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Discovering the Ears on Flusser's Face. A respectful revision

When my attention was directed to Rodrigo Maltez-Novaez's brilliant translation of Vilém Flusser's lecture "On Music"¹, this revelation from the Flusser Archive took me by surprise. Flusser's influential media philosophy has been described so far as having neglected the sonic dimension, being dominated by analysis of visual knowledge such as texts, writing, and technical imagery like photography and the computable image. I even remember (and agreed myself with) a saying that Flusser had a "face with no ears". This turns out to be a reductionist reading of the Flusser galaxy and I am happy to pay justice to Flusser's music theory with a few remarks. In an uncanny way, Flusser posthumously gets closer to music - reminding of Friedrich Kittler's "musical turn" which dominates his re-turn to ancient Greece in his later years.² Flusser, too, had a widening notion of music by referring to its ancient Greek meaning as "art of the Muses" <Lecture 15>.

Anticipating current Sound Studies and in tune with Murray Schafer's notion of the sonosphere³, Flusser first directs our attention in his Sao Paulo lectures on music to the machine-induced noises of the modern world like "the syncopated rhythms of machine levers" and of "typewriters" which replace former natural and symbolical social and festive rhythms.⁴ Close to Marshall McLuhan's definition of the electronic age as "acoustic space"⁵, Flusser distinguishes the present situation by its "acoustic character rather than a visual one" <Lecture 16>, the symptom of which is that "we desire silence far more than darkness" <ibid.>. Noise and sounds created by mass communication "influence us almost subliminally" <ibid.>, thereby becoming the true message of electronic media.

Flusser does not focus on the harmonic or melodic but on the rhythmic qualities of music. That gives him the possibility to recall the direct link between the countable (mathematics) and music; in fact he openly confesses to be a true Pythagorean. "Effectively, music and mathematics are the obverse and reverse of the same coin" <Lecture 15>. Just like Flusser's seminal work on the technical image

¹ 15th lecture in the series: The Influence of Existential Thought Today, delivered at the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy in Sao Paulo (1965). Thanks to an electronic communication by Annie Goh, January 2014

² See the first two books of *Musik und Mathematik*, vol. I ("Hellas"): *Aphrodite* (2006) and *Eros* 2009. Kittler had invited Flusser to perform his lectures at Ruhr-Universität Bochum in the early 1990s.

³ Murray R. Schafer, *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester, Vt. (Destiny Books) 1994

⁴ See W. E., *Ticking Clock, Vibrating String: How Time Sense Oscillates Between Religion and Machine*, in: Jeremy Stolow (Hg.), *Deus In Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, New York (Fordham University Press) 2013, 43-60

⁵ Marshall McLuhan (with Edmund Carpenter), *Acoustic Space*, in: same authors (eds.), *Explorations in Communication. An Anthology*, Boston (Bacon Press) 1960, 65-70

confronts us with a new type of image made entirely of mathematical functions, music here acts as a precursor. Not only "the structure of our thought is arithmetic", this is also "what music is made of" <ibid.>.

Different from a traditional cultural history of music, Flusser identifies an epistemic (or should we say: acoustemic) rupture and focuses on the new quality which characterizes music since the Renaissance: "With the advent of the Modern Age, a cultural phenomenon emerged, which seems to me to be at least as important as the emergence of science and technology: Pure music" <Lecture 15> - a phenomenon which according to Flusser is not only absent in other cultures but absent from pre-modern occidental history itself. This is a very European statement, since in spite of the Renaissance self-concept, Europe thus emancipates itself from the overshadowing dominance of ancient classical knowledge. "Pure music is the greatest contribution of the Modern West to humanity's treasure" <ibid.>. In Flusser's enthusiastic correlation of music with mathematics, pure music - freed from discursive (aesthetic, cultural or religious) restraints - situates humans in a non-historicist tempor(e)ality in itself.⁶

Flusser's comparison of "pure music" to the grammatical structure of language is a structuralist approach, a true archaeology of sonic knowledge: "Pure music is the very articulation of this structure" <Lecture 15>. Under this perspective, computer music is not simply a creation of the 20th century, but a recursion of the oldest concept of occidental music as such. All of the sudden, *logos* becomes musical again - not in the sense of oral poetry, but rather in a deeper sense of *epistémé mousiké*. Logocentrism does not need to be deconstructed any more but gets (algo)rhythmicized.⁷ Flusser defines music as "any set of sounds purposely composed by the human intellect" <Lecture 16>. At the same time he thereby provides a clear distinction between music as epistemic structure and its physical implementation as audible sound.

Music, understood as mathematical concept, can be visually expressed by its sister art geometry. What Renaissance perspective did with the image, here turns out in pure musical scores: "And it is inversely the attempt to geometrize music and make it independent from lived experiences, to transform it into pure structure" <Lecture 16>. This feature of the modern European mind culminates with genuinely media-induced electronic music which is not just an extension of the classical instrumental tradition but a new quality, corresponding with music in its purest mathematic form. "The tape composed by the composers is the immediate articulation of the intellect. It means nothing, but it expresses directly the structure of thought" <Lecture 16> - just like Clement Greenberg identified

⁶ For a radical diagnosis on the ahistoric "ecstasis" of musical temporality see Günther Stern's (*alias* Günther Anders) unachieved habilitation thesis, Philosophische Untersuchungen über musikalische Situationen, typescript (1930/31), Literary Archive of the Austrian National Library (Vienna), no. 237/04

⁷ For this neologism see Shintaro Miyazaki, *Algorhythmics. Understanding Micro-Temporality in Computational Cultures*, *online* in: *Computational Culture*, Issue 2 / 2012 (<http://computationalculture.net>); same author, *Algorhythmisiert. Eine Medienarchäologie digitaler Signale und (un)erhörter Zeiteffekte*, Berlin (Kulturverlag Kadmos) 2013

modern abstract painting. Beyond cultural semantics, Flusser therefore celebrates electronics as a cultural form induced by technologies based on the electro-magnetic field. The magnetic recorder is described by Flusser as the true archaeologist of the sonosphere, listening with technological ears without evaluating music from noise: "A random sound is recorded on tape. The sound is almost indifferent. It may be the sound of a bell, or of a locomotive, or of the human voice reciting a verse from the Bible <...>. The tape is recorded and then cut-up, and its segments are then submitted to deliberate manipulation. They are amplified, twisted or condensed. The segments thus manipulated are then re-composed onto a new tape, in a deliberate order and structure, that is, vertically, horizontally, diagonally and in a sequence that is independent from the primitive tape. This is a composition in the strict meaning of the term" <Lecture 16>. Flusser is a true contemporary of William Burrough's acoustic cut-ups and their posthuman assumptions.⁸ Music as intellectual concept turns into sound only when implemented into the physical world which is the moment when parameter t (the time axis) is involved: "The tape is then played through an apparatus for sound reproduction, and we can then experience this music acoustically, this is, in its temporality" <Lecture 16>. Only the embodiment of musical compositions into physical materiality provides it with a temporal dimension which defines sonicity against pure concepts - just like an algorithm is not yet computing but needs an operative computer to be executed in time. Mathematics is not able to perform itself; a diagram for sound synthesis as well needs a real electronic synthesizer to happen as sound.

Here the audio-visual divide takes place: "But we may also appreciate it <sc. music> equally as a geometric structure: visually" <Lecture 16>. When Flusser correlates the options of electronic music with Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, he refers to non-Euclidean geometry as much as McLuhan does in his later work.⁹ A kind of sonification might transpose Einstein's mathematical equations onto tapes: "If done, we could then grasp musically Einstein's world, because we are already tired of knowing that we cannot imagine it" <Lecture 16> - an up-date of Plato's idea of the music of the astronomical spheres, just as the techno-mathematical theory of music developed by the avant-garde engineer of digitally controlled analog synthesizers Erkki Kurenniemi.¹⁰

Even if electronic music "appeals directly to our intellect" <Lecture 16>, our sonic understanding is hindered by our accommodation to traditional music which "still mobilizes our sensitivity" <ibid.>. Flusser in other contexts declared the post-historic age; here he defines the ahistoricity of structural music. Training in listening to electronic music will help humans "to grasp the beauty of pure thought" <ibid.>.

⁸ On William Burrough's audiotape cut-ups from the 1960s see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, And Informatics*, Chicago / London (University of Chicago Press) 1999, 208 f.

⁹ See Marshall McLuhan / Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village. Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, Oxford et al. (Oxford University Press) 1989

¹⁰ See Mikko Ojanen et al., *Design Principles and User Interfaces of Erkki Kurenniemi's Electronic Musical Instruments of the 1960's and 1970's*, in: *Proceedings of the 2007 Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME07)*, New York, NY; online: http://www.nime.org/2007/proc/nime2007_088.pdf

The precursor of this emancipated notion of pure music not as sound but as mathematical sonicity in its perfect articulation is Baroque music; it was not by coincidence that in the emerging epoch of electronic music (Flusser's lectures in 1965) "currently in all of our programs <...> composers such as Vivaldi and Tartini are going through a rebirth" <Lecture 16>. This rebirth cannot be grasped by figures of historical evolution but demands for a nonlinear description of the chrono-logics of symbolical knowledge which defines culture. Thereby when "concerts are enacted with authentic instruments from the fifteen hundreds" <ibid.>, what is termed historically informed performance is in fact experimental archaeology, archaeo-acoustics not in its chronological but structural sense - both in terms of the materiality (instrumental behaviour) and the intellectual concept of music.¹¹ Flusser's radical analysis of the musical situation of the digital media age and his clear differentiation between the symbolic regime of musical mathematics and its temporal implementations as sound are themes which deserve attention beyond his grave. At the end of his talk on modern music, Flusser asked his listeners for hot "discussion rather than cold presentation. The invitation is now open to you" <Lecture 16>. After half a century, a media archaeology of sonic articulation is willing to provide the echo to Flusser's insistence on music.

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¹¹ See W. E., *Toward a Media Archaeology of Sonic Articulations*, in: same author, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, edited and with an introduction by Jussi Parikka, Minneapolis / London (University of Minnesota Press) 2013, 172-183