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, the whole point of Kant's Copernican revolution basically consists in affirming "a transcendental gap," i.e. in Kant's acknowledgment that "every content appears within an a priori formal frame" (Žižek 2014: 15-16), that the noumenon is out of reach, always-already missed in its being *an sich*, beyond the boundaries of our experience of the world even if it structures it. This perfectly captures the basic gesture of modernism itself, as practised – at least in their aesthetic statements – in the second half of the 20th century by composers like Boulez, Stockhausen, Varèse and Luigi Nono. Here the very impossibility of achieving the noumenal absolute (pure sound, time as such etc.) becomes the motor of their creative outburst; something that makes

modernism an "unfinished project" doomed to keep going and endlessly missing its goal.[6]

But this noumenalization of the gap is precisely what we don't find in the new generation of composers McClary refers to (nor in "older" composers like Poulenc or Satie, as Downes made perfectly clear): Even if they use the techniques of their modernist predecessors, here the gap is not a masochistic beyond, unabashedly demanding blind obedience, as Lyotard puts it. On the contrary, the gap appears playful, ambiguous, even mischievous in its ubiquity. So, I think that in order to aesthetically grasp what is going on right now, what we have to do is to consider what has proven to be the most fundamental step in Western thought over the last two centuries, namely the transition from Kant to Hegel. What do I mean?

Modernism: From Kant to Hegel

In the last two decades an entirely new interpretation of Hegel has been attempted by scholars like Catherine Malabou, Rebecca Comay, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, aiming at doing away with the old interpretive clichés on the Jena philosopher. That very same Hegel who, in the works of Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida appeared as the stand-in for 'identitarian thinking', for the everlasting (totalitarian) temptation of Western metaphysic to 'square the circle' and to speak for the totality of being itself, this Hegel becomes in recent scholarship the very spearhead of a dialectic the ultimate goal of which is not the conciliatory gesture of *Aufhebung* but a reaffirmation of the power of contradiction. For instance, in an article from 2013 Rebecca Comay describes as follow what in the traditional (anti-)Hegelian *doxa* appears to be the very proof of Hegel's outdated and preposterous ambition to somehow speak on behalf of being itself, i.e. that concept of 'Absolute Knowing' at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the entire dialectical process reaches its own conclusion:

> It's the Saturnine aspect of the operation that fascinates me. Sluggish, torpid, 'sunk into the night of its own self-consciousness,' Absolute Knowing digests what it encounters and secretes what it has assimilated as its own excrescence. […] A moment of kenotic expenditure in

[6] On this point see Jameson 2009: 61-62.

> which the speculative reversal from loss to gain is in turn reversed […]. Could such an undecidable figure—the very figure of indecision—make its comeback as the final figure of the dialectic? (Comay 2013: 144-145)

Instead of an affirmative, 'identitarian' synthesis we suddenly face in Comay's interpretation of Hegel's Absolute Knowing its very opposite, an uncanny reversal, in which it seems we have been suddenly thrown back to the very chaos the entire dialectical process began with. But what does this 'un-decidability' breaking through at and as the end of Hegel's dialectic mean in concrete terms?

If Kant affirms the existence of a noumenal, transcendental formal frame, laying beyond the boundaries of our experience of the world but nevertheless structuring it, the proper Hegelian move in dealing with such a Kantian frame resides precisely in shifting this transcendental gap a step further: What Hegel ultimately accomplishes with his own philosophy is, according to Žižek, to affirm that "the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into content itself, as an indication that this content is not all, that something was repressed/excluded from it" (Žižek 2014: 15-16). The basic gesture of Hegel's dialectic thus consists not in a (totalitarian) glimpse into the noumenon in itself, but in revealing how this noumenon is per se barred, caught up in an internal antagonism. Or, to put it another way:

> When Kant asserts the limitation of our knowledge, Hegel does not answer him by claiming that he can overcome the Kantian gap and thereby gain access to Absolute Knowledge in the style of a precritical metaphysics. What he claims is that the Kantian gap already *is* the solution: Being itself is incomplete. (Žižek 2004: 45)

At this point it becomes clear that the passage from Kant to Hegel advocated by Žižek implies within the aesthetic sphere the very opposite of what Lyotard identified as the fundamental gesture of every true aesthetic (post-)modernism, i.e. that 'jubilation', that "making us discern the unpresentable in the writing itself, in the signifier", Lyotard saw as paradigmatically embodied in James Joyce's work. The point is not to challenge the form in order to express by means of a sublime feeling the unpresentable content (the inhuman Thing), but to reveal the very split between form and

content *as the inherent property of the content itself*: Here the Kantian noumenon wrapped in its own transcendental self-sufficiency becomes that 'undecidable figure' Hegel's Absolute Knowing is concerned with. Ultimately, to put in more Lacanian terms, we have "traversed the fantasy" of the sublime object itself or, as Žižek puts it: "to 'unmask the illusion' does not mean that 'there is nothing to see behind it': what we must be able to see is precisely this *nothing as such*" (Žižek 1989: 195).

And, to conclude, is this not what we ultimately get in Adès's arrangement of Couperin's cembalo piece? As we saw at the beginning of my paper, Adès's refined instrumentation doesn't convey the sense of a trans-historical sound event sublimely shimmering through the texture of Couperin's phenomenal music or breaking/deconstructing from within the original logic of the piece. There is no dynamic tension between some unaccomplished surface and an unreachably deeper truth at work here. But the arrangement neither reconstructs Couperin's work in terms of a self-assuring, pleasurable sense of closure, celebrating the beauty of an – at least in the arts – accomplished finitude (the rococo dreams of denial in Strauss's own engagement with Couperin). Instead, what we confront here is an utterly open space of inconsistency or, to put it once again in more Lacanian terms, a – indeed feminine – non-All, a twisted space, troubled by some missing object, by a gap, but a gap that – unlike Lyotard's – has no consistency of its own: What we become able to hear here it is "*nothing as such*".

Like the traumatic event in Freud, the ontological consistency of this gap is only that of a fantasmatic reconstruction *après-coup*, of a retroactive formation the reality of which (Did it really happen? And did it really happen *this* way?) is continuously under scrutiny. The wonderful blurring together of Couperin and Adès throughout the piece impressively exemplifies this point: The gap, the weird sense of something missing, relentlessly dances back and forth between Couperin (the off-beat melody, its syncopated development) and Adès (the muted instruments, the modernist fragmentation of the melodic line redistributed between different players etc.). The gap becomes a porous, ubiquitous something, metamorphosizing in a plethora of symptoms we can no longer ascribe to one source or another. Ultimately, what we acoustically

confront here is our being caught up in an imperfect finitude , unable to fully fit the pure immanence of nature, to be a meaningful part of any cosmos whatsoever, nor to subscribe once again to those sublime pretensions of transcendental *erlösung* that culture unabashedly upholds despite everything. And precisely this void, this "Real" zone of indecidability, neither beauty nor the sublime, is what, in my opinion, the more recent compositional developments McClary refers to in her essay are trying to map out.

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