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Artistic Research

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Volume I

The Dark Precursor in Sound and Writing

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Thinking Sound through the Notion of the Time-Image

Deleuze's Cinema Studies as a Model for Problematising Sound in Artistic Practice

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In 2013 I had the chance to listen to a performance of Italian composer Luigi Nono's work *No hay caminos . . . a Andrei Tarkovskij* (1987), for seven instrumental groups distributed around the audience, at the main hall of the Cité de la Musique, in Paris.¹ I recall being startled about three-quarters through this piece, which lasted approximately twenty-five minutes, by a substantial transformation in the way I experienced some of its sound components. This transformation was not the result of the manipulation of any of the sound elements of the work but of a displacement of my listening focus. It revealed sound as an essentially manifold instance, susceptible of acquiring diverse statuses.

In this chapter I would like to use Deleuze's notion of the "time-image," developed in his investigation of the role of the image in cinema, to explore what was significant about this experience. Along with this, I sketch a proposal to use the concept of "time-image" as a tool to reassess aspects of how we conceive sound and its role within artistic practices.

THE "TIME-IMAGE"

What we understand when we refer to an *image* is not an undisputed given. As visual scholar W. J. T. Mitchell (1987, 9) puts it: "[something] that must immediately strike the notice of anyone who tries to take a general view of the phenomena called by the name of imagery . . . is the wide variety of things that go by this name . . . pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas." He elaborates this with an example: "[What] if I try to point to a real image

¹ The piece was conducted by Jonathan Nott and performed by the Ensemble Intercontemporain and members of the Orchestre du Conservatoire de Paris.



and explain what it is to someone who doesn't already know what an image is. I point at Xeuxis's painting and say 'There, that is an image.' And the reply is, 'Do you mean that colored surface?' Or 'Do you mean those grapes?'" (ibid., 17).

An image implies a particular instance of perceptual individuation, a grasp, an articulation of codes set up within a model that organises the seen. As such, it acquires different roles and statuses within different sensory and cognitive models. As Mitchell (2005, 263) points out, "ancient optical theory treated vision as a thoroughly tactile and material process, a stream of 'visual fire' and phantom 'eidola' flowing back and forth between the eye and the object." This example shows how such a model defines the nature of the image in a very different way from a model that postulates the mind as "a drawing surface or a mirror" (Mitchell 1987, 17).

Although not aiming to propose a comprehensive theory of the image, in the books *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989) Gilles Deleuze explores the status and role of images within the domain of cinematic practices. The manifold nature of the image is expressed by enunciating distinct *regimes* of the image. As Deleuze explains in chapter 6 of *The Time-Image*, what confers a distinct status to an image is not the reference it conveys, the "object" of an image: "it is not a matter of knowing if the object is really independent, it is not a matter of knowing if these are exteriors or scenery" (Deleuze 1989, 126); what determines its particular status is the kind of relationships it establishes.

Throughout the two cinema books, Deleuze strives towards the description of a particular type of cinematic image that he will label the *time-image*. This type, he will claim, emerges as relevant for the first time, albeit not exclusively, in post-World War II cinema. It is contrasted with the type of cinematic image that mostly inhabits what he brands as *classic cinema*, which operates instead within the regime of the *movement-image*.

SENSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

The impression that I had while listening to Luigi Nono's *No hay caminos*, which conveyed the transformation I referred to above, can be described in the following way: at a particular moment in the piece I came to hear the joint sound of the single and double strikes on the timpani and bass drum, the two lowest members of the percussion family, as if the sound had been "spatialised" by electronic means, as if it had been spread throughout, expanded into emerging from all areas of the hall.

It is well known that the lowest sounding frequencies give the least amount of directional information, rendering these sonorous instances less localisable and more diffuse. Nevertheless, in this case the significant aspect is that I was literally hearing these elements in a fundamentally different way than I had heard them at the beginning of the piece. This occurred even though no other layer had been added to these sound components: they had remained unchanged, and they appeared at rather regular time intervals throughout the work, always

consisting of similarly repeated, simple gestures.² In this piece, although most other percussion, string, and wind instruments are spread throughout the space in diverse locations, the two timpani and the bass drum, played mostly in combination, are located *only* on the front stage and the back of the hall.

As I mentioned before, the transformation in my experience of the sound resulted not from a manipulation or alteration of the sound but from a displacement of my listening focus. The unfolding of the piece had sensitised my hearing to the inherently spatial aspect embedded in each sound, to the fact that every sound entity produced in a conventional medium comprises a series of successive and multiple reflections; hence, rather than hearing this sonorous instance *through* the pre-eminence of its attack, which had determined my listening approach at the start of the work,³ my attention had shifted to the resonances of the timpani and bass drum, to the proliferation of acoustic excitations produced by the reflections they triggered in the hall. The intensity of these resonances, previously absent from my awareness, had been levelled and rendered, through this shift in attention, as equivalent in relevance to that of the attack. This alteration in my experience of this sounding instance did not simply imply a change in the sonorous information to which I attended; it altered the sounds' role and precipitated a different set of adjacencies. In the circumstances of apprehension that were established at the beginning of the piece, and through the perceptual isolation of the attack, this sound event had been constituted as a point within an autonomous plane of musical figures; but at this point the sound turned into the experience of the room as a sounding *body* triggered by the timpani and bass drum's initial excitation. This sonorous instance thus prompted multiple sets of affective memories and traces of embodied apprehensions.

A CRYSTALLINE REGIME

Within *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze discusses how images in cinema acquire a different status depending on the kind of prolongation prompted by their interaction. These prolongations occur within particular *regimes of the image*, themselves enabled by specific cinematic operations. Deleuze's use of the notion of prolongation is rooted in Henri Bergson's radical reassessment of the concept of image, which Deleuze claims entails a redefinition of the basis of our perceptual model.

In *The Movement-Image* Deleuze contrasts Bergson's position with that of phenomenology, observing that Bergson and Husserl undertook in parallel the challenge of devising their own "solution" to the inherited nineteenth-century problem of how to weld "image" and "movement" (Deleuze 1986, 56). He claims that phenomenology retained the coordinates of consciousness through the performance of intentionality, asserting the existence of natural "condi-

² They appear in segments 1, 8, 14, and 21 of the score (Nono 1987).

³ As Morton Feldman remarks: "Actually, what we [usually] hear is the attack and not the sound" (Feldman [1973] 1985, 89).

tions of perception” that define “an ‘anchoring’ of the perceiving subject in the world” (ibid., 57). Deleuze states that phenomenology “still preserves the categories of things and of consciousness” (Deleuze 1982a, my translation),⁴ by way of its main dictum: “all consciousness is consciousness *of* something” (Deleuze 1986, 56). Bergson, rather, removed the “of,” claiming that “all consciousness *is* something” (ibid.). While phenomenology conceives of a “sensible form (Gestalt) which organises the perceptive field as a function of a situated intentional consciousness” (ibid., 57), in Bergson the “infinite set of all images constitutes a kind of plane” (ibid., 58), a system of “universal variation” (ibid.) where instances of perception are not organised according to a model of “bodies (nouns), qualities (adjectives) and actions (verbs)” (ibid., 59) but actually emerge through the articulation of pure relationships between images. “Every image acts on others and reacts to others, on ‘all their facets at once’ and ‘by all their elements’” (Deleuze 1986, 58). Particular instances of perception arise from this continuous interaction, from the particular “interval [that] appears—a gap between the action and the reaction” (ibid., 61). Constructing his argument from this Bergsonian precedent, Deleuze explicates the notion of *regime of the image* (ibid., 62), in which a particular kind of prolongation, arising from their interaction confers a specific status on an image.

In Chapter 3 of *The Time Image* (1989) Deleuze introduces Bergson’s two kinds of “recognition,” which involve two different kinds of memory, to further elaborate the inner workings of the two main *regimes* of the image. The first of Bergson’s types of memory can be identified with habit; the second, with the recollection of past events. In an earlier lecture, Deleuze (1982b) labelled them respectively memory-contraction (habit) and memory-circuit (recollection).

Habit plays a role in the vast majority of our everyday circumstances, in the form of sensory-motor links: I see a cup and react to it by taking hold of it and bringing it to my mouth. It is not necessary to invoke a set of recollections; a motor-link is prompted directly by the cup. However, if for any reason my memory habits fail, the sensory-motor link is interrupted, and I’m confronted with memory-circuits of the past, the diverse layers of interactions and possibilities that constitute the current experience. Deleuze (1982b) cites Bergson’s references to cases of aphasia, illustrated by the situation in which we meet on the street a person we know, but we don’t remember from where we know him or even his name. In this instance a particular effort to activate the recollection of memories takes place.

The regime of the *movement-image*, comprising processes of “automatic or habitual recognition,” is governed by sensory-motor links, where a particular action, affection or a *state of things* is constituted. A cinematic shot of an orange on a table, followed by a shot of a person who grabs it and slams it against a wall, constitutes an *action-image*. Within this regime, also identified by Deleuze as an *organic* regime, images *stand for something beyond themselves*: a detached continuity, a “supposedly pre-existing reality” that follows the “laws which determine successions” (Deleuze 1989, 126).

4 “la phénoménologie gardera encore les catégories des choses et de conscience.”

This *organic* regime is contrasted with a *crystalline* regime, which is articulated by *time-images*. Deleuze claims that the first emergence of this type of image as a regular feature of *modern* cinema appears in cinematic situations in which characters are faced with something so “unbearable” (Deleuze 1989, 2) that it has become impossible for them to react.⁵ In these first cases that Deleuze alludes to in *The Time-Image*, the prolongation of the image into action has been broken, put into crisis. Comparable to the interruption that occurs in memory-circuits, where “the actual is cut off from its motor linkages” (ibid., 127), prolongation is in this case interrupted: “descriptions, which constitute their own object, refer [now] to purely optical and sound situations detached from their motor extension” (ibid., 126), and the image, in this case, is relinked to its virtual past and future. Within the regime of the *time-image*, “a crystalline description . . . constantly gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones. It is now the description itself which constitutes the sole decomposed and multiplied object” (ibid.). In opposition to what occurs within the realm of the movement-image, in which the function of the images is to relate to a detached continuity, “a supposedly pre-existing reality” (ibid.), here an image stands for itself, but not as a self-contained thing-in-itself. Rather, it is an instance of an image-circuit that, disconnected from sensory-motor links, is open to all that constitutes it and that is not actual: the multiplicity of past conditions that allowed it and the future possibilities that arise from it.

BECOMING INDISCERNIBLE

Luigi Nono’s *No Hay Caminos* . . . is constructed of twenty-six segments interspersed with silences of varying durations. These twenty-six segments expose in diverse orders and distributions a set of recurrent materials: sound elements and behaviours that can be broadly identified by their timbral characteristics. These arise from diverse combinations of instrumental behaviours, including: conventionally and continuously held notes, iterated stable notes (produced by either *flatterzunge* or tremolo actions on string instruments), multiple-attack sequences on the bongos, deep-low single attacks on bass drum and timpani, multiple-attack *legno* gestures on the strings (“jeté”), and slow frequency oscillations on held notes.

The pitch material of the piece consists of microtonal variations around the single pitch-class G, distributed over all registers, which helps the piece to develop its focus on material aspects of the sound phenomena. The segments, although using very diverse dynamic ranges and degrees of vertical or horizontal aggregation, rarely imply a clear sense of directionality across the sequences that result, since the diverse variants are distributed in a way that does not give priority to any specific material. The work’s overall design could be said to pose a particular challenge to how continuity is perceived, as the distribution of components sets up a fundamentally non-directional character.

⁵ “What has suddenly been brought about is a pure optical situation to which the little maid has no response or reaction” (Deleuze 1989, 2).

The sound elements unfold, distributed among the seven different group locations around the audience and following diverse combinatorial strategies. Different patterns of distribution of the sources of sound in the hall take place: continuously held notes are “relayed” from one point to another in the room following complex schemes; attacks are interpolated that occur in one and another location; diversely “weighted” sound sources in the hall are summed in continuously shifting layers.⁶

Through the sum of these strategies, *No hay caminos . . .*, rather than setting up a layer of trajectories that would render an impression of linear movement throughout the hall—that is, creating an impression of the spatial as a magnitude based on localisation change—undertakes a sensitisation process that discloses the inherent spatiality of every sound. The spatial aspect of sound cannot be expressed as a single parameter; it implies a singular coalescence of diverse instances: motion parallax, inter-aural differences, spectral filtering caused by the room, psychological determinations of knowledge of the source, and cultural memories and conditions that inform the way we engage with sound. The spatial exceeds what can be grasped in a scalar dimension.

The unfolding of this work, in my experience of its performance, exposed how conditions of apprehension play a role in the way sound is experienced: while at first I had grasped the timpani attack as a figure, a point on a plane of formal relationships, my focus shifted towards the way the active engagement of my attention defined my listening process. By deploying a specific compositional strategy—including repetitions that ambiguously constitute different sound aggregates out of the same initial components, together with the isolation of the simplest elements at the subtlest dynamics *at the limit of audibility*⁷—the work disengages these elements from the threads of musical discursivity. By interrupting the possibility of establishing figural continuities between its sonorous components, the piece’s organisation enhances a listener’s awareness of each sound event as a diverse manner of exciting the acoustic conditions of the hall and of the sensitive adjacencies of these instances, rendering material aspects of sound as binding together diverse possibilities of apprehension.

Rather than linking one sound to another to constitute a detached continuity, an independent, *imaginary* plane of formal relationships, the way the piece unravelled had set up each *sound instance* as one which “constantly gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones” (Deleuze 1989, 126). Each perceived component, as in the case of the *time-image*, thereby prompted a link to the multiplicity of past conditions that allowed it and the future possibilities that arise from it.

As in the case of the *time-image*, the arrival at this sonorous instance is not equivalent to the arrival at an object “in itself,” an ultimate reality of sound

⁶ For a detailed account of the scheme for distributing location, see Banihashemi (2005, 30–39).

⁷ In several works of his so-called late period, Luigi Nono asks for the instrumentalists to play at such a soft level that the resulting sound is “at the limit of what is possibly audible”, see *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima* for string quartet (Nono 1980) or *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* for violin and eight-channel tape (Nono 1988). In *No hay caminos . . .* (Nono 1987), this is expressed by the use of extreme dynamic markings such as *ppppppp*.

detached from its surroundings; it rather offers a perceptual instance in which “the two modes of existence are now combined in a circuit where the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible” (Deleuze 1989, 127). From such a perspective, a sound is neither a pure acoustic instance nor a figure on a musical plane. Like the image, as introduced at the beginning of this article, sound is instead an inherently problematic instance, ever implied in singular circuits of material and symbolic transformations.

In the work I have referred to, through the exposure of the variable conditions at play in the constitution of our apprehension, the role of sound is problematised, shown to happen in the enactment of particular models. By describing the *sound-event* as occurring within a regime comparable to that of the *time-image*, sound is exposed as a confluence of latent possibilities of coalescence and its actualisations.

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Appendix

ONLINE MATERIALS



As further illustration to the chapters “Deleuze’s Fold in the Performing Practice of Aaron Cassidy’s *The Pleats of Matter*” (pp. 56–66) and “Alone/Together: Simulacral ‘A-presentation’ in and into Practice-as-Research in Jazz” (pp. 167–73), an online repository of audio and video examples has been created and hosted within the website of the Orpheus Institute, Ghent. These examples, which should be viewed in connection with a reading of the relevant articles, may all be accessed under the URL: <http://www.orpheusinstituut.be/en/the-dark-precursor-media-repository>.