

Towards An Ethico-Aesthetics of the Musical

Music is storming, driving, relentless, devotional, slinky, subtle, heartbreakingly-beautiful sounds that, lyrically, switch from the cynical to the sanguine, the defeated to the defiant, dealing in love, war, beauty, children, romance, rejection, Pethedine, poetry, panties, God, Auden, Johnny Cash, cold potatoes, too-much-money, not enough money, writer's block, flowers, animals and more flowers. But maybe I'm projecting here. – Nick Cave (of Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds)

Dumb notes have struck chords of wonderful tone. Something has called out of somewhere. Something in me is trying to answer. It is surging through my whole being, the wonder of it all, like a great river rushing on, dark and turbulent, and rushing and unresisting, carrying me away on it's wild swirl like a helpless bundle of wreckage. – Emily Carr

What may ground Ethico-Aesthetics is Nietzsche's project of creating a Dionysian philosophy of becoming. For Nietzsche Dionysian philosophy is connected to the experience of the musical as that which is linked to the flow of creation. If one is to take part in music, in the primal sense of being possessed by divinity (the muse), through poetic language or inspired sound making, one enters the flow as the feeling of an excess of plentitude. Through this process one becomes *not-one*; the singular being opens to the musical dimension of the world in its abundance and is reminded of its own status as time-bound multiplicity.

The ethico-aesthetic project rests on the desire of recovering that state of Dionysian sensuous knowing as an augmentation of life by letting go of previously assimilated constraints and entering a process of poetic transmutation. The main theme in the *critique* proposed by this new (and ancient) philosophy is that of liberation from restrictive habits in order to gain a renewed openness towards the world to become rather than to be. This approach is far from the ideological framework offered by Platonic aesthetics where the goal is to maintain the connection between the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. Plato's aesthetics reveal his conservative politics.

The threshold of the musical is radically democratic and stands as an open invitation; the flow of the musical is a moment of shedding and becoming-other. In musical lingo shedding means both practicing and gathering inspiration, sucking in the radiance of the muses. This term joins activity and receptivity working against the fixed idea of art as production only. The experience of the musical is the rhizomatic movement of Deleuzian de-territorialization and re-territorialization where the wasp and the orchid interplay in the movement of becoming: “The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real.”¹

Ethico-aesthetic philosophy can also be imagined through the lens of Berardi’s idea of conjunction vs. connection. Conjunction requires a meta-syntactical receptivity to body, movement, tone, timbre, and silence. Berardi’s difference between connection and conjunction can be thought of as the difference between musical composition and the experience of the musical. While connection is closer to the idea of composition, as an ordering of parts (syntax) for the sake of the *oeuvre* conjunction is closer to the experience of abundant possibility and expansion beyond the self.

As George Smith outlined in his essay *Heidegger’s Calling*, the task of ethico-aesthetic philosophy is to awaken a kind of “Dionysian spontaneity” by revitalizing the mythological dimension of thinking that has been repressed under the yoke of scientific thought. (25) This new philosophy is a return to the roots of Western thinking in the philosophy of the Presocratics as a fusion of poetics and logic. Unfortunately the Dionysian impetus soon vanished in the consolidation of German Idealism with Kant and Hegel.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.

The call for a musical philosophy is inherently political as it expresses the personal and collective desire for a happier and fuller experience of life, the experience of a participator rather than a participant to whom a part has been given “to follow the delirium in order to render it coherent and sharable, to open it to friendship in oneself and to friendship with the other [...] to assemble the refrain with other refrains.”²

I.

The first critique I will explore is issue of responsibility between Nietzsche and Arendt. The main issue here is conformism as the cultural process of breeding *reliable* human beings. For Nietzsche the task of culture is to breed an animal that can promise so that man may be “answerable for his own *future!*” (GOM 36) For Nietzsche the long and *painful* development of the *sovereign individual* as the autonomous, self-sufficient master of his/her destiny has led to the democratization of mediocrity. This theme will become important with the Frankfurt School and the idea of the reversal of the project of the Enlightenment whereas emancipation becomes domination. Nietzsche asks: Could this freedom given by the need for responsibility mask a more treacherous form of slavery?

In short, Nietzsche sees this development of the *ethos* of modern man out of the ascetic spirit of Christianity. Eternal responsibility to personal god becomes a mechanism that demands the atonement of all. The essence of Christianity morphs into utilitarianism of “the *English* kind” where individual is simply an index of demography. The creative individual is subsumed under the formula of the greater good for the greatest number. What Nietzsche is so vehemently against is the herd instinct that crushes the spirit through “fixed ideas - ascetic ideals and lifestyles.”³ For Nietzsche the regulations

² Berardi, Franco. *Felix Guattari: Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography*. (Palgrave MacMillan, UK, 2008), 126.

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 38.

imposed by the culture of denial have depressed the creative instinct. Man, as he says, has become a reactive creature, “tame house-pets” incapable of becoming anything interesting.⁴ Obviously, we must take Nietzsche’s bombast with a grain of salt as to what constitutes an interesting human being is highly problematic.

Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, makes no mention of creative instinct keeping the discourse on a purely rational plane. For Arendt the evils of Nazism came out of the yoke of conformism inasmuch as the people had forgotten to think for themselves, reiterating Kant’s dictum *sapere aude*: “For only if we assume that there exists a human faculty that enables us to judge rationally without being carried away by either emotion or self-interest [...] only under this assumption can we risk ourselves on this very slippery moral ground with some hope of finding a firm footing.”⁵

Arendt does not articulate the manipulation of consciousness that was unleashed by Nazi artistry nor does she consider the process of psychic rebuilding that led to the rise of Hitler. Her rationalism seems to focus on the a-temporal subject and his/her ability to think and judge. While Nietzsche’s genealogical method seeks to uncover the process of transmutation of values and norms, as the *grey* area of culture, Arendt seems to believe there is an eternal standard that man must recover in order to make the right choices: “The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly.”⁶ The ground for judgment is consciousness as the silent dialogue with oneself. What happens when consciousness changes? What is responsibility in the face of change? Both Nietzsche and Arendt, in their own way, are

⁴Ibid., 42.

⁵Arendt, Hannah. *Responsibility and Judgment*. Ed., Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 27.

⁶Ibid., 189.

warning us against the dangers of mass society and the technological means that control the human spirit.

II.

The second critique tied to the first is the notion of the future. Basically, the hypothetical future for Franco Berardi and Ernst Junger is a stand off between what is left of man and the machine. Junger's text *Total Mobilization* offers a chilling picture of a technological age: "Total Mobilization is far less consummated as it consummates itself; in war and peace, it expresses the secret and inexorable claim to which our life in the age of masses and machines subjects us. It thus turns out that each individual life becomes even more unambiguously, the life of a worker."⁷ What is surprising is that Junger sees this mechanization of the human as a new exciting frontier. The worker is a higher form of human being that has acquired a new sensibility of insensibility: "The exhaustion of the old values being united with the unconscious longing for a new life."⁸

On the other hand, Berardi pits man against the machine as the machine subsumes the sensuousness of the body. Berardi uses the metaphor of the cyborg in the form of the pop idol David Bowie to illustrate the exploitation of the sensuous body: "The anaesthetic aesthetics of virtuality is the last avatar of a process of sublimation of the body (of the woman) that in the Christian area descends from Quevedo, through Des Esseintes, to Bataille, down to David Bowie [...] Bowie's hero is no longer a subject, but an object: a thing, an image, a splendid fetish—a commodity soaked with desire, resurrected from beyond the squalor of its own demise."⁹

⁷Junger, Ernst. "Total Mobilization," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 128.

⁸Ibid., 138.

⁹Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2012), 70.

Berardi is holding on to a humanist strain of thought based on the indisputable value of sensibility while Junger actually sees technology as an expression of a deeper nature “a phenomena of cultic variety”¹⁰ Junger does not explain what this power may be. For Junger there seems to be an “elemental substance” that dwells in time, technology being only a means of liberating this force.¹¹ Junger’s thought is unsettling as he calls for break from the time honored tradition of thinking of man’s essence in terms of feeling by opening up to a telluric dimension of thought. No matter how far Berardi goes in his critique of modern society he remains anchored to a Catholic-humanist-Marxist interpretation of man’s essence; warm flesh vs. cold steel.

III.

The third critique is that of form-Gestalt. For Berardi man’s destiny is sealed by the fact that we are unable to break out of the mold imposed on us by the matrix of finance and technology. Berardi uses the word *disentanglement* meaning the effort to think differently and reactivating our sensibility so that we can re-connect with the world. Berardi’s ideas can be seen as a development of Deleuze and Guattari’s *rhizomatic* of flows and intensities.

For Berardi the process of rationalization has led to a state of profound disconnection: “The gradual translation of semantic differences into syntactic differences is the process that led from modern scientific rationalism to cybernetics, and eventually made the creation of a digital web possible. But if you extend the syntactic method of interpretation to human beings, a cognitive and psychic mutation is underway.”¹² This

¹⁰Junger, Ernst. “Total Mobilization,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 129.

¹¹Ibid., 133.

¹²Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2012), 164.

mutation has brought about a condition of pathology marked by the inability to switch paradigm and be able to relate to oneself and the world.

Berardi's project rests on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *schizoanalysis*: "Our definition of schizoanalysis focused on two aspects: the destruction of the expressive pseudo forms of the unconscious, and the discovery of desire's unconscious investments of the social field. It is from this point of view that we must consider many primitive cures; they are schizoanalysis in action."¹³ It is the investment of desire in the social field that is at the heart of Berardi's project; the existential mutation is achieved through the re-discovery of sensibility: "Sensibility is the ability of the human being to communicate what cannot be said with words. Being available to conjunction, the social organism is open to affections, sensuous comprehension, and social solidarity."¹⁴

Berardi's attention to the feminine is very interesting in the context of philosophy and deserves more attention. The receptive, feminine, qualities of human sensibility are being overtaken by the aggressiveness of technology and its inhuman speed. Berardi's metaphor of the disappearance of feminine *Fortuna* means the destruction of time, care, and patience. The disappearance of this dimension and the changes in practices of mothering will inevitably bring about a state of global disassociation: "In the sphere of neoliberal capitalism, because of the capture of feminine nervous and physical energies by the machinery of global exploitation, mothers are less and less the source of language: they are separated from the bodies of children by salaried labor, by the networked mobilization of their mental energies, and also by the globalization of the affective

13 Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 164.

14 Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2012), 121.

market.”¹⁵

Berardi sees the rise of Italian and Japanese Fascism as the attempt to aggressively cover up the substrate of feminine sensibility: “As far as time goes, Italian fascism was about forgetting laziness, slowness, and Mediterranean sensitivity, and affirming a different perception of time, one based on acceleration [...] The ridiculous, crazy, murderous hysteria of Italian and Japanese fascism, comes as a consequence of the denial and forced obliteration of the feminine side of those cultures.”¹⁶ From this perspective, Deleuze and Guattari’s project in the *Anti-Oedipus* can be seen as a feminization of thought that seeks to break away from the patriarchal constraints of the Oedipal model and the Fascist tendencies at work: “The intuitive, the practical, and the reflective, which all become joined as bits and pieces of one and the same strategical machine whose target is the ego and the fascist in each of us.”¹⁷

IV.

The fourth critique deals with art and society. On the two sides of the ring we have Baudrillard and Heidegger. These philosophers represent two extremes on the spectrum as far as style and content although as often happens in philosophy they share the same table. For Baudrillard the essence of contemporary art has become a nullity in the sense that it has become just another part of the machinery of capitalism: “In itself Duchamp’s act is infinitesimal, but starting with him all the, all the banality of the world passes into aesthetics, and inversely all aesthetics becomes banal; a commutation takes place between the two fields of banality and aesthetics, one that truly brings aesthetics in

¹⁵Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Intervention Series, 2012), 107..

¹⁶Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁷Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), xix.

the traditional sense to an end.”¹⁸

The artist himself has lost his position as a somewhat mystical counter-cultural interpreter. Baudrillard targets Warhol as the primary designer of the contemporary aesthetic: “Warhol went the farthest in abolishing the subject of art, of the artist, by withdrawing from the creative act. Behind this mechanical snobbery, there is in fact an escalation in the power of the object, the sign, the image, the simulacrum of value of which the best example itself is the art market itself.”¹⁹

In Baudrillard’s view there has been a collusion that has flattened art and made it indistinguishable from everyday life. The process of junction promoted by the avant-gardes between art and life has reached its desired end, the danger being that art is no longer something other than life under capitalism! While in the 60s and 70s gestures of anti-art seemed so new and provocative, today it is absolutely common to confuse art and life as in the case of the staff of the Museoin in Bolzano, Italy that threw out the installation by artists Sara Goldschmied and Eleonora Chiari thinking that it was the trash from a party.²⁰ For Baudrillard art has simply failed to matter as its propagation into life has eliminated its potency.

Baudrillard is very good at pinpointing the failures of art he remains on the surface and does not explore the event constituted by art. Heidegger, on the other hand, focuses his attention on how art emerges as an event and its implications for thinking and

¹⁸ Baudrillard, Jean and Sylvère Lotringer. *The Conspiracy of Art*. (Cambridge: Semiotext(e)/The MIT Press, 2005), 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Online article:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11956330/Art-installation-in-Italy-ended-up-in-the-bin-by-cleaners-who-thought-it-was-rubbish.html>

living. Heidegger speaks of *poiesis* as the bringing forth of art which cuts through the evaluation of the defunct status of the artist: “It is of utmost importance that we think bringing-forth in its full scope and at the same time in the sense in which the Greeks thought it. Not only handcraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poiesis*. *Physis* also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, *poiesis*. *Physis* is, indeed *poiesis* in the highest sense.”²¹ Heidegger is speaking of a fundamental dimension of revealing and concealing that stands as the grounding for any sort of poetic/artistic revelation. As a retort to Baudrillard Heidegger would say that art is happening but we are too jaded to see it.

After Nietzsche, Heidegger carries the torch for the artist-philosopher. Heidegger’s later work is a kind of thinking that draws out of deep listening. As Heraclitus listened to the flux on his mountain Heidegger’s thoughts follow the creeks and drafts of the Black Forest. Heidegger speaks of *Gestell* as a framework, which means both an existential awareness and the cultural manifestation of the domination of technology. *Gestellen* is a state of autism or aural damage as not being able to *sense* the world anymore. Without sensing there can be no creation.

While technological framework reveals according to a utilitarian calculation, ordering all things according to need, as standing reserve, the revelation of the fundamental act of art is free and thus it may free us as well:

Always the unconcealment of that which is goes upon a
way of revealing. Always the destining of revealing holds

²¹ Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*. Ed., David Farrell Krell. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 137.

complete sway over man But that destining is never a fate that compels. For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey.

Getting back into the flow of life requires the deconstruction of previous forms of domination, patriarchy, and ideology. In many ways, philosophy like Western music suffers from the ideological underpinnings of few experts jealously guarding their master-codes. Through artists such as Cage and thinkers like Heidegger the open region of the musical is momentarily revealed. We must listen carefully. Similarly to Cage's musical thinking, ethico-aesthetic critique seeks to dissolve various forms of closure.

Ethico-aesthetics offers a kind of intellectual/sensuous reawakening as the attempt to gather a holistic awareness of the human condition that incorporates the existential, the aesthetic, the ecological, and the social. The scope of the ethico-aesthetic critique operates trans-historically as knowledge evolves through time. Values and ideas morph into each other just like various forms of art and music contaminate each other and mutate within a continuum. Perhaps the ethico-aesthetic project is an act of inclusion and a testimony to the enduring value of friendship.

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