THE RADICAL MUSIC OF JOHN ZORN, DIAMANDA GALÁS, AND MERZBOW: A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO EXPRESSIVE NOISE

BY

STEVEN ALAN WILSON

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Gayle Sherwood Magee, Chair
Associate Professor Donna Buchanan
Associate Professor Gabriel Solis
Assistant Professor Michael Silvers
Abstract

Music at the turn of the twenty-first century has expanded in new, previously inconceivable directions, many of which espouse a newfound freedom from dominant models of beauty and aesthetic excellence. From this musical space, vital new musical practices are emerging from composers such as John Zorn, Diamanda Galás, and Merzbow; however, because their music is so utterly unconventional, existing critical tools are failing to lead toward a greater understanding of the meaning created through the music. This interpretive lacuna has compelled the present study, which seeks to create a discursive space along with appropriate critical tools to help scholars and listeners better understand new streams of radical music from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The radical music of John Zorn, Diamanda Galás, and Merzbow presents special hermeneutic challenges to anyone who endeavors to find meaning within their aggressively alienating expressive languages. To this end, I propose a multifaceted, multi-perspectival approach that is grounded the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, but that also emerges organically from the exigencies of the works under consideration. Across case studies on Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, I demonstrate how a hermeneutic approach can uncover comprehensible musical meaning even when confronting the extreme expressive languages of these composers. Ultimately, I hope to provide a model for future investigations into musical meaning to help elucidate the work of other radical composers.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help and support of many people, some of whom are mentioned below.

Heartfelt thanks to my advisor, Gayle Sherwood Magee, who encouraged me even as I worked on a dissertation project that she once referred to as a peanut butter and jalapeño sandwich. She gave me the freedom to explore some very strange music in a very strange manner, all while keeping me grounded. Thanks also to my committee—Donna Buchanan, Gabriel Solis, and Mike Silvers—for their input and perspectives on my project.

Along the way, I have been blessed with the friendship and colleagueship of numerous individuals. When the rigors of graduate school proved most trying, they were the ones who made the journey truly rewarding. Thanks to my dear friends Elissa Harbert and Catherine Hennessy Wolter. They have been my most trusted colleagues in academia and my closest allies in life. I am grateful to my wonderful friends and colleagues in Champaign-Urbana: Megan and Alex Woller, Michael Siletti, and John Stanislawski. Whether they were reading and commenting on my drafts, or just hanging out and commiserating on the status of graduate school affairs, they have been a tremendous source of happiness and normalcy during some very difficult (and occasionally wonderful) times.

Sincerest thanks to my parents, Mark and Debbie, who have shown me unwavering love and support through my entire life, who believed in me even when I didn’t, and who always knew exactly what to say when life seemed most unfathomable. Special thanks are also due to my mother for setting aside her own career to homeschool me. Any scholastic aptitude that I possess is thanks to her. Thanks, finally, to my sister Katie, for being my fellow explorer of the arts and my best friend. And, ultimately, thanks to God, my sine qua non.
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Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Music at the turn of the twenty-first century has expanded in new, previously inconceivable directions. As the hegemonic power of the Western art music canon declines, the advent of postmodern sensibilities has given rise to a diffraction of musical styles. The abundance of recordings and historical research has created a flattening of history into a perpetual present where centuries of music from around the world are available to inform and inspire composers. This, along with the thoroughgoing skepticism toward metanarratives that is the ineluctable essence of the postmodern turn, has created a unique freedom from a dominant, unified model of aesthetic excellence. Some of the emerging streams of music continue to fall into the familiar categories of art music and popular music, but there are a number of streams that not only refuse to fit within this binary, but also actively work to demonstrate the limitations of convention as it pertains to music.

In this dissertation, I examine three such streams of radical music by John Zorn, Diamanda Galás, and Merzbow. I define radical music as a broad class of aural expression that transgresses the common codes of a given culture. The transgressions may range from the aesthetic to the social to the political to the ethical, but the class of all radical music composers is united by a desire to break boundaries and question any and all levels of cultural praxis. The disruptive efficacy of radical music is powered by a phenomenon that I call “expressive noise”—a metaphysical essence that contains the kernel of transgression inherent in radical music. Expressive noise cuts across distinctions of taste, style, and any other convention as it ruptures the outer conceptual shell that encompasses music.
I hold that there is great value in the exploration of the extreme states of a given phenomenon. The process of investigating the periphery of musical practice leads to two things: first, it provides a way to reconceptualize what is already familiar, and second, it allows us to expand our conceptions of music in new directions. The pluralism of John Zorn demonstrates the limitations of divisions between musical hiererachies of value, as well as musical styles; the vengeful anger rendered aurally explosive by Diamanda Galás exceeds its aesthetic frame, bursting forth from the speaker to create real ototoxic anxiety; and the revolutionary sonic explorations of Merzbow pose ontological queries, the likes of which music has not faced since Cage. Each of these composers uses radical means to transgress the borders of culture, society, and aesthetics, and although each of them may have very different reasons for doing so, they are united by their dedication to musical anti-foundationalism.

Because radical music is intrinsically alien, arriving at our ears in a manner that is unfamiliar and often discomforting, it compounds the normal problem of interpretation, and thus we must explore new approaches to musical understanding if we are to understand it at a level beyond a simplistic attack on normative values. My central objectives are to create a discursive space along with appropriate critical tools so that we may understand new streams of radical music from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I begin with the premise that when a given music is sufficiently removed from acknowledged traditions of Western music, the existing critical models no longer pertain and it becomes necessary to find new approaches to the task of hermeneutics. To this end, I propose a multifaceted, multi-perspectival approach that is grounded the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, but that also emerges organically from the exigencies of the works under consideration.
Thus far, critical approaches to composers such as Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow have tended to fall into two camps: the first favors a sociocultural approach either interpreting the music with respect to its sociocultural context, or avoiding interpretation in favor of a more objective, ethnographic approach that mostly documents what the practitioners say about themselves; \(^1\) the second is a phenomenological approach similar to Pierre Schaeffer’s *acousmology* where the sound is considered as a decontextualized thing-in-itself.\(^2\) In the case of the former, the scholarship has difficulty discussing the specifics of the musical actuality of the work, while in the case of the latter, the scholarship turns a blind eye towards crucial issues of context and meaning. By contrast, at the heart of my study is a deep engagement with the music of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, where I address not only the failure of any existing hermeneutics to confront a growing body of radical music that exists outside the purview of either Western art music or popular music, but also a way forward so that we might welcome it into the musicological discourse. My goal is to conduct a synthesis of my hermeneutic readings with an ethnoaesthetics of radical music—a confluence of interpretation and the aesthetic conceptions indigenous to radical composers.

There is a growing body of literature on the music I describe as radical, but many of the scholars examining this music are coming from a field other than musicology—a point I will elaborate on in subsequent chapters as part of my literature review. This is true of Galás, whose coverage consists mainly of music journalists and countercultural critics, and this is especially true of Merzbow, whose limited coverage exists mainly within the realm of sound theory and...

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\(^1\) At the extreme end of this approach, we find Miller, whose editorial voice is all but mute. Paul D. Miller, ed., *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

cultural studies, although David Novak’s recent ethnography of Japanese noise music is a welcome exception.\(^3\) The academic literature on Zorn is starting to grow, but again, the majority of published material on Zorn comes from music journalists instead of musicologists and theorists. With one monograph and a small handful of dissertation chapters that consider Zorn, much remains to be said.\(^4\) Granted, those outside of the musicological discourse may find it intimidating (or possibly useless) to discuss music with any sort of specificity or precision, but is that not why the field of musicology exists? Is our field not one of experts trained in the obscure art of musical discourse? If so, it is disappointing that a thriving body of music would go almost unnoticed by the very field charged with studying it. The field of contemporary radical music seems to have fallen between the still-persistent art music/popular music divide, containing elements of both, while fitting within neither. The present study seeks to rectify this situation by proposing a new approach to musical hermeneutics that will help introduce radical music into the musicological discourse while providing a new toolset for future scholars of radical music.


\(^4\) Zorn’s name is mentioned in a number of books, but he is rarely the focus of a chapter or article. Often, his name appears in a list of composers associated with postmodernism or he is mentioned in passing. Cf. numerous chapters in Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, *Postmodern Music / Postmodern Thought* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jonathan D. Kramer, “Beyond Unity: Toward an Understanding of Musical Postmodernism,” in *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz since 1945*, ed. Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1995); Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).


2.0 Background

I will begin by offering a brief commentary on what I term radical music and expressive noise that prefigures a fuller exposition that will follow in chapter two. From there I will provide some background on Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, along with the respective works that I will examine in chapters three through five. Next I will conduct a survey of the musicological discourse surrounding music and meaning with special attention devoted to hermeneutic approaches to musical understanding. Finally, I will present a brief outline of the hermeneutic that I will develop in detail in chapter one.

2.1.0 Radical Music

Where the standards of conventional music and culture have been transgressed beyond a certain threshold, where our analytical and interpretive approaches cease to yield meaningful results, where the very boundaries of the concept of music are pushed to a breaking point, there we find radical music. It transgresses standards, pointing to a beyond of music and of musical experience, and in doing so, radical music forces us to ask fundamental questions about the nature of music and art.

I have chosen to call this music “radical” for a number of reasons. The designation “experimental music” carries the unfortunate connotation that the composer is presenting some sort of outcome of a musical test rather than a fully formed, intentionally designed work of art. The label has also been used as a synonym for non-academically affiliated twentieth century modernists like John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison. Along similar lines, the

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designation “avant-garde” has also been used to refer to a specific period of history—the “historical avant-garde” of Andreas Huyssen—and to differentiate between institutionally supported avant-gardists and non-institutionally-supported experimentalists. Avant-garde, as a term, also carries an evolutionist connotation implying that the art is merely at the forefront of what will eventually become “après-garde.” If radical music aligns with a historical period, it coincides with the postmodern turn during the latter decades of the twentieth century and extending into the foreseeable future of the twenty-first century. Like the so-called experimentalists, radical composers tend not to be affiliated with academic institutions and are not overly concerned with trying to situate their music in relation to the Western art music canon. Unlike avant-garde composers, it is less that radical composers are ahead of the curve and more that they have transcended the curve.

Radical music is a heterogeneous category with wildly divergent intentions and aesthetic manifestations. There are, however, eight general features that are often found in radical music. While these eight features are not strict requirements, they represent eight of the most common features shared amongst the diverse group of radical composers. There is no minimum criterion for assessing the radicalism of a given work, but most radical music touches on at least a few of these features. Moreover, there are degrees to which any of the following features pertain to a given composer, and these degrees are subject to change either over the span of one’s career or

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8 From this distinction we find that beyond matters of institutional support, avant-gardists tend to see themselves at the forefront of a musical teleology (e.g., Boulez, Stockhausen) while experimentalists tend to see themselves as rebels deviating from the tradition (e.g., Cage, Partch, Cowell). David Nicholls, “Avant-garde and Experimental Music,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ff. 519.

9 The relationship of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow to institutional support systems will be explored in more detail in chapters three, four, and five, respectively.
from work to work. For instance, Galás’s oeuvre encompasses works of aesthetic extremism alongside (bizarre, but less radical) covers of blues, gospel, and jazz standards. Similarly, Zorn has had to self-finance many of his projects, but he has slowly gained recognition and now receives orchestral commissions and prestigious fellowships.  

1) Radical music is intrinsically transgressive on many fronts, including general aesthetics and fundamental musical conventions, such as the seemingly formless displays of musical abjection found in Galás’s early work.

2) Radical music is extreme. There is durational extremism from Merzbow’s fifty-CD Merzbox to the tiny vignettes of Zorn’s band, Naked City; there is sonic extremism from the piercing screeches of Galás to the nearly silent work of Francisco Lopez; there is sociopolitical extremism from the bitter fascistic parodies of Throbbing Gristle to Merzbow’s Dadaist critiques of the art establishment.

3) There is usually an important conceptual component that is transgressive in nature, often in a political sense. Zorn rails against the musical establishment, while Galás creates scathing critiques of social injustice around the world. Unlike the general transgressive spirit of radical music, these conceptual components pertain to issues specific to a given work.

4) It is rare for radical composers to have any sort of conventional institutional support such as a professorship, a major record label contract, or orchestral commissions. They are often self-sustaining artists who rely on media sales including CDs or digital downloads, often released through either boutique labels catering to like artists, or through their own self-managed and self-financed record labels.

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10 Amongst other commissions, Zorn received a commission from the New York Philharmonic and composed *Orchestra Variations: Leonard Bernstein in Memoriam* in 1998. He was also named a MacArthur Fellow in 2006.
5) Timbre is often of central importance, supplanting traditionally omnipresent musical features such as melody, harmony, and rhythm. In Zorn’s *Astronome*, for instance, the voice is used in an entirely non-verbal capacity, thereby leaving timbre as the only sonically concrete element to discuss.

6) Radical music tends to exist as recordings that cement the composer’s exacting specifications in a definitive edition rather than as scores requiring the interpretation of a musician. Even when the composers are not also the performers, they typically oversee the recording and production of their work.

7) Radical music often involves cultural hybridity. Often times this cultural hybridity pertains to intercultural borrowing, but in the case of radical music, the artists are sometimes multinational citizens with roots in a number of cultures, thereby rendering questions of a singular origin problematic.

8) The radicalism of the sonic elements is magnified by equally radical extra-sonic elements. Whether it is the controversial album art of Zorn or the incendiary, profanity-ridden interview of Galás, or the themes of bondage and domination of Merzbow, there are supporting elements that enhance the transgressive power of the music.

9) Radical music often uses space in a particular manner. Sometimes this involves a total sonic saturation of space, other times it involves almost imperceptibly quite sound that blends with one’s listening environment, and yet other times, this involves multichannel, spatialized sound.
2.1.1 Expressive Noise

Noise is a widely used and poorly defined term. A survey of its usage reveals that it can mean just about anything from ugly sound to sound that is subjectively annoying to the total class of all sounds of which music is but a particular variety. Sometime noise is a pejorative and sometimes noise is commendatory. The noise of John Cage, for instance, is latent beauty waiting to be discovered by those who have blinded their ears to it, while the noise of Whitehouse is an antagonistic sound bomb meant to shock by virtue of its thoroughgoing hideousness.

First, it is important to clarify that noise is not necessarily synonymous with “non-music,” for most definitions of noise involve a subjective component, or at least involve some sort of intentional circumscription designating the sonics in question as an expressive act. Within contemporary discourses of noise, there are six main conceptions: acoustic, communicative, subjective, symbolic, transcendent, and phenomenological. Acoustic noise can be defined straightforwardly as an irregular waveform. Communicative noise is defined as a corruption of signal or content—a source of interference. Subjective noise is that which one finds repulsive as judged by any criteria that one wishes and may potentially encompass any sound at all. Symbolic noise creates a metaphor out of noise, using it to represent a concept such as rebellion, chaos, or the future. Transcendent noise is conceived as the source of all sound and can be filtered through cultural codes into that which we recognize as music. Phenomenological noise is defined through the experience that it provides, whether it is a numbing of sensation due to an oversaturation of activity or a total sensorial domination. Of these six categories, communicative noise is one most likely to be used to refer to non-musical sound, for a corruption of signal could, in some cases, be introduced unintentionally, thereby falling outside of the realm of the intentional artistic expression.
It is crucial to understand the paradoxical nature of noise. If noise is intrinsically anarchistic, what happens when we begin to accept noise as legitimate art? Merzbow is often referred to as a “noise musician,” but by accepting his work as “noise music” we strip it of its transgressive power. This is why I believe that the sundry attempts to redeem noise are misguided, for it is only when noise retains its full power of transgression that it is most effective. Noise may be an expressive sonic act, just like sound that we can more easily recognize music, but it demands different categories and a different mentality than more conventional music does. For this reason, I conceive of noise and music as opposite poles on a continuum of intentional, artistic sonic expression, with noise existing as that which moves away from musical convention. Noise cannot be subsumed by what we conventionally recognize as music.

Here, I am defining music as an intentional, aesthetic sonic expression that carries the implication of some level of convention that allows music to be recognized as such by an at least marginally aware listener from the culture in which the musical expression originates. Expressive noise, then, is also an intentional, aesthetic sonic expression, but it is one that deviates so thoroughly from musical convention, that a conventional musical mentality no longer pertains. Expressive noise is a phenomenon that exists on a continuum of intentional, aesthetic, sonic expression, but it resists assimilation by conventional music and points to a beyond of musical convention. I have avoided the term “noise music” because it allows us to hear noise merely as a particular and weird style of music, whereas truly transgressive noise is something else altogether. Expressive noise implies artistic intent, but it also creates an oppositional relationship to music. With respect to radical music, expressive noise is a source of transgressive power that a given composer may use to varying degrees. Thus, a composer like Merzbow would
be at the far end of the noise-music continuum, while a composer like Zorn would be somewhat closer to the musical end of the continuum.

2.2.0 John Zorn

Turning now to the composers of radical music, we find a diverse, ever-expanding number of composers who could be considered radical. While my selection of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow is partially due to my personal preference, they are also important figures in radical music at the turn of the century. Beyond the weight of his massive oeuvre, John Zorn (b. 1953) is an indefatigable advocate for radical streams of music through his record label, Tzadik, his non-profit performance venue, The Stone, his series of books collecting the essays of contemporary composers and musicians, Arcana: Musicians on Music, and his mentorship of composers and musicians in the New York City “Downtown” scene in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His sphere of influence continues to expand, especially with composers and musicians who are not academically affiliated. The stylistic pluralism of Zorn’s work is wide reaching, and his refusal to honor traditional distinctions of aesthetic taste and musical class exposes the irrelevancy of the traditional canon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Considering the depth and breadth of Zorn’s oeuvre, the selection of a single work is difficult. I could have selected an album by Masada and looked at the collision of free jazz and klezmer scales; alternately, I could have chosen to write on Chimeras (2003) comparing Zorn’s approach to serialist chamber music with Pierrot Lunaire—the work from which Chimeras is derived; or I could have looked at issues of indeterminacy versus authorial control in Zorn’s game pieces like Cobra (1985) or Xu Feng (first recorded in 2000). These are but three examples that would have led to very different analyses and interpretations.
In chapter three, I focus on Zorn’s vocalise opera, *Astronome* (2006). It is a 44-minute journey into a mystical world of darkness and alchemy led by vocalist Mike Patton as he screams, mumbles, wails, squawks, and incants nonsense syllables, all suggesting an ancient pre-linguistic ritual. Patton is supported by Joey Baron’s vicious percussion and Trevor Dunn’s thunderous bass, which is often distorted to the point that clear pitch is no longer discernible. Deafening cacophony gives way to menacing ambience, jarring rhythmical passages turn into lyrical strains that almost suggest melody, and just when the listener begins to feel a sense of musical stability, everything changes and the music is off to new territory. *Astronome* is a disconcerting and sustained attack on the senses, possibly surpassed only by Merzbow’s even more extreme musical language. Right from the opening explosion of bass and drums, the aural crucible that is *Astronome* never allows the listener to rest or ease into peaceful complacency.

I have chosen to examine *Astronome* for a number of reasons: first, the work combines a number of Zorn’s themes including aesthetic extremism, madness, and the occult; second, the work pays tribute to Antonin Artaud, Edgard Varèse, Aleister Crowley, and Richard Foreman—all major influences on Zorn’s aesthetic sensibilities; third, the work employs one of Zorn’s original compositional schemes—the file card composition, which involves the creation and arrangement of musical “scenes” in a filmic manner; fourth, the work exemplifies Zorn’s refusal to accept distinctions of “high art” and “low art,” as he explores operatic composition within a heavy metal idiom; and finally, *Astronome* was chosen out of necessity.

It is a piece that stands out as one of the most inscrutable of Zorn’s works due to its scale and its refusal to allow the listener the comfort of any form of stability or recognition. While there are critical models that may suffice, at least in a limited capacity, for the interpretation of works grounded in more convention (of course, when we are discussing Zorn, the idea of
convention is somewhat ludicrous), *Astronome* belongs to a special class of Zorn’s compositions that is extremely arcane and difficult—precisely the sort of radical music that my hermeneutic is designed to accommodate. The emergence of works like *Astronome* has created the exigency that led me to develop a new method of musical hermeneutics.

### 2.2.1 Diamanda Galás

Diamanda Galás’s (b. 1955) oeuvre does not match the volume of Zorn or Merzbow, and she is not the figurehead of an extensive aesthetic movement. Yet, her importance is found in the sociopolitical components of her music as she rails against injustice. Her artistic voice has been particularly important in three areas: first, she has worked in the realm of radical feminism, and her music shows a commitment to deconstructing normative gender politics both within Western and non-Western societies; second, her scathing critiques of the sociopolitical and religious intolerance of homosexuality were prominent during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, and those themes continue to inform her work today; and third, she has been an outspoken voice for the recognition of the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Mani lament traditions fuse with blues and spirituals to mourn the victims of hatred and violence, and extended vocal techniques mix with her confrontational theatrics to avenge their pain through her sonic ferocity.

In chapter four, I examine *Wild Women with Steak Knives* (1982), which Galás describes as “a homicidal love song for solo scream.”11 The work begins with an explosion of glossolaliac utterances with wild panning around the stereo soundstage; the voice isn’t immediately identifiable as human, and when we do begin to recognize the timbre of the voice, we struggle to determine if the utterances are a foreign tongue, or if they’re nonsense; we are taken aback at the

11 This description is found on the 1989 repressing of *The Litanies of Satan*, although it was not present on the initial release. Diamanda Galás, *The Litanies of Satan*, Y Records Y 18, 1982, phono disc.
shrill, piercing timbre, and we attempt to discern the temperament of the sounds—are they angry, are they sad, are they simply manic? All of this within the first few seconds of listening, and yet we’re no closer to any answers, for very little can prepare us for the barrage of vocal calisthenics that Galás has in store for us. This disorienting, disconcerting effect will last long into the work—our ears simply do not allow us to adjust to the aural peculiarities of *Wild Women* easily—and that is a major part of the efficacy of the music.

I have chosen *Wild Women* because, like *Astronome*, it is one of the most extreme works in the career of a composer/performer who is already dedicated to aesthetic extremism. On the surface, it is barbarous and impenetrable, and one could easily make the mistake of experiencing it for the timbre alone. There is, however, much more to it than unusual timbre. We must read the sonics alongside the radical exhortation of feminine power that Galás was espousing at the time of its composition, just as we must understand her vocal gymnastics and microtonal delivery as a convergence of Mania lament, bel canto style, and modernist extended techniques. An understanding of the way these musical and textual features intersect and contribute to the greater whole is the key to unlocking the mystery of *Wild Women*. Where score analysis fails, where cultural analysis only gives us half of the picture, and where pure timbral analysis reduces the work to a simplistic vocal exercise, a multi-perspectival hermeneutic offers solutions. Thus, like the case of *Astronome*, I have selected *Wild Women* because the interpretive difficulty of the work demands it.

### 2.2.2 Merzbow

Merzbow (b. 1956) is widely regarded as the foremost composer working in the field known as “noise music.” For more than three decades, he has been raising questions about the nature of music and noise through his work. In much the same way that Cage asked the listener
to reconsider the boundaries between music and silence, Merzbow asks the listener to reconsider the boundaries between music and noise. Where Cage investigated the role of the composer through his explorations of indeterminacy, Merzbow investigates the boundaries of sound from a position of intentionality and control. His work forces the listener to confront a music that has no recourse to harmony, form, melody, rhythm, or virtually all other features that were considered important and necessary elements of music until the mid-twentieth century. Even Varèse’s “Liberation of Sound” still maintains the importance of form and rhythm.\(^{12}\) In Merzbow’s work, we confront the margin between music and non-music.

There is a specious notion that all of Merzbow’s work sounds the same, but as I see it, his oeuvre actually breaks down into four rather distinct phases based on both his instrumentation and his production techniques. More detail on the phases of Merzbow’s oeuvre will follow in chapter five, where I conduct an examination of three representative works, each from different phases. Although the idea of choosing archetypical works from a discography that includes hundreds of distinct releases is a bit ridiculous, one finds that there are often exemplary recordings that lead to subsequent, more peripheral recordings based on any range of factors, including the use of a particular production technique, instrument grouping, thematic idea, conceptual approach, sample set, or even sonic material borrowed and reworked for a new recording. These touchstone works then lead to a series of more peripheral and derivative


*Ecobondage* finds Merzbow at the beginning of his career exploring the use of found sounds, field recordings, makeshift instruments, samples, percussion, and damaged electronic equipment. The work feels more like an extension of Cagean experimentalism than the sort of wall of distorted feedback that would later define the classic “Merzbow sound.” It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the influence of Kurt Schwitters is felt, insofar as *Ecobondage* is essentially an assemblage of so-called ugly and junk objects. *Pulse Demon* represents the apotheosis of Merzbow’s second phase, which is marked by his use of the EMS Synthi A, a modular analogue synthesizer, and heavily treated feedback. Where there is some semblance of a connection to the experimental tradition of Cage in *Ecobondage*, all of this has been erased by *Pulse Demon*, which takes Merzbow as far as possible from sound that one could easily recognize as music. This opens up discussions of the relationship between noise and music, and Georges Bataille’s concept of eroticism and transgression. *Karasu* is one part from Merzbow’s thirteen-CD series based on Japanese birds, and it reflects his growing interest in animal rights and veganism. Here we find Merzbow combining his unique style of feedback and distortion with computer-based production and live percussion that is reminiscent of his early explorations of rhythm. During Merzbow’s fourth phase, his passionate arguments against animal cruelty mark an interesting development because unlike his previous work that was, in a manner of speaking, absolute music, his music now has a distinctly political program. This

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14 With the exception of *Ecobondage*, these records also have the benefit of being relatively easy to find either on CD or as MP3s through online merchants like the iTunes Store or Amazon.com
development opens up a discussion of the nature of musical meaning because we are asked to hear a plea for cultural reform in a sonic expression that still sounds, on the surface at least, like a barrage of formless noise. These three works occasion different discussions regarding noise and music, the meaningfulness of aesthetic boundaries and the results of their transgression, the intelligibility of an art that may seek to be unintelligible, and the experience of the listener who must decide how to confront a radical new form of potentially dangerous sonic expression.

2.2.3 Radical Composers and Radical Music

There may be some dramatic differences between Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, but they are united as late twentieth and early twenty-first century artists exploring the boundaries of music, each pushing the art form in new, radical directions. They share a commitment to the deconstruction of hegemonic powers. Born within three years of each other, their careers have followed similar trajectories, each coming into their own in the late 1980s when postmodern mentalities were in full swing. They are composers of their time, embodying a spirit of pluralism, Zorn with his stylistic fusions, Galás with her cultural mixtures, and Merzbow with his mélange of Japanese culture and Western aesthetic theory. All three are also particularly good examples of the awesome potential of postmodern art; far from creating the sort of tiresome postmodern works that are based on the principle of ironic juxtaposition for its own sake, Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow practice a critical postmodernism. The polyvalence of their work serves not to create humor out of unlikely pairings, but to create new modes of thought by exposing the limitations of metanarratives across a broad spectrum.

A great deal of scholarship since the postmodern turn has dealt with the “deconstruction” of social, political, cultural, and ethical structures, but one of the failings of this trend is that often there are few answers provided. It is far easier to simply tear down a structure than to
propose a superior alternative. Post-structuralism is itself a new structuring system that, at its best, initiates a reminder that we are always already operating within structuring systems. The benefit to this reflexivity is that it prompts us to try to think beyond the structure in new and creative ways so that we are no longer beholden to its powers of definition and delimitation. If, for instance, Zorn was just the bad boy destroyer of cultural values that the mainstream journalists claim he is, then his work would not be all that interesting. After all, countercultural artists have been creating culturally irreverent work since the 1960s. Rather, the critical postmodernism practiced by Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow not only has a deconstructive component, but goes further to suggest that we consider the structural periphery—the outer regions of conceptual nebulae where innovation and change occurs.

Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow are also largely united in their status as outsiders with respect to the spectrum of institutional support. David Nicholls attests to the importance of the distinction between avant-garde composers who hold “an extreme position within the tradition” and experimental composers whose music exists completely outside of the tradition because when considering “institutional support, ‘official’ recognition, and financial reward,” the connection to tradition is a meaningful advantage to the avant-garde composer. Even if the situation is no longer a simple binary between insider and outsider, Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow tend to be farther toward the independent end of the spectrum than most of the composers situated more within the art music milieu.


The reasons for this are probably as ideological as they are pragmatic. There are many issues at play, including the alleged supremacy of (and pervasive preference for) the Western art music canon, the tendency of certain institutional structures to exert influence over its members, the desire for total artistic freedom, and a Romantic notion of the composer as autonomous artistic genius. These issues often intersect in complex ways. Radical composers often avow the importance of artistic freedom at all costs, and staking out a space of independence can be as much about the presentation of a certain artistic persona and ideology as it is about avoiding institutional restrictions.

While it is clear that the practical issues of marketing and sales potential are restrictive forces within commercial institutions, it is less clear that academic institutions are similarly restrictive, at least in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; however, even if academic institutions are increasingly permissive of potentially controversial artworks, there are other hindrances toward radical composers, such as the usual requirement of academic credentials and participation in academic music discourse in general. Philanthropic institutions are even more ambiguous because even though one can point to certain controversial exceptions, such as Andres Serrano’s creation of the \textit{Piss Christ} with funds awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts, they too have certain practical concerns. The NEA, for instance, has faced numerous attacks from political conservatives and moralists, and when one surveys the list of musically conservative (or at least conventional) organizations receiving NEA funding in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to believe that there is not a connection between political pressure and the desire to avoid controversy by favoring less radical artists.\footnote{Arts.gov maintains a searchable database of grant winners from 2000 to the present, and the latest grant announcement is representative of the type of projects that tend to receive funding. “National Endowment for the Arts—2013 Spring Grant Announcement,” accessed October 31, 2013, http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/ArtWorksMarch2013CouncilByDiscipline.pdf.}
Ultimately, radical composers may wish to express a romanticized conception of themselves as heroic outsiders, but the ideology behind their position does not negate the practical issues. Commercial institutions are concerned primarily with profitability and are unwilling to risk supporting radical composers. Academic institutions may support radical works of art, but none of the most prominent radical composers have the sort of academic musical training that would qualify them for a professorship at a typical American university. Philanthropic institutions may occasionally award a grant to a composer like Zorn or Galás, but these are exceptional occurrences and do not constitute a long-term support system.

Fortunately, the lowering costs of production and the increasing ease of dissemination have created an alternative way for composers to sustain themselves with a greater degree of independence. Where Merzbow once ran his own record label out of his home, issuing hand-dubbed cassette tapes in editions of fewer than fifty, he can now record CDs and sell them to an increasingly global market through sites like Amazon.com. And, of course, it is certainly advantageous that these alternative avenues toward economic independence coincide with the ideology of artistic autonomy.

With respect to the spectrum of institutional independence, there is variety within these three composers. Merzbow is the most independent insofar as he primarily releases albums on a very small scale through ephemeral boutique labels that allow him total artistic control over the end product. Although he does perform live (mostly within Japan), these occurrences are rare and do not constitute any sort of meaningful income. For the majority of her recording career, Galás has had the benefit of a contract with Mute, a small independent record label that was particularly important in the 1990s for its electronic music releases; however, because labels of this size can rarely offer much in the way of a recording budget, it is not a viable means of
income. In effect, she has accepted the financial limitations of a small label for the freedom to create uncensored, politically incendiary work. Beyond the digital downloads and art objects for sale through her website, Galás supports herself by performing her blues covers, which in turn allows her to create works in the more radical style that she is forced to self-finance.\textsuperscript{18} Zorn is the most complex because on the one hand, he rejected the support of niche labels like Nonesuch on the grounds of artistic freedom and on the other, he has now gained enough recognition that he receives chamber and orchestral commissions, as well as fellowships and grants. Significantly though, these commissions and grants tend to lead to less radical works inasmuch as they often use standard notation and are scored for instruments common to the symphony orchestra. For all of the success he has won, Zorn still requires the support of his independent label to finance his most radical projects. Moreover, his label, Tzadik, is hardly a traditional record label with its egalitarian profit sharing scheme that helps to minimize the importance of marketability and sales potential.\textsuperscript{19}

Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow are particularly successful examples of the sort of relative institutional independence that has only recently become possible. In fact, their generation was one of the first to realize the possibility of a career supported by CD sales alone. As of 2012, Zorn has released almost one hundred and fifty CDs of his own music on his Tzadik label, and that total does not include any of the many recordings he has done for other labels before the Tzadik era. Merzbow’s discography is even more unmanageable with more than three hundred individual releases spread across many boutique labels that cater to extreme forms of music. Zorn and Merzbow are probably not becoming wealthy from their CD sales, but it provides


\textsuperscript{19} Michael Goldberg, “John Zorn,” \textit{BOMB} 80 (2002).
sufficient financial support to allow them to continue creating music without relying on grants or academic support. Galás tends to compose at a slower rate, and her discography is much smaller, but she generates income through the online shop on her website, where she sells CDs, digital downloads, and various art objects. In a sense, this is the patronage model of the new millennium where artists can supplement CD sales by selling limited edition art objects to their most loyal supporters.

2.3.0 Music and Discourse

Let us now turn to the current state of musical discourse. The transition toward so-called new musicology in the latter part of the twentieth century has opened up an array of new approaches to the understanding of music, but as progressive as these new methodologies are, the majority continue to function best when confronting music that exists within the conventions of Western music, and Western art music in particular.

Although the idea of the Western art music canon is currently in a state of deconstruction, we are still feeling the ideological effects of the old paradigm that considered the primacy of master composers and master works to be axiomatic. Thus, even if we are aware of the ideological effects of canon from studies by William Weber\(^\text{20}\) or Katherine Bergeron,\(^\text{21}\) there is a tacit assumption that if one is to prove the efficacy of one’s proposed theory, it must be tested on a work widely held as a standard of excellence. I agree with Robert P. Morgan\(^\text{22}\) that canons are quite useful, so long as they are approached critically and I would add that they are useful for


creating a space for a discursive formation, because they constitute a set of reference points from which one can situate various discursive statements. If one is aware of the ideological effects of canonicity and approaches them critically—especially when creating new canons—this should forestall the hegemonic potential of these canons.

In sum, I do not wish to argue against the idea of a canon, per se, and indeed I could describe certain works as canonic within the radical music milieu. I merely wish to show that it has been a limiting assumption in musical hermeneutics thus far. We must replace the canon with canons, plural, and we must understand them as a necessary convenience without allowing them to offer unified aesthetic prescription.

Even when moving beyond the canon, as many scholars have done, there often remains a connection to convention that tends to inhibit the interpretation of radical music. This is not necessarily a fault of the various approaches toward musical understanding. Because most artistic expressions occur within a field of conventional cultural practice, broadly defined, it follows that a successful methodology should function within these conventions as well. It makes little sense to devise a musicological methodology that pertains only to single works because the relationship between individual works is a vital component of the work’s ability to create intelligible expression. The depth and breadth of these conventions has slowly expanded, and where musicology had been concerned first and foremost with canonical works and composers of Western art music, we are now freer to examine the work of non-canonical composers, jazz, and a range of popular styles; however, even as the discipline allows for a greater range of styles permitted, most of the methodologies continue to apply most efficaciously to music that does not deliberately avoid convention to the extent of radical music.
When looking specifically at radical music, some conventional methodologies can contribute to a greater musical understanding, at least in a limited capacity. A historiographical approach, for instance, will help to trace lines of influence in terms of music, aesthetics, and ideology. An ethnographic approach will help explain how various pockets of radical composers and participants conceptualize and practice their own work. A cultural approach will help elucidate the context of the particular sonic expression, at least in its originary context. These are all worthwhile techniques for greater musical understanding, but they also tend to circumnavigate the sonic core of radical music without being able to penetrate in toward the meaning behind the sonic particulars of the work.

Granted, the above methodologies are not necessarily intended to speak to the same level of sonic detail that we find in a hermeneutic study. A historicist study, for example, may explain how a certain composer was influenced by a certain idea while composing a certain work all while leaving a detailed analysis of the work to an analytical or hermeneutical study; however, even when specific musical details are beyond the scope of a study, there are two factors that allow the omission: first, the study can refer to familiar musical reference points to give the reader a sense of musical grounding, even without hearing the actual work under investigation; and second, the study can assume a general familiarity with Western musical practices, which is often sufficient to make a compelling argument. By contrast, a historicist study of a radical work can point only to difference without specificity because the radical work does not follow enough conventions to make sense without substantive musical detail, of which it is very difficult to speak, especially when certain seemingly fundamental features like melody, harmony, and/or rhythm may be nonexistent.
To use a concrete example, David Novak’s recent ethnography of Japanoise (a particular variety of noise music practiced in Japan) is invaluable for its insights into the historical and cultural context of a radical stream of music; however, Novak’s purpose is not to offer detailed interpretations of particular works, recordings, or performances, and when reading his accounts of the aural experience of Japanoise, he paints the experience in vivid detail, but without the sort of sonic specificity that leads to a detailed interpretation. Where his goal is ethnographic, mine is hermeneutic.

The only traditional approach to musical understanding that offers almost nothing to the interpretation of radical music is an analytical approach. Pieter C. van den Toorn and David Lewin may uncover interesting formal elements in certain types of music, and these discoveries may lead to a fuller appreciation of the work at hand, but they are utterly dependent upon a musical score to subject to analysis, and thus they are inappropriate for a musical stream that rarely uses notation. The same can be said of Kofi Agawu’s semiotically grounded interpretive methodology because it is so completely dependent upon a written score that follows enough internal conventions to ensure its interoperability with other works of the same style. Agawu may create inspired interpretations of canonic works with his semiotic method, but it is inappropriate for my purposes.

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Analytical methodologies notwithstanding, each of the above approaches supplies important answers to parts of the question of radical music, but they can only ever contribute a partial meaning because they are derived from certain premises intrinsic to their methodological goals. In every attempt to gain musical understanding, meaning—always multiple and plentiful—becomes narrowed in accordance with the internal logic of a given system,\textsuperscript{26} and it is my intent to keep the realm of potential meaning as broad as possible, to find the most convincing aspects from each of the above practices, and to create a coherent synthesis. My aim is closely related to what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description,” or “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [we] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.”\textsuperscript{27} I intend to take a multifaceted approach drawing from Ricoeur’s ontological hermeneutic philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, sociocultural criticism, and the discourse on experimental music to arrive at a thick interpretation.

2.3.1 Previous Work on Musical Hermeneutics

What happens, then, when there is no score, no harmony to analyze, no discernible pitches? What happens when the music diverges from convention so totally that connections are virtually impossible to envisage, save for a purely intellectual reading of these artists (ostensibly) rebelling against a socio-historical tradition? What happens when the frame is broken and the work spills out into unexpected and unpredictable directions? It is telling that most every author who attempts to write about this sort of radical music spends time commenting on how difficult it is to write about such a practice. These studies, almost always written by scholars outside of

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\item[27] Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Culture} (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.
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music academics, tend to focus on sociocultural context,\(^{28}\) phenomenology,\(^{29}\) or the sound’s status as non-music,\(^{30}\) usually to the exclusion of the others.

Even if I am not satisfied with any of the available interpretive approaches proffered by musicologists with respect to their applicability to radical music and expressive noise, they provide an important point of departure, having tested various avenues of exploration. I intend to find the most relevant and useful theoretical components so as to build on the work already done. Almén and Pearsall’s edited volume, *Approaches to Meaning in Music* is a great summary of the state of hermeneutics in musicology.\(^{31}\) Similar to my position, Byron Almén\(^{32}\) and Jann Pasler\(^{33}\) have both written on the importance of a multifaceted hermeneutic, working towards a sort of thick description. Both find meaning to be contingent not only on syntactical pitch analysis, but also on the sociocultural conditions both at the time of composition and at the time of the experience of the listener.

Lawrence Kramer has been exploring hermeneutics over the course of many monographs

\(^{28}\) Cf., Hegarty, 2007.

\(^{29}\) This is the favored perspective of many composers adopting an acousmatic position after Pierre Shaeffer. For example, see Kim-Cohen’s discussion of Francisco López and Christina Kubisch in Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 109-128.

\(^{30}\) Wishart apologetically acknowledges the scoldings he has received at the hands of (unnamed) musicologists informing him that his “noise” was not music and thus refers to as “sonic art.” Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1985).


and he is an important figure in the postmodern turn in musicology,\textsuperscript{34} especially insofar as he argued for the importance of contextual reading in place of the metaphysics of presence implied by Romanticist ideology. From \textit{Music as Cultural Practice} (1990) to \textit{Interpreting Music} (2011), Kramer’s conception of musical hermeneutics has expanded from a system that is still largely dependent upon a published score to a more generalized hermeneutic that is ostensibly applicable to a wide variety of music not limited to the common practice repertoire that Kramer admittedly favors. At the time of this essay, his latest book contains his most philosophically abstract statement on interpretation and seeks to frame musical hermeneutics in the terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur (although Ricoeur is never mentioned and there is no direct evidence that Kramer has read him). Kramer sees interpretation not as a discovery of singularly correct, hidden, author-intended meaning, but as a dynamic engagement between the listener’s present and the work’s past.\textsuperscript{35} The work’s truth is propositional rather than demonstrative. These are all points that I will argue in chapter one through the more philosophically centered work of Ricoeur. Kramer’s theories of interpretation, however, tend to be most effective when confronting a work of common practice music that follows certain conventions. Even when discussing such a meta-conceptual idea as deconstruction, he uses Beethoven’s sixth string quartet as an example. Kramer’s hermeneutics may indeed have something to offer unconventional music, but it is quite difficult to discern what that might be given his narrow range of application. As illuminating as his analyses might be, his hermeneutic functions most effectively with conventional music.


In a similar way, Robert S. Hatten’s overall perspective on musical hermeneutics is excellent, but the more musically specific he gets, the more his hermeneutic relies on convention. He writes,

The task of musical hermeneutics, while far from stable, is best accomplished if anchored in the style that interpretation itself helps reconstruct. While ranging widely in search of relevant cultural meanings, the interpreter must also recognize that the work of art creates its own, often insulated world—and if the work is successful, it may in turn deflect cultural meanings toward its own ends.36 Like Kramer, this view is generally consistent with Ricoeur; however, his applications reveal limitations because of their reliance on the presence of a score that can analyzed and a musical work that follows enough conventions to be coherent while exhibiting the power of musical expectations.37 While Hatten’s approach to hermeneutics is surely advantageous for common practice music, his method does not pertain when faced with works of radical music.

Jenefer Robinson’s anthology, *Music and Meaning*, contains an interesting variety of philosophical approaches, although they are not always successful.38 For example, Marion A. Guck defends the fundamental idea of musical metaphor against strict formalists, and her concept of comparative and ascriptive metaphors is an interesting step toward a reconciliation of formal analysis with musical affect; however, in doing this, her metaphors become quite general. The shape of an arch may be evident in the score that she considers, but what is gained from declaring the arch to be the main comparative metaphor? Does this mean that the work is about


arches, and if so, what does that mean?\textsuperscript{39} Although the issue of metaphor is crucially important in musical hermeneutics, Guck’s essay uses a more limited conception of the power of metaphor than one finds in Ricoeur.

In the same anthology, Fred Maus proposes another novel way in which one may reconcile the objectivity of musical analysis with the subjectivity of musical experience.\textsuperscript{40} By conceiving of an “imaginary agent,” one can transpose affective concepts onto the notes of the score, leading to a consideration of musical structure as dramatic structure. Maus’s results are compelling, but as with virtually all approaches to musical hermeneutics thus far, Maus’s hermeneutic is dependent upon both a musical score and a work that follows enough conventions that one may discern its dramatic characteristics.

A common problem with existing approaches to musical hermeneutics is that a program is a requisite feature. At very least, a reference to a culturally established body of symbolism is necessary. Raymond Monelle investigates topic theory exploring hunting, the military, and shepherds—each widely circulated cultural icons—looking at relationships between musical signifiers and their topical signifieds.\textsuperscript{41} While this is an interesting approach for common themes expressed with enough conventionality that they may be recognized as such, it fails when confronted with very abstract topics that do not have strong roots in a culturally established semiotic system. Granted, radical music is not always above and beyond the power of cultural


signification, but it often ventures into unfamiliar significations that resist a conventional interpretation.

Although Richard Taruskin does not set out to create or explain a theory of musical hermeneutics, he does offer some comments on their nature and value. Referencing Gadamer, Taruskin avows the importance of recognizing that meaning is constructed by the interpreter in the present, and he defends the subjective nature of interpretations, for even though they are subjective, they can still be subject to evaluation.42 Although he perhaps overstates his case by claiming that Russian music in the twentieth century is perhaps the most polyvalent, most interpretively complex body of music in existence, he is successful in demonstrating the importance of musical hermeneutics, especially in his application to composers like Shostakovich whose music has given rise to such wildly divergent, and opportunistic, interpretations.43 Overall, he points out that even though hermeneutics does not lead to the same sort of truth-evaluable conclusions as we find in musical analysis, we should not shy away from the necessarily subjective interpretations of musical hermeneutics because there are still varying degrees of argumentation and cogency that can differentiate between good and bad interpretations.44

Finally, and most importantly, we come to the work of Roger W.H. Savage who offers a post-postmodern meta-critique of music criticism where he argues that, although the Romantic ideology of absolute music has been justly deconstructed by cultural musicologists,45 musical

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43 Ibid., 476-7.

44 Ibid., xxx.

45 In this usage, Savage is referring to what has been called “new musicology.”
works have now become so shackled to their cultural context that it is difficult to conceive of a work creating any sort of emergent meaning in the present, and thus their affective power is greatly diminished. One of Savage’s most important contributions is his application of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics as a way to speak to the affective dimension of music—an issue that he believes has all but vanished from current trends in musicology that are almost exclusively concerned with socio-historicizing readings of works. A longer discussion of Savage’s arguments will follow in chapter one, as his novel transposition of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy to the domain of music makes an important contribution to my own interpretive theory.

2.3.2 Towards a Hermeneutics of Radical Music and Expressive Noise

Radical music and expressive noise require a hermeneutic that is dependent on neither score, nor convention. The elimination of those two features voids the immediate applicability of virtually every existing approach to musical hermeneutics, as is outlined above. Although some hermeneutic approaches may bring us closer to a thick interpretation—for instance, Susan McClary’s feminist approach is useful for considering certain elements of Galás’s work—none offer a comprehensive enough solution because radical music and expressive noise push us to the very boundaries of music. I propose a trivalent hermeneutic grounded in the ontological hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. A fuller exposition of this theory will follow in chapter one, but I will offer a general outline presently.


My proposed hermeneutic involves three levels moving from general to specific: first is the level of general interpretive assumptions (e.g., the definition and nature of the musical work, the role of the author and his or her socio-historical context), which is informed by Ricoeur’s general theory of interpretation; the second level combines Ricoeur’s ontological hermeneutics with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to examine both the latent and manifest content of the work, as well as the experience of confronting the work; third is the metastructural level of conceptual approaches to music (e.g., gender theory, area studies, historiography, reception history, musical analysis) selected in a combination specific to the needs of a given work as well as an engagement with the composer on his or her own terms. The third level has two tasks: first, it involves the exploration the various features of the work and the clues suggested by the work through connotation or implication, and second, it involves an investigation of the composer and his or her conceptual work—his or her ideas on music, on art, on life.

Through this hermeneutic, we may consider the richness of a radical work in a very holistic sense, taking care to explore its many facets in detail. Far from constituting an interpretive hodgepodge of heterogeneous fragments existing in tandem but never in concert, the ideal thick interpretation weaves an intricate tapestry out of the multifarious strands of the work. A cogent interpretation must execute the best convergence of the greatest number of features of the work while synthesizing multiple perspectives together into a coherent totality. Naturally, there is no objectivity to be found in this endeavor, but this does not preclude us from evaluating the efficacy of a given interpretation based on the aforementioned features. Ultimately, a thick interpretation aims to vivify the essence of the work in the mind of the listener/reader. An interpretation may be philosophically elegant and filled with brilliant insight, but it becomes a
rather trivial mental exercise if it does not serve the music. A successful interpretation, in my view, must open the work up to a listener in a way never before experienced.

3.0 Chapter Overview

Chapter one consists of a detailed introduction to Ricoeur’s ontological hermeneutics and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, as well commentary on musicological hermeneutics that contribute productively toward a hermeneutics of radical music and expressive noise. Although the respective theories of Ricoeur and Lacan are thought to be antithetical, I spend some time comparing the two theoretical bodies and conclude, by way of Ricoeur, that they are united in their hermeneutic exploration of phenomena. They speak to differing realms of experience and knowledge, and thus they must be coextensive in every interpretation. Finally, I propose a trivalent hermeneutic designed especially for radical music and expressive noise, which will be explored more fully in the following chapters.

In chapter two I will provide an exposition of my concepts of radical music and expressive noise, taking care to situate them within both the musicological discourse and the other non-musical discourses that account for the bulk of the available literature. The idea of noise itself is fraught with varying definitions ranging from complete relativity to metaphysical transcendence, and these debates must be synthesized before the idea of noise can be conceived productively in an artistic context.

Chapters three through five set about testing my hermeneutic of radical music and expressive noise with case studies focusing on Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, as outlined above in sections 2.2.0 through 2.2.2. Astronome, Wild Women with Steak Knives, and the trio of Merzbow works—Ecobondage, Pulse Demon, and Karasu: 13 Japanese Birds Part 4—present an array of hermeneutic challenges that demand an approach that is not beholden to score
analysis or any other such conventional methodology. I hope to provide a rich network of meaning as I explore the many facets—cultural, situational, biographical, political, aesthetical, philosophical—that have not only informed the compositional process and the general aesthetic conceptions of the respective composers, but have also informed our hearing and experience of the work in the present.
Chapter 1 – Towards a Hermeneutics of Radical Music and Expressive Noise

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will explore hermeneutic theories in detail. I will begin by spending some time introducing the ontological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, and I will show how these ostensibly antithetical systems can actually work together to create compelling interpretations of music, generally, and radical music and expressive noise, specifically. Finally, I will present my own approach to musical hermeneutics, showing how it grows out of the theoretical bodies of Ricoeur and Lacan and how certain extensions of their ideas can be made to better serve the exigencies of radical music and expressive noise.

2.0 Paul Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur was one of the main exponents of philosophical hermeneutics in the twentieth century. He does not belong to the generation of influential and iconoclastic continental philosophers grouped together as “postmodernists” (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard), but his approach to hermeneutics actually aligns with the postmodern paradigm in a number of ways, including issues of authorship, historiography, interpretation, and the nature of truth. An important difference here is the emphasis on suspicion versus restoration. Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and many of the postmodernists practice what Ricoeur calls a hermeneutics of suspicion: “This hermeneutics,” he writes, “is not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises.” 48 This contrasts with Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of restoration, which replaces suspicion with faith. “What faith?” Ricoeur asks. “No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in

hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith.”⁴⁹ Although the “tearing off of masks” practiced by Derrida and Foucault serves an important social and philosophical purpose, the legacy of their work has become a toolbox for disabusing rather than constructing new meaning. Ricoeur may tear off the mask as a first step, but he is also interested in proposing something to put in its place—a productive interpretation that adds meaning rather than negating meaning.

In discussing psychoanalysis, the hermeneutics of suspicion par excellence, Ricoeur challenges the idea that consciousness is simply an illusion of control, which is unable to discern its motives as originating from and being obscured by the unconscious. Rather than the meaning uncovered in psychoanalysis negating the meaning of consciousness, it offers a complementary meaning that must be understood dialectically. In place of deception, there is restoration, which in Ricoeur’s philosophy is an additive process.

While philosophical factions sprang up clustered around concepts that were ostensibly at odds with each other such as deconstructionism, analytical philosophy, and psychoanalysis, Ricoeur is exemplary in his ability to find lines of continuity and agreement within diverse philosophical schemes. In fact, his mixture of the allegedly antithetical disciplines of phenomenology and psychoanalysis has greatly enhanced the power and scope of his philosophical inquiries. More on this will follow after I introduce Ricoeur and Lacan’s respective theoretical framework. Ultimately, it is Ricoeur’s conciliatory example that I hope to follow in the present study, especially insofar as I draw from a wide range of theoretical works to create the most rigorous and thorough interpretations possible. It is easy to pick a position and enter into the circular cycle of argumentation with its institutionally recognized opposition, but as

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Ricoeur demonstrates, it is usually more productive to confront this opposition and find a way to show that it can actually make a fruitful contribution.

Before jumping into a more detailed analysis of Ricoeur’s thought, it is important to have a general overview of his hermeneutic theory. For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is not an epistemological investigation seeking to uncover univocal meaning, nor is it the Romantic venture where one projects his or her subjectivity onto the work; instead, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is ontological, as “the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which [one has] of [oneself].” A convincing interpretation, then, does not seek to decode the information presented in a unidirectional flow from artist to perceiver, but rather it seeks to offer a new mode of self-knowledge through the novel world created through the work. Rather than establishing, once and for all, the definitive meaning of a work, the role of hermeneutics is to animate an emergent meaning in the mind of the perceiver that is made possible by figurative and non-literal components of the work. As Ricoeur states, “interpretation thus becomes the apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text.” Let us spend some time unpacking the philosophical arguments that have led to the above conclusion.

2.1 Discourse: Event and Meaning

For Ricoeur, discourse is the event that happens when one speaks or writes. It is an intersubjective exchange wherein a message passes from the author to the reader and is received


52 *Ibid*, 177.

53 Ricoeur’s idea of discourse is derived from Emile Benveniste’s work in linguistics. Ricoeur writes, “If the ‘sign’ (phonological and lexical) is the basic unit of language, the ‘sentence’ is the basic unit of discourse.”
as a packet of communication that begins a process of comprehension in the moment of perception. For the moment, let us set aside issues of authorship as they pertain to music, which may have a single composer, but may also have an array of demi-authors (i.e., performers in their more limited capacity of semi-authorial contribution) to collaborate ex post facto in the creation of meaning before it even reaches the perceiver. For now, we may understand Ricoeur’s reference to the “author” or “speaker” as encompassing both composer and performer.

The event of discourse is a momentary phenomenon, but, paradoxically, discourse also has a sameness, which Ricoeur calls its “meaning.”54 It is at once same and other. Meaning has an objective and a subjective dimension.

To mean is what the speaker does. But it is also what the sentence does. The utterance meaning—in the sense of the propositional content—is the ‘objective’ side of this meaning. The utterer’s meaning—in the threefold sense of the self-reference of the sentence, the illocutionary dimension of the speech act, and the intention of recognition by the hearer—is the ‘subjective’ side of the meaning.55

The propositional content of a sentence can be described as “objective” insofar as it remains locked in its linguistic system. The utterer’s meaning, however, encompasses a) the fact that the speaker implicitly refers to him or herself, b) the illocutionary components of the sentence including the various moods (e.g., indicative, imperative, subjunctive), and c) the fact that the listener or reader agrees to accept the message. This last point shows that in Ricoeur’s theory, meaning is not the exclusive privilege of the speaker or the author because the sentence itself holds meaning irrespective of the author’s desire to control it (for instance, a sentence may be

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misunderstood or not understood at all) and because the listener or reader must take an active role in helping to vivify the meaning of the sentence.

Although Ricoeur often speaks about language, many of these concepts can be applied to music through a simple one-to-one transposition. Let us consider the musical work as discourse: the event of music is transient and we are confronted with the task of comprehension in the moment, but there is also an enduring meaning in the musical work that is its sameness each time we return to it, and this meaning is what we intend to investigate through interpretation. The idea of musical meaning is, of course, fraught with controversy, but here again, even the subjective and objective dimensions of meaning pertain.

On a very simple level, a musical work’s objective (i.e., propositional) content could be the thing that it offers us in the form of its musical syntax, while the subjective content is a complex of the composer’s intent, his or her manner of “speaking” through the grammar of music, and our perception leading to understanding. This is further complicated when the musical work involves performers in the realization of the music. Although many radical composers tend to either perform their own work or tightly control the recording process (which leads to an ostensibly definitive, or only, version), plenty of other music involves a diverse array of performers who must often make choices that affect the presented meaning of the work in substantive ways. In the present study, I focus on three composers who are almost solely responsible for the realization of their works, and I will provide a more nuanced discussion of their roles as authors in their respective chapters; however, when considering other composers who may produce conventional scores that can be performed in a more straightforward manner by a wide range of performers, we must also consider the performers’ contribution to the authorial utterance, albeit to a lesser extent than the composer. Ultimately, one may wonder if
music can be “about” something, but the way in which Ricoeur explains the creation of meaning provides a novel answer to this question, which I will address presently.

2.2 Metaphor and Mimesis

Ricoeur’s concept of metaphor far exceeds the rather humble literary trope where one word replaces another. Rather, Ricoeur argues that we need to look at the semantics of the sentence as a whole. “Since a metaphor only makes sense in an utterance,” he writes, “it is a phenomenon of predication, not denomination. […] So we should not really speak of the metaphorical use of a word, but rather of the metaphorical utterance.”

The metaphorical utterance, then, is a unit of discourse where a word—a semantic impertinence—replaces a semantically harmonious word, thereby creating a logical absurdity. The metaphorical word renders the sentence nonsensical until the reader intervenes and begets an emergent meaning in the sentence.

Thus, metaphor is presented as the animating principle of language. It is the locus of an emergent meaning that occurs in the event of discourse, but its power lies in the sense of surprise inherent in the act of rendering a nonsensical statement as a logically sound statement through a shift in meaning. The logical absurdity requires the shift in meaning to be realized by the reader who, faced with the impossibility of the literal use of the word, must look for clues “for finding a

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57 “Speaking of metaphor in philosophy, we must draw a line boldly between the relatively banal case of an ‘extended’ use of the words of ordinary language in response to a deficiency in naming and the case—to my mind singularly more interesting—where philosophical discourse deliberately has recourse to living metaphor in order to draw out new meanings from some semantic impertinence and to bring to light new aspects of reality by means of semantic innovation.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (London: Routledge, 2004), 344.
new meaning capable of according with the context of the sentence and rendering the sentence meaningful therein.\textsuperscript{58} This illumination constitutes the vivification of language.

The power of metaphor is found in its ability to “redescribe” reality, which brings us to mimesis.\textsuperscript{59} Ricoeur refers to Aristotelian poetics in his conception of mimesis, where the mimetic act is more than a simple mimicry of something real; it is an elevation of something real into the poetic realm—a poetic redescriptions of reality. Ricoeur writes,

\textit{Mimesis} preserves and represents that which is human, not just in its essential features, but in a way that makes it greater and nobler. There is thus a double tension proper to mimesis: on the one hand, the imitation is at once a portrayal of human reality \textit{and} an original creation; on the other, it is faithful to things as they are \textit{and} it depicts them as higher and greater than they are.\textsuperscript{60}

Through the act of mimetic redescriptions, metaphor has a unique power of suggesting alternative ways of being in the world.\textsuperscript{61} The imitation of reality gives way to a redescriptions of reality, and this leads to a transformative experience.\textsuperscript{62}

All of this, however, relies on what Ricoeur calls a “living metaphor” and not a mere word substitution. A common metaphor becomes a dead metaphor when its meaning has been incorporated into the natural polysemy of language. The use of a dead metaphor is thus a “sterile operation” because it lacks the “tension between…two interpretations, one literal and the other

\textsuperscript{58} Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 170.

\textsuperscript{59} Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory}, 52-3.

\textsuperscript{60} Paul Ricoeur, \textit{The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language} (London: Routledge, 2004), 45.

\textsuperscript{61} “What is a world?,” Ricoeur asks. “It is something one can live in; something that can be hospitable, strange, hostile…in this way there are fundamental feelings that are unrelated to any specific object or thing but which depend on the world in which the work appears; these are, in sum, pure modalities of inhabiting.” Ricoeur, \textit{Critique and Conviction}, 175.

metaphoric.” A dead metaphor can be read passively and does nothing to create the emergent meaning born of a logical absurdity. Because the solving of the logical absurdity is a part of the event of discourse—the moment of emergent meaning—all metaphors will become dead metaphors as they become common within a given language.

2.3 Interpretation

Metaphor brings us to the idea of interpretation proper. Although a metaphor is living when it animates language, as described above, “metaphor is [also] living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at the conceptual level. This struggle to ‘think more,’ guided by the ‘vivifying principle,’ is the ‘soul’ of interpretation.”

Building on our new understanding of metaphor, we can now approach some of the larger issues of interpretation. Because a work can have multiple meanings (e.g., historical meaning, cultural meaning, spiritual meaning), our interpretation of a work must embrace an expanded view of signification that moves beyond the “so-called univocal signs required by the logic of argumentation.” Thus, interpretation, according to Ricoeur, “is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.”

Here, we can draw a useful connection between Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and Derrida’s more widely circulated concept of deconstruction. Through the concept of deconstruction, Derrida claims that because language is inherently unstable, no mode of analysis may claim

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63 Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 51-2.
64 Ibid, 63-4.
65 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 358.
interpretive authority, and thus interpretation is closer to a game than to an epistemological investigation into final truth and meaning. As Derrida proposes a “game,” Ricoeur borrows Gadamer’s idea of “play” as way to describe the interpretive process wherein we enter into a dynamic relationship with the work. Ricoeur and Derrida each embrace the intrinsic fluidity in language and present the interpretive process as a fluctuation between the reader and the work. In fact, in his comparative study, Eftichis Pirovolakis concludes that the divisional boundaries between each philosopher are jagged and porous—nearly coextensive, but complementary and unassimilable in equal measure. At this stage, this comparison does not yet account for the difference between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of restoration, but this will be addressed later in section 5.0.

Interpretation qua play is a dynamic, multivalent process involving a complex cycle of hypothesis and verification—a “to and fro,” as Ricoeur says. Through this process, we move toward understanding, which is not a process of discovering facts, as such, but of discovering an existential potentiality. “To understand a text,” he writes, “is not to find a lifeless sense that is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text.” The play of

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68 This explanation is adapted from Stuart Sim’s remarkably lucid assessment of deconstructionism. Stuart Sim, *Derrida and the End of History* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), 30-31.


71 Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” 186.

interpretation is not a properly intersubjective play between author and reader (or composer and listener) because the act of reading is not dialogical. The dynamism, however, exists between the reader and the work. Ricoeur writes, “whoever plays is also played: the rules of the game impose themselves upon the player, prescribing the ‘to and fro’ and delimiting the field where everything ‘is played.’” Because textual reference (especially with respect to the poetic text) refers not to reality as such, but to a proposed redescriptions of reality, the reader must engage with the text itself to bring this possible world and possible mode of being in the world to light.

2.4 Problems of Interpretation: Authorship, Distanciation, and Appropriation

At this stage, we have seen what one intends to do through interpretation, but there remain many obstacles standing between the work and our understanding of it. What exactly is the role of the author? How can we best account for historical and cultural difference? Do we historicize the work, or is the work transcendent? To whom, after all, is the text addressed?

Borrowing from Roman Jakobson’s linguistic theory, Ricoeur describes the dialogic encounter of speech as fundamentally different from the alienation that marks the act of reading because, in the case of the former, the speaker and interlocutor share a common set of ostensive reference points, while in the case of the latter, there is no such connection between writer and reader. “Writing,” Ricoeur states, “renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies.” The text is autonomous insofar as it has transcended both the dialogic situation and the historical and cultural particulars of its origin, but it is not autonomous in a Romanticist sense, which would imply that the work achieves total transcendence from mundane existence. Our interpretative endeavors are


inherently colored by the horizon of our contemporary encounter with the work, but to the extent that we do not confront the experience of the work through the horizon of its origin, the work may be described as autonomous in the sense that it can be fused with infinite potential horizons in the future. Accordingly, Ricoeur argues against both historicism and the Romanticist primacy of the author. It is neither necessary nor, in some cases, possible to know the original horizon of the work, but this does not mean that there is not a self-sameness to the work that persists through time, and it is this transcendent essence that constitutes the horizon with which the listener will engage.

In the case of music, we must also note the intermediate step of performance. The work’s originary horizon exists with its creator, and there is a subsequent, lesser horizon that exists with the performers. At times, these horizons are fused, as is the case when a composer like John Zorn uses musicians to realize his work for a definitive, strictly supervised and controlled recording. Similarly, Diamanda Galás often works with trusted sound designers to help her realize her musical ideas, and although their authorial presence is much less significant than Galás’s because of the more technical nature of their role, their contributions are still worth noting. Merzbow belongs to a small class of composers who bypass the issue completely by being the sole realizer of their work. In other instances, especially where conventionally scored music is concerned, a particularly charismatic performer may elevate the importance of the demi-author. In extreme cases like Glenn Gould’s two renditions of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, the performer’s presence may even overshadow that of the composer. To the extent that the author is important in crafting an interpretation, the demi-authors are also necessary to consider; however, the problematics of authorship in music draws attention away from what Ricoeur is really saying, namely, that we are not beholden exclusively to the author(s) for the construction of meaning.
through hermeneutics. The fusion of the author’s (and demi-author’s) horizons with our own allows us to construct meaningful interpretations that have validity in our present.

The historicist position, in Ricoeur’s opinion, puts great restrictions on the possibility of the work to create new meaning in the present. Because we have no real access to the past, except through artificially constructed historiography, attempts to identify with the original audience must be, at best, notional, if not delusional. Even if we could escape the horizon of our own metaphysical existence, there is an epistemological limitation on what we may truly know of another being. Moreover, attempting to uncover meaning primarily through the historical imagination further removes us from the experience of the work and hinders our ability to speak to its affective dimension. If the work is to disclose a potential world to the perceiver *hic et nunc*, interpretation solely through some imaginary historical agent curbs the possibility of a profound personal experience. Although this may be less of an issue for certain types of discourse—scientific treatises, for example—it is especially pertinent when confronting a work of art. It may be a fun exercise to imagine what it was like to experience Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876, but does this not downplay the experience of a modern spectator when confronting the work for the first time? Similarly, do we not limit the potential of the work if we restrict its ability to propose meaning to that which the composer might have (explicitly or implicitly) intended? Ricoeur allows us to “unfold the revelatory power implicit in [the author’s] discourse, beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation.”75 We can only attempt to appreciate what Wagner might have intended in the nineteenth century as an intellectual exercise, but we can certainly appreciate the accrual of meaning collected by the work as a supplement to our contemporary encounter in a fusion of our horizon with that of the work itself.

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If the work is not beholden to its author or its original audience, the ontological question is raised. Ricoeur’s answer is that the work of art “exists only in its capacity for ‘monstration.’” The work is a suspended potentiality with an “indefinite capacity to be reincarnated, and in a way each time historically different, but substantially and essentially founding.” The work of art transcends its originary context because of the work’s infinite capacity for successive monstrations—always new, and yet, always the same—and thus Ricoeur links the “sempiternal and the historic” as features immanent to the work.

Turning momentarily to musical hermeneutics, we might find Ricoeur’s position difficult to accept. After all, a literary work passes directly from author to reader, but a musical work presents a twofold interpretive operation: that of the performer and that of the listener. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics are focused on the final perceiver, and so the intermediary role of the performer remains undeveloped by Ricoeur himself. Interestingly, he does describe the act of reading as resembling “the performance of a musical piece regulated by the written notations of the score” because the text is “no longer animated by the intention of its author.” However, he does not go on to speak to the role of an interpretive intermediary, and so I will provide a few comments of my own.

In a sense, most of the above applies equally to both listener and performer; however, the performer faces a dialectic of interpretation and re-presentation, as he or she must first interpret the work and then present a version of the work augmented by his or her own wishes as a sort of

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77 Ibid.

78 This process may be complicated by an editor or a translator, but for the sake of the argument, let us assume a simple monolingual transition from writer to reader.

79 Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 175.
demi-author. I propose that we consider the intermediary act of performance as a deferral and augmentation of the meaning of the work. As we will see in the section on validity in interpretation, there are standards of interpretation and it is possible to differentiate amongst the values of a given interpretation over another. The performer thus has recourse to hermeneutics and, as a performer, he or she must endeavor to create the most compelling interpretation possible by confronting the very issue at hand: distanciation and appropriation. This also leads to the implication that the act of interpretation is more akin to musical performance than one might think. In this capacity, interpretation is not so much an academic exercise, but an expressive act.

Returning to Ricoeur, we confront the question of how, if it is untethered from its socio-historical origin, a work can speak through the great distance of time and space. Apropos of this issue, Gadamer’s concept of distanciation was an important development in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Distanciation describes the distancing effect of the text, which happens as the text becomes unmoored from its author and original context and endures through history. Gadamer described distanciation as alienating, but Ricoeur proposes a “positive and productive” view of distanciation writing, “the text is much more than a particular case of intersubjective communication: it is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. As such, it displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience, namely, that it is communication in and through distance.” Because we perceive existence as linear thanks to the

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80 In the present study, the role of the musician is largely avoided because Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow are still living and, in the case of Galás and Merzbow, they also perform their own music. Zorn does hire musicians to perform his music, but he selects specific individuals for the unique musical contributions each will bring to the project as he builds their artistic voices into the composition itself. In each case, there is no true intermediary in the sense of a musician performing, say, the Bach cello suites.

81 Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 76.
marking of time, we can be described as historical beings. Distanciation, thus, is a natural part of existence.

Distance, for Ricoeur, is a dialectical struggle between “the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding.”82 We sense our alienation from the original horizon of the work, but we simultaneously experience the immediacy of affect in experiencing the work in the present. Therefore, we have the dialectical counterpart to distanciation: appropriation, or “understanding at and through distance.”83 Appropriation, however, should not imply the Romanticist notion of projecting oneself onto the work in an act of solipsistic interpretation. Instead, Ricoeur writes, “I should prefer to say that the reader understands himself in front of the text, in front of the world of the work. […] It is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself.”84 Again, Ricoeur refers to Gadamer who conceives of interpretation as a fusion of horizons—past and present, author and reader. Ricoeur writes,

This concept signifies that we live neither within closed horizons nor within one unique horizon. Insofar as the fusion of horizons excludes the idea of a total and unique knowledge, this concept implies a tension between what is one’s own and what is alien, between near and far; and hence the play of difference is included in the process of convergence.85

There is no homogenizing metaphysics that implies a universal perspective or a fixed meaning, but there is a different transcendence within the work, which allows it to mean new things to future perceivers while retaining its essence. Appropriation implies not that we are “making the

82 Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 43.
work our own,” but rather projecting ourselves into the world prompted by the non-ostensive references of the work. We open ourselves up to the work and we are changed.

2.5 Validity in Interpretation

There are, of course, multiple ways of construing a work, but Ricoeur holds that a) not all interpretations are equal, and b) it is possible to judge a given interpretation with respect to other interpretations. Ricoeur speaks of a dialectic between guessing and validating where the reader engages in the aforementioned play of interpretation—the “to and fro” of trial and error. This holds true for the work as a totality and for the metaphor in an utterance.86

Fortunately, we are not left to guess blindly, for the work contains clues that “serve as a guide for a specific construction, in that [they contain] at once a permission and a prohibition; [they exclude] unsuitable constructions and [allow] those which give more meaning to the same words.”87 This does demand that one is knowledgable enough to decipher the clues, but the ability to find and decode such clues is, after all, one of the primary requirements of one who engages in hermeneutic inquiry. Verification in interpretation does not carry the scientific pretention of absolute truth because the focus is on the propositional character of a given text—the non-ostensive reference of the text to a possible world as opposed to the ostensive reference of a scientific experiment. The truth of an interpretation is much closer to what J.L. Austin describes a performative utterance because the interpretation is not a description that is truth-evaluable from a logical perspective, but is instead a proposition that changes what it describes.88

The work’s truth is its redescriptive power. If the interpretation succeeds in disclosing a world to

86 Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 175.
87 Ibid., 175.
the perceiver, then it is subjectively true in the Kierkegaardian sense. Interpretation, after all, belongs to a different realm than that of objective truth derived from empirical research. Although we cannot speak of a more truthful interpretation in a rigorously scientific sense, we can speak of a more probable interpretation. As Ricoeur writes, “the more probable is that which, on the one hand, takes account of the greatest number of facts furnished by the text, including its potential connotations, and on the other hand, offers a qualitatively better convergence between the features which it takes into account.”

3.0 Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics and Musical Interpretation

Up to this point, I have drawn some connections between Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the text and its possible musical applications, but now I would like to focus entirely on music and its relationship to ontological hermeneutics. I will begin by reviewing Ricoeur’s rare but significant comments on music, and will then discuss the work of Roger W.H. Savage, the only major music scholar to offer an extended engagement with Ricoeur.

On the surface, Ricoeur appears to hold a Romantic view of music, writing, “music creates feelings for us that have no name; it extends our emotional space, it opens in us a region where absolutely new feelings can be shaped.” Although this sounds a bit like the idea of music “expressing the inexpressible,” reading Ricoeur’s statement in light of his larger philosophical project frames this in a different manner. He initially states that music is not a mimetic art, but

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89 Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 78.

90 Here, it is important to note that by “facts,” Ricoeur primarily means the manifest features of the work at hand. *Ibid*, 175-6.

91 Lawrence Kramer’s *Interpreting Music* is actually very Ricoeurian, although Ricoeur is never mentioned in the book. Kramer appears to have reached similar, albeit less philosophically sophisticated, conclusions a few decades later through a reading of Derrida tempered by literary theorists.

then he allows, “at the limit, could not one say that to each piece of art there corresponds a mood?” Music with no linguistic content does not have denotational power and thus it cannot describe action as such, but because the power of his conception of mimesis lies in its refiguration of reality, Ricoeur can still explain the ability of a musical work to redescribe a “mood” or “humor” as a particularly abstract sort of mimesis. “Music,” Ricoeur writes, “opens up in us a region where unspoken sentiments can be represented and our being-affected can be expressed.”

What, then, is this “mood,” this “unspoken sentiment”? Understood in a proper existential-ontological context, a mood differs from simple affects and feelings; rather, it is fundamental to our being-in-the-world—our “thrownness,” as Heidegger would say, that allows us to recognize the existence of, and interact with, other beings within the world. In Heidegger, a mood discloses a manner of being “before all cognition and willing and beyond [its] scope of disclosure.” When Ricoeur describes musical mimesis as corresponding to a mood, it exceeds any cognitive theories of the play of emotions manipulated by music. As Savage argues, “the idea that music is the language of emotion too quickly relegates the poetic expression of feelings to the recesses of the subject’s interior life.” Acquiescence to a total and binding subjectivity of criticism renders the interpretive enterprise useless because all interpretation becomes inconsequential in the face of whatever feelings a work may arouse in the conscious mind of the

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94 Ibid.


96 Ibid., 128.

individual. Instead, mood speaks to music’s ability to reach a place beyond cognition—a place of elemental, pre-conscious being—that has ramifications beyond the individual, even if we engage with the work as individuals.\footnote{Interestingly, there is actually some important overlap between Heidegger’s concept of mood and Lacan’s concept of the Real, but this discussion must remain in abeyance for now.} The work discloses to the individual through interpretation, but the work does far more than present a unified emotion to be awakened in each individual.

The “feelings that have no name” that Ricoeur speaks about exist here in a mode of pure, unreflective existence, and thus, they reach us at a level of profound depth. Music, for Ricoeur, becomes a transfiguration of a mode of existence prior to cognition and volition. Through music, “we enter into a region of the soul which cannot be explored otherwise than by the hearing of this [individual, specific] piece. Each work is authentically a modality of the soul, a modulation of the soul.”\footnote{Ricoeur, “Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics: Interview with Paul Ricoeur.”} Accordingly, an interpretation and critique of music seeks to understand not only structure, but also the way in which the work structures a mood, which is precisely what Savage sets out explore in 	extit{Hermeneutics and Music Criticism}.

3.1 Savage and Musical Hermeneutics

As a systematic musicologist, Roger Savage presents an innovatory conception of music as a whole. For Savage, music’s power of affective redescription allows us to consider the “aporia of time and the other of time.”\footnote{Savage, 	extit{Hermeneutics and Music Criticism}, 87.} Music is a unique way in which we may engage with a beyond-of-time that is difficult to even conceive of—much less experience—through philosophical reflection alone. Although his thesis does not focus directly on the interpretation of radical music, the way in which he arrives at this thesis—by way of Ricoeur and Gadamer—is quite useful, especially insofar as he has already developed some musical applications of
Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. After addressing how Savage applies Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor to music, I will consider the musicological implications of Savage’s work for musicology and musical critique.

3.1.1 Music and Metaphor

Although Savage recognizes the importance of questioning the metaphysical conceits of Romantic critics, he also contends that “exiling individual works to the recesses of cultural, historical, and sociopolitical analysis paradoxically dissimulates music’s efficacy and obviates the work’s power to speak. This power, inseparable from the aesthetic experience of a work, underlies the work’s expression of moods and feelings that, in turn, redescribe affective dimensions of our experience.”¹⁰¹ Ricoeur’s concept of metaphor is the solution to restoring the efficacy of the affective dimension of music without either capitulating to Romanticist metaphysics or postmodern contextualism exclusively. If music has the power to “[refigure] our affective relation to the world,”¹⁰² it is through the power of metaphor.

The great debate on music’s representational power founders on the issue of reference because our understanding of the nature of reference precludes its applicability to music when we insist on the primacy of what Ricoeur calls a “first-order reference,” or a reference to the literal, material world. The “second-order reference,” he states, “reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects but at the level that Husserl designated by the expression Lebenswelt and Heidegger by the expression being-in-the-world.”¹⁰³ When a scholar like Peter

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¹⁰² Ibid., 217.

¹⁰³ In Husserl, Lebenswelt [lifeworld] represents the class of all things perceivable in an intersubjective, universal sense. It is the space of all human experience. See Edmund Husserl The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 108. For more
Kivy investigates the possibility of meaning in music, he is concerned exclusively with first-order reference, which inevitably leads to the conclusion that instrumental music cannot, strictly speaking, be “about” anything.\footnote{Kivy considers what he calls “music alone” to be “a structure without meaning or reference or representational features.” Peter Kivy, “The Profundity of Music,” in \textit{Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 202.} Fred Everett Maus proposes a solution to the dilemma of the first-order reference in music through his music as drama hermeneutic. In this theory, one describes musical affect in terms of an “imaginary agent” who is the figurative protagonist in the drama of a musical work.\footnote{Fred Everett Maus, “Music as Drama,” in \textit{Music and Meaning}, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 105-130.} This allows Maus to reconcile score analysis with affective interpretation, but the usual problem arises when confronting a work that does not follow conventional dramatic principles, such as certain minimalist works that confound the listener’s expectation of a teleological mode of listening. Although Maus’s hermeneutic has much to offer common practice music, problems remain because of the perceived importance of first-order reference.

Savage, on the other hand, argues, “By suspending ostensive, literal references, the metaphorical meaning of the new predicative pertinence redescribes the real in the light of its own heuristic fiction.” That is, when we set aside the ostensible primacy of literal, denotative references, the figurative meaning is enlivened and animated in a way that shows us a unique, refigured reality corresponding with our own individual existence. Lawrence Kramer arrives at apparently similar conclusions in his discussion of musical metaphor as a hermeneutic concept through Austin’s concept of performative utterances, although he has not systematized the

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\footnote{discussion on Heidegger, see the discussion of “mood” in section 3.0. Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 85-6.}
possibility of metaphor in the manner that Ricoeur has done. Ricoeur, Savage, and Kramer are in agreement that when we are shackled to a literalist view of reality, the poetic dimension is foreclosed; however, if we can overcome this tendency, the musical work opens up a new path to discovery, or as Ricoeur writes, “we may imaginatively actualize the potential non-ostensive reference of the text in a new situation.”

How, then, does metaphor relate to music, specifically? After all, the non-textual components of music do not provide metaphors themselves. Perhaps descriptive titles, album covers, and information gleaned from contextual research can suggest appropriate metaphors, but there is nothing inherent in the pitch content that suggests a replacement that creates the sort of semantic impertinence to which Ricoeur refers. Savage proposes that,

> through the analogies between a work’s syntactical features and its expressive content, based on coded conventions of various paradigmatic plots, the critic creates the metaphors suggestive of the referential value of a musical work. Metaphor-making, in this sense, defines the critic’s interpretive role. Expressive interpretation thus complements, and in a sense completes, structural considerations by identifying analogies between the work’s internal organization and the non-aesthetic experiences in which the work’s expressive features are grounded, and to which they ultimately refer.

In a limited sense, we already do this when we attribute any sort of linguistic descriptors to the instrumental component of a work of music. Describing a work as melancholic, or arch-like, or “suggestive of the wind in a field of tall grass,” creates a metaphorical connection by rendering

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108 Marion Guck actually attempts to draw a connection between musical materials and metaphor, but in her analysis of a Chopin prelude, she concludes that the operative metaphor is the arch. She finds arches everywhere in the work, but it is unclear what is gained from recognizing the recurrence of a literal shape in melodic and harmonic movement other than an appreciation of the work’s Shenkerian organicism. In this sense, the metaphor is functioning closer to what Ricoeur would call a symbol, and a very abstract one that that. See Marion A. Guck, “Two Types of Metaphoric Transference,” in *Music & Meaning*, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 201-214.

the materiality of the work in common language, and, in fact, this is what Marion Guck describes when she speaks of comparative and ascriptive metaphor.\textsuperscript{110} The former involves an ostensive connection between language and some material feature of the work, and the latter involves a non-ostensive connection between language and the suggestion of a concept or emotion in connection with the work. Her conception of musical metaphor is, however, less abstract than Savage’s. In an analysis of Chopin’s “Prelude in B minor,” Op. 28, no. 6, Guck finds the shape of an arch to be the operative comparative metaphor, while “urgency” is the dominant ascriptive metaphor.\textsuperscript{111} Guck’s interpretation is easier to perceive and defend through common intuition than Savage’s use of philosophical reflection, but when confronting radical music, it is difficult to find enough features that lend themselves to Guck’s methodology. What Savage proposes, by way of Ricoeur, is a sort of musical metaphor that creates a non-ostensive reference to a possible world disclosed by the work. Just as the logical absurdity in the metaphorical utterance involves the reader in the vivification of language, the application of lingual metaphors to the realm of music creates a similar vitality by involving the listener in the resolution of the logical absurdity of matching language to tones and rhythms. Although the “language” of music has its own internal logic, the application of verbal language to musical sounds creates a cognitive dilemma that the listener must resolve.

This is a point of divergence for Savage, who follows Gadamer and Ricoeur into ontological hermeneutical territory, and Kramer, who adopts a more standard hermeneutical position. For Kramer, metaphor does not carry the same ontological weight of offering a possibility of being; rather, it is the simpler act of attributing dynamic meaning to music. His


\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}, 201-212.
example is Ingmar Bergman’s *Autumn Sonata* (1978), which features Chopin’s “Prelude No. 2 in A minor” (1893) throughout the film. Kramer tracks the accrual of meaning attributed to this Chopin prelude throughout the film, but his conception of metaphor from the beginning of the chapter transforms into what should be properly called symbolism in his actual analysis. The work is a symbol in the film and it takes on new shades of meaning while retaining traces of earlier meanings, and in this sense, it functions as what Ricoeur calls a symbol. Kramer creates a compelling interpretation of *Autumn Sonata* through his symbolic analysis, but it is one thing to trace the symbolism of a common practice work within a narrative film and quite another to attempt symbolic analysis in a work that appears to have little relation to symbols as cultural codes with conventionally comprehensible meaning. This is precisely why the full philosophical weight of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is crucial to my project.

Savage has taken Ricoeur’s concept of metaphor and created a credible transposition to music, and now I intend to push further into increasingly complex metaphorical networks. It is here that I arrive at my first connection between Ricoeur and Lacan. My application of Lacanian theory is, in part, the invocation of the structure and function of the Lacanian psyche as a root metaphor—a gravitational center that brings smaller scale, conceptually diverse metaphors into concert with one another. Part of my intent in this study is to demonstrate the power of Lacanian theory as a metaphor—a living metaphor—for radical music and expressive noise. Through this metaphor, I hope to engender a “seeing as” in this arcane music and to help the musical work disclose its world to the listener. If radical music drew from the standard body of culturally established signifiers, then this metaphorical use of Lacanian concepts would be

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113 Ricoeur on root metaphors, *Interpretation Theory*, 64.
unnecessary, but in light of the apparent incomprehensibility of these works, conventional symbolic analysis fails because conventional symbols are rarely evident.

3.1.2 Ontological Hermeneutics and Musicology

Looking more generally to the field of musicology and music criticism, Savage touches on a number of issues vis-à-vis ontological hermeneutics, including the role of context in interpretation and the importance of the experience of the work. In the end, Savage attempts to move beyond a stagnant disciplinary debate regarding proper critical methodology by reminding us of the crucial importance of the affective dimension of music, and this may be his greatest contribution to musical hermeneutics. Whether one believes that all affect is socially constructed or not, it is useful to investigate the affective experience of the work instead of being totally focused on either the social function or the formal structure of the work.

As we saw during our discussion of Ricoeur’s anti-historicist position, the work occasions a fusion of horizons between itself and the perceiver. But how does this function in a discourse like musicology where the discipline of cultural studies has only recently gained traction and socio-historicist readings reign supreme? After numerous comments on the insufficiency of both Romantic formalism and postmodern deconstructionism to explain the whole work, Savage states that the “socio-historicizing questions concerning the conditions of a work’s production, performance, and reception illuminate the limits of a present interpretation. Every encounter with a work occurs within a field of changing horizons.”

Every work has a context, but the power of the work is not found exclusively in the socio-historical context, but in the fusing of horizons of which Gadamer spoke.

It is important and entirely obvious to discuss a work like Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* (1971) in the context of American Vietnam-era crises, and we might push even further into

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114 Ibid., 149.
biographical issues since, upon returning from a tour of duty in Vietnam, Gaye’s brother, Frankie, painted such a grim picture that *What’s Going On* was not only culturally relevant, but personally relevant as well; however, it is much less obvious (and no less important to realize) that even such a personally and politically contingent album carries the capacity for new meaning in every future encounter. Long after the cultural revolution of 1960s America and the anti-war sentiments of the Vietnam era have withered and decayed in history textbooks as a mere event of the past (as opposed to a cathected experience shared by the originally intended audience of the album), will Gaye’s message of love and tolerance not speak to future listeners confronting future variations on the same human struggles? Ricoeur argues, and I agree, that the changing horizons of future encounters of the work will expand its potential meanings beyond the original, intended (and empirically lost) context. One may find it compelling to imagine the reunion of Gaye and his brother—the war-wary veteran—leading to such an epiphany that Gaye was not only inspired, but also obliged to create his masterpiece, but surely there is a limit on the possible empathy one can feel toward another human being. How much, after all, can one empathize with another individual with whom one has no personal connection, irrespective of the poignancy of sentiment? Is not a significant part of such a work the transplantation and/or extrapolation either to our own existence as individuals encountering the work or to our view of our social situation? Ricoeur’s limitation on the importance of the original horizon addresses precisely this point. Far from simply imagining the message of *What’s Going On* as applying to ourselves in the present, through appropriation, we fuse the horizons of the work with our contemporary situation.

Distanciation moving to appropriation creates the illuminating power of the work. Savage writes, “by highlighting contemporary choices and alternatives against the historical horizons
that conditioned the work’s creation, critical commentaries reintroduce the sense of distance between present and past horizons that the contemporaneity of the experience of a work tends to cover over.\footnote{Ibid., 150.} For a hermeneutics of music (or any text), it is neither a simple historicist reading, nor a contemporaneous, ahistorical reading that suffices. An interpretation drawing from history and from contemporary life increases the power of distanciation and amplifies the efficacy of the work as it returns to us from a greater distance. Thus, we can conduct a socio-historicist examination of What’s Going On, but we must not privilege our attempted reconstruction of the original meaning over the meaning resulting from our contemporary encounter with the work.

Savage’s discussions of metaphor serve his larger theses on the importance of the experience that the work conveys. “Poetic feelings,” he writes, “renew our inherence in the world by intensifying and augmenting the sense of being affected that attests to our non-objectifying insertion in the world.”\footnote{Savage, “Ricoeur and Musicology,” 221.} Just as Ricoeur described the importance of poetic language in involving the reader in the act of textual animation, Savage attests to the way in which mimetic redescriptions paints a new way of being in the world. The suspension of conventional emotions creates a space for metaphors to “augment the affective field of our experiences.”\footnote{Ibid.} Furthermore, Savage speaks to the unusual potency of the “ontological vehemence” inherent in the work through Ricoeur’s comment that, “as the representational function is lessened…as the gap with reality grows wider, the biting power of the work on the world of our experiences in reinforced. The greater the retreat, the more intense the return back

\footnote{Ibid., 150.}

\footnote{Savage, “Ricoeur and Musicology,” 221.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
upon the real.”¹¹⁸ Insofar as non-descriptive, non-representational music occasions what must be the furthest retreat from ostensive reference imaginable, Savage is able to frame music as uniquely suited to create a “heightened sense of being ‘out of time’ or even ‘beyond time,’ [opening] the world to us anew.”¹¹⁹ Again, Savage is creating a very broad philosophical proposition applicable to virtually all music around the world, but his thesis here is especially pertinent to radical music and expressive noise because of their intrinsic non-assimilability into conventional language and concepts. If music, in general, points toward a beyond of time, surely the “beyond” of radical music and expressive noise must be even greater.

3.2 Summary of Ricoeur and Music

At this point, it is useful to take stock of the concepts at play thus far, especially with respect to their hermeneutic applications in music. Of the many concepts introduced above, there are six that seem particularly apposite to musical interpretation: the vivifying power of metaphor, the redescriptions of reality and mood via mimesis, the act of play in interpretation, the attenuation of historicism and the authorial voice, the fusion of horizons through appropriation, and the way in which we approach validating interpretations in contradistinction to one another. At the risk of reductionism, I offer the following schema to condense the above concepts into a manageable reference.

Above I have considered the musical work as equivalent to the main object of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, i.e., the text. Where the text, or work, is a series of linguistic units in a syntagmatic relationship that form a coherent totality,¹²⁰ so too is a musical work the collection of units of

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¹¹⁸ Ricoeur, Critique and Conviction, 176.

¹¹⁹ Savage, Hermeneutics and Music Criticism, 118.

tonal and rhythmic expression arranged to create a discrete entity, or at least an intentional circumscription of an aural phenomenon.\textsuperscript{121} From here, we arrive at metaphor, which presents a logical absurdity that the reader/listener must struggle to resolve through his or her own creativity, thereby animating the musical language.\textsuperscript{122} As Savage shows, the interpreter may invent metaphors that create illuminative connections between musical abstraction and concepts and objects that can be said to exist.\textsuperscript{123} The difference is that the interpreter, not the author (or performers), suggest metaphors, but in doing so, the listener is similarly involved in the vivification of the non-ostensive (non-lingual) references inherent in music.

Metaphor leads directly to mimesis because it is through the non-ostensive references of the text that reality is redescribed and a latent world is disclosed to the reader/listener. Although non-textual music does not possess the denotative power to refer to real objects, music can refer to concepts through the invention of metaphors, and it can also refer to moods. In Heidegger, moods refer to a generalized existential state prior to cognition and volition, and, as Savage claims, it is through music that we may access this realm of pure affect.\textsuperscript{124}

Active reading/listening enlivens the text, but the reader/listener must struggle to create a coherent interpretation through the dance-like process of play. Possibilities are proposed, explored, abandoned, and accumulated to move toward an ever fuller, more convincing interpretation. This is no less true in music, but the potentiality of play is all the greater due to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{121} The application of this comparison to radical music and expressive noise is obviously more complex, but at the roots of a text and a work of expressive noise we can at least acknowledge the authorial circumscription of an expressive totality.
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\textsuperscript{122} Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 173.
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\textsuperscript{123} Savage, “Ricoeur and Musicology,” 219.
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\textsuperscript{124}———, \textit{Hermeneutics and Music Criticism}, 94.
\end{flushright}
the abstraction of music and the presence of second-order authors, or performers, who add to and modify the work at hand before it reaches the listener’s ears.

Ricoeur problematizes the role of the author and the importance of socio-historicizing contexts in the creation of meaningful interpretation. Because the text escapes the horizon of the author(s) and his or her original audience, the meaning offered by the text can no longer be said to correspond unproblematically to either the author’s intentions or the original audience’s horizon of understanding. Performers are intimately familiar with this issue because the realization of a musical score presents the same dilemma.  

The restorationist impulse is, however, misguided because to subscribe to the delusion of “hearing the work as its original audience heard it” is not only impossible, but also self-defeating. It is precisely because of the distance between the original horizon and the contemporary listener’s horizon that the work harnesses the power of distanciation following Ricoeur’s principle of the greater the distance, the more powerful the return.  

The attenuation of historicist and authorial issues allow the work to generate new meaning in its infinite capacity for subsequent realizations. Because the composer communicates through the symbolic notation of music, this distancing occurs almost immediately and to a potentially greater extent than with a text, thereby intensifying the distanciation effect.

Through the vivification of language in metaphor and the play of interpretation, we appropriate the work, which is to say, we understand ourselves in front of the text. Rather than a solipsistic projection of our own biases and prejudices onto the work, we open ourselves up to it.

\[^{125}\text{Ibid.}, 149.\]
\[^{126}\text{Ricoeur, Critique and Conviction, 176.}\]
In appropriating the text, we allow it to expand our own horizon of understanding.\textsuperscript{127} Through appropriation, we create a fusion of horizons that allows us to experience the work as individuals in direct confrontation, rather than as individuals in indirect confrontation due to the mediation of historicist imagination.\textsuperscript{128}

Finally, we arrive at interpretational validation, which exists on a scale of plausibility. Through the interpretive process, we look for clues in the text that, in turn, suggest and discourage certain possibilities.\textsuperscript{129} A convincing interpretation, then, is one that is able to account for the greatest number of textual features, connotations, references, and offers the most compelling intersection of these features.\textsuperscript{130} In the case of music, this concept becomes a bit more difficult because of the dearth of concrete material in the way of lingual content. Savage’s suggestion of metaphorical creation, however, opens the musical work to new horizons and allows us to move beyond both formalism that is concerned primarily with the mechanical functioning of the work and contextualism that underrepresents the affective component of the work. In the case of music, the hermeneutic practitioner must look not only at the features the work proposes, but we must also invent metaphors to help us speak to the ontological power of the work.

To the above, I would add the following observations: In a sense, interpretation works on an absolutely individual level. If Ricoeur’s style of ontological hermeneutics frames the non-ostensive references of the text as disclosing a possible world and a possible way of being in this world, then it seems that there are levels of interpretation in every situation. As an interpreter of

\textsuperscript{127} ———, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 178.

\textsuperscript{128} ———, Interpretation Theory, 93.

\textsuperscript{129} ———, “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 175.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 175-6.
radical music, I attempt to provide a first-order interpretation of a specific work that can speak to a wide audience and help them understand both the possible world and the possible ways of being in the world that the work discloses. If interpretation is a dynamic process where Ricoeur’s “thinking more” is the goal, my job must be to augment the vivifying inspiration of the work by choosing a powerful and apt metaphorical network. There is also a second-order interpretation that happens when a reader encounters my interpretation and, although this second-order interpretation is once removed from my initial interpretation, a dialectical process is initiated between the reader’s interpretation and understanding of my interpretation and their personal ideas about the work, which—ideally—leads to an imbrication of our understandings of the work.

Provided that my interpretation is neither so simple as to be obvious, nor so complex as to be incomprehensible to anyone but myself, the phenomenological component of interpretation ought to be transferable with little loss of power, for the efficacy of an illuminating interpretation lies in the personal experience of metaphorical understanding, which happens when the reader/listener encounters the metaphor, not when the interpreter creates the metaphor. If this were not true, then the metaphors used in poetic language would have already exhausted themselves on the authors before even reaching the reader.

4.0 Jacques Lacan

Let us turn now to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. Unlike Ricoeur, Lacan’s discourse is hermetic and arcane; it is filled with neologisms, language games, and general interpretive hurdles. Because his theoretical body remains foreign to musicological discourse, I will spend some time introducing the concepts and their interrelations within the Lacanian psyche. I will create a few connections to musical hermeneutics along the way, but the bulk of
my discussions on Lacan and music will occur within the case studies themselves. Before diving into the Lacanian nebula, however, some prefatory remarks are in order. Lacan’s oeuvre extends over decades and not only do his many concepts change over time, but Lacan intentionally leaves ambiguities and resists both clear and singular definitions because he prefers his theoretical body to remain amorphous and polyvalent, just like language itself. For instance, the word “jouissance” goes through at least three major stages of development over the course of thirty years. When one considers the wealth of concepts that Lacan either introduces or borrows (and substantially modifies) from Freud, the task of the author is onerous. In reviewing much of the secondary literature on Lacan, one finds that a number of authors apparently shield themselves from critiques of terminological accuracy and meaning by hiding behind the jargon, jumping from term to term while assuming that the reader will interpret a given word in the “correct” sense. As a result, there are numerous books that remain obscure to all but the specialist.

If an author wishes to avoid speaking only to specialists within the Lacanian discourse, he or she confronts the difficult choice of either burdening the reading with a lengthy exposition taking care to describe all senses of the concept—much of which, realistically, the non-specialist does not need to know—or providing the sort of clear, concise explanations that are nowhere to be found in Lacan’s own writing, at the risk of oversimplification and subsequent critiques by those who prefer a different sense of the concept. Insofar as the purpose of my writing is to introduce and demonstrate the hermeneutic efficacy of Lacanian theory to musicologists (and fellow non-specialists), I have chosen the latter strategy. In my introduction to Lacanian theory in the present section, I will attempt to provide clear, concise explanations of concepts using examples with ordinary language with the proviso that my explanations reflect the most common
uses and are not comprehensive. If my theoretical discussion appears to venture into some very strange and remote territory, it is only to lay the groundwork for richer interpretational possibilities exemplified in subsequent chapters.

4.1 Lacan and Music

I propose that one understands the Lacanian psyche as a metaphor for the affective and communicative dimensions of music. In this sense, there is a complex, multivalent exchange happening between the listener and the musical other (i.e., the composer, performer, producer, or whatever intentional agent is behind the musical utterance). There are a number of factors that affect this exchange. The context of the sounding experience (e.g., prerecorded, performed live without improvisation, performed live with improvisation) changes the degree of reciprocity involved, and the context that the listener brings (his or her horizon, as Ricoeur would say), both impact the way that the work is perceived. Even when a given subject listens to an unchanging recording and the communication is essentially one-way, I propose that the way in which the music is perceived and interpreted shares much in common with the way one perceives and interprets language in the Lacanian system. It is a confluence of the subject’s personal life experience and the culturally established modes of artistic experience that impact one’s perception of music. This communication is not limited to what a subject receives both consciously and unconsciously from a recording, but also includes the subject’s reflexive projections onto the music, which in turn come back to the subject as an additional layer of communication.

In truth, this use of psychoanalysis is not sanctioned by Lacan insofar as the act of clinical psychoanalysis relies entirely on intersubjective, verbal communication. This has not

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131 For those wishing to explore any of the below concepts in more detail, please refer to Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).
hindered literary critics and film theorists from using Lacanian theory to either decode character subjectivity in narratives or to create convincing metaphorical readings of narratives in general. Slavoj Žižek, for example, inhabits both worlds: Some of his work uses cultural products to explain Lacanian concepts—much in the way that Lacan himself often referred to literature to explain himself—while his other work engages in what Richard Feldman calls post-psychoanalysis, a transposition of psychoanalytic techniques into sociocultural theory. Moreover, some of Freud’s writings can easily be considered as sociological texts, even if he never refers to them as such. Lacan downplays this dimension of Freud’s oeuvre, but if we look at the legacy of Freud, his clinical contributions pale in comparison to his impact on sociocultural studies. My contention is that Lacan’s idea of “the unconscious structured like a language” is already a metaphor for understanding linguistic communication, so it can also serve as a metaphor for musical communication. It is a powerful hermeneutic tool that can lead to compelling, cogent readings that one could not achieve through alternate means. As I will show in section 5.0, his theories can also work nicely within Ricoeur’s broader hermeneutical framework.

As a final introductory comment, I would caution the reader against understanding these Lacanian concepts as necessarily true in an absolute sense. For example, one need not believe

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132 Essays in the following volume from Jacques-Alain Miller and Colette Soler remind us that Lacan was a medical doctor and not a literary theorist. That said, their emphasis is on clinical psychoanalysis and their bias is obvious enough. Ellie Ragland, ed., Critical Essays on Jacques Lacan (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990). On the other hand, Freud frequently crossed over into sociology and cultural studies, especially in Civilization and Its Discontents (1929), Totem and Taboo (1913), and Moses and Monotheism (1939).

133 McGowan’s psychoanalytic readings of David Lynch films are exemplary in their cogency of interpretation and in their rigorous adherence to Lacanian theory. Todd McGowan, The Impossible David Lynch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

that the Subject is formed literally by viewing oneself in a mirror. Certainly, infants have been
discovering their difference from their mothers without the aid of mirrors for millennia. Such
literalist readings are unproductive because they insist on applying a scientific mentality to a
philosophical expression of experience. Numerous theorists have proposed ways of explaining
psychosexual development, and none can technically make unassailable truth claims in the way
that contemporary psychiatric and neurological discoveries can. This does not mean that these
theories do not reflect some level of human experience in a conceptual manner that continues to
resonate with at least some people. Concepts like Lacan’s mirror stage are useful insofar as they
convey modes of experience with a sort of dramatic expression that appears to reflect the
similarly dramatic experience of life.

4.1.1 The Lacanian Subject

Let us begin with some background on Lacanian theory, which we can build upon in the
following chapters. The crux of Lacan’s theory is the tripartite psyche—three simultaneous
orders within each subject, each order inextricable from the others. Briefly, the Symbolic is the
order of language and the domain of the unconscious, the locus of a subject’s enunciations, the
true meaning of which the subject is unaware;\(^{135}\) the Imaginary is the order of the ego
(consciousness and self-perception) where the subject mistakenly believes his or her intent
resides and where this intent is articulated in a straightforward (i.e., not mediated by the
unconscious) manner; and finally, the Real is the order of the unknowable beyond of language
and structure, that which is neither the Symbolic nor the Imaginary, the realm of pure
phenomena that defies signification. Lacan uses a Borromean knot (See Appendix A) as a
metaphor to describe the interrelation of these orders for a number of reasons: first, the three

\(^{135}\) Lacan writes, “The unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a
strings of the knot are interdependent, so that none may exist alone; second, if one string is cut, the knot becomes untied; third, there is no hierarchical relationship between the orders—they all exist equally and always in the healthy psyche.

The Lacanian subject differs markedly from the Cartesian cogito, a model of self-transparency of consciousness wherein there is nothing beyond the purposeful intent of the subject. Freud’s discovery of the unconscious is, for Lacan, sufficient evidence that ego psychology at best can only ever see part of the psyche, and at worst be easily misled and subverted by the unconscious. Rather than Descartes’s formulation, “I think therefore I am,” Lacan offers, “I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking.”

That is to say that, within Lacan’s model, the subject is blinded by the illusion of the Imaginary, considering his or her thoughts to originate at the level of the ego and in to be full control of them. In fact, Lacan says, the subject’s thoughts originate in the Symbolic and speak without the subject being able to filter or even understand them for what they really are.

The acquisition of language leaves the Lacanian subject permanently split. Bruce Fink writes that the subject is nothing other than the product of this split, defined negatively in the space between thinking and being. He speaks about it as a two-sided surface,

One that is exposed and one that is hidden. Though the two sides may not ultimately be made of radically different material—linguistic in nature—at any given point along the surface there is a front and a back, a visible face and an invisible one. Their value may only be local. [...] Yet there is an at least locally valid split between front and back, conscious and unconscious.

Even though origin of a subject’s speech may emanate from the unconscious and remain hidden to them, the brief appearances of the unconscious in language—for example, in parapraxes or


jokes—are discernible to the trained psychoanalyst and therefore, they can be known through an external agent; however, a painstaking circumlocution typifies the analytic process in practice, as the analyst slowly gleans enough from the analysand’s peripheral language to zero in on the message from the unconscious that has remained inaccessible to the conscious mind of the subject. The analysand’s language is a potential source of displacement and deferral in the form of metaphor and metonymy, and thus the analyst attempts to observe the play of signifiers and find connections to the signifieds from which they have become alienated through unconscious figuration.

The subject is formed during the Mirror Stage, wherein the infant—still in a state of undifferentiated being with the mother—first recognizes itself in the mirror and realizes its alienation from the mother.\(^{138}\) The infant is delighted by the superiority it perceives in its appearance, which far outstrips its own sense of uncoordination, and a rivalry is created between the idealized image (the ideal ego) and the body. To resolve the conflict, the infant identifies with the mirror image, insofar as it acts as a sign of bodily mastery yet to come, and in this way, the infant becomes trapped in the Imaginary and learns to identify with a product of misrecognition.\(^{139}\) The realization of separation from the mother is also important because the subject will now comprehend the mother as mOther, thereby creating desire, as we will see presently. The important point is that there is a moment of self-realization wherein the infant

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\(^{138}\) Although the infant can see much of itself without the aid of a mirror, the mirror image is crucial because it reflects the totality of the body. Here, Lacan is using the mirror literally, but later in his career he would acknowledge that the mirror itself was not necessary for an infant to realize his or her own alienation from the mOther. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 75-81.

\(^{139}\) This is not to say that the mature subject will retain a desirous relationship with the mirror image, for many adults develop issues resulting from their visual self-perception, whether it be envious desire or alienation. This fact only reinforces the importance of the mirror image because it shows the extent to which a subject forms ideas about him or herself through a visual representation that the subject imagines to be representative of the gaze and judgment of the Other.
comprehends him or herself as an independent being alienated from other beings. Lacan uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe this, but a literal mirror is not necessary for one to arrive at this realization.

4.1.2 Desire

Desire is an abstract, fundamental force in Lacanian theory and is distinct from the related forces of need and demand. Initially, the subject is in a state of pure biological need, but once the subject recognizes the separation between him or herself and the mOther, the relationship changes. The subject becomes enmeshed in the Symbolic, in part, through a gradual understanding of the symbolic exchange that occurs when the subject finds that a demand of the mOther can result in the satisfaction of need. Joël Dor describes the theoretical first experience of satisfaction wherein an infant feels the vital need of hunger and experiences the satisfaction of being fed. The initial satisfaction occurs before the subject has formed a mental representation of the intersubjective exchange, and thus an mnemonic trace is created containing a cathected ideal of total satisfaction—a total satisfaction from which the subject will be forever alienated. When the subject next experiences need, instead of linking need with a Real object (nutrition), the power of cathexis—in this case, the satisfaction of need experienced as love—causes the subject to link need with a representation of the Real object of satisfaction (the mnemonic trace), which in turn results in a deficiency between satisfaction of hunger and the cathected mnemonic trace of impossible, total satisfaction.

In essence, Real objects can satiate need, but desire is an existential condition for which there is no satiation. Here, the subject encounters the inability of the Other’s love to meet his or her demand fully, for the subject demands no less than to be the sole object of the Other’s desire.

This gap between demand and total satisfaction is a permanent lack that Lacan terms desire. “Desire,” he writes, “is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting.”\footnote{Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006) 580.} Desire is eternally self-propagating because unlike a need, which can be fulfilled at least temporarily (like hunger), desire can never be satiated. Fink writes,

Desire is a constant search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying it, in other words, extinguishing it. Desire is fundamentally caught up in the dialectical movement of one signifier to the next, and is diametrically opposed to fixation. It does not seek satisfaction, but rather its own continuation and furtherance.\footnote{Bruce Fink, 1995, 90.}

Lacan names the pure, abstract cause of desire object (a)—an unattainable, unfixed, immaterial cause that excites one of the various drives in a given subject. The individuality of a given subject is accounted for in the various drives that are particular manifestations of the general field of desire represented by object (a),\footnote{The “(a)” stands for the French word “autre,” or “other.”} but this should not imply that desire is simply the act of, say, seeing a work of art and wanting to possess it. Rather, desire is always intersubjective, filtered unconsciously through the Other, as Lacan writes, “man’s desire is the desire of the Other.”\footnote{Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI (New York: Norton, 1978), 235.}

This brings us to the dialectical nature of desire, which is multifaceted. On the first level, the subject desires recognition by the Other and desires to be the object of the Other’s desire. In other words, the subject’s desire is to be desired. Much like Hegel’s master/slave dialectic from which Lacan derives his conception of desire, the desirousness of an object is often inextricable
from the value that the Other places (or appears to place) on it. Most often, there is no rational justification for the object of a subject’s desire, but even though there is no intrinsic value in the object of desire, it takes on value when the Other desires it. Adding to the obscurity of desire, the object of desire is always engaged in a process of substitution. Lacan writes, “the enigmas that desire…poses for any sort of ‘natural philosophy’ are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else.”

Because one cannot desire what one already has, the subject’s field of desire is in a constant state of deferral, engaged in a metonymic slide that eludes the subject’s conscious mind.

4.1.3 The Law, Jouissance, and Radical Music

The second dialectical level frames desire as inherently transgressive. When the subject enters the Symbolic, there are certain conditions instated including what Freud called the pleasure principle—a law that, as Lacan writes, “superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature.” Here, Lacan borrows Freud’s metaphor of the Oedipus complex to explain the instantiation of desire in the subject. During this stage, the Father uses the threat of castration to bar the child from trying to possess the mother in uninhibited, incestuous enjoyment. Thus, the

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145 Lacan writes, “Man’s very desire is constituted, [Hegel] tells us, under the sign of mediation: it is the desire to have one’s desire recognized. Its object is a desire, that of other people, in the sense that man has no object that is constituted for his desire without some mediation. This is clear from his earliest needs, in that, for example, his very food must be prepared; and we find this anew in the whole development of his satisfaction, beginning with the conflict between master and slave, through the entire dialectic of labor.” Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Physical Causality,” in Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 148.


148 It should go without saying that here Lacan taken Freud’s metaphor and abstracted it even further as a way of explaining the establishment of a sense of right and wrong both in the form of socially-determined behavior and in the form of subservience to the power of language to structure the world. For example, the Father is not
subject is said to be castrated upon entering the Symbolic because he or she is forever separated from primordial jouissance—a sort of enjoyment that goes well beyond pleasure to the point of intense pain and a breakdown of the Law.

The establishment of the incest taboo is paradoxical because the mother was never really available to the subject, but as we have seen, desire is easily created out of wanting what one cannot have. The loss of jouissance upon entering the Symbolic—even if it is based on a pleasure that never was—serves to sustain desire because the subject continually strives to recover it. As Lacan writes, “desire is the flip side of the law,” which is to say that they are inextricable from each other. There can be no transgression without taboo, and indeed Lacan states, “I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn’t said ‘Thou shalt not covet it.’ But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment, for without the Law the Thing is dead.”

Because of the prohibition of the Law, the ensuing desire is fundamentally transgressive. As the drives circle incessantly around object (a), the promise of reclaiming the jouissance of the mythical first pleasure prods the subject along, the Law sustaining desire by keeping the subject at a distance from the experience of jouissance. Freud referred to this urge to go beyond the pleasure principle as the death drive, a concept that Lacan adopts himself, insofar as the nature of the drive is to assuage itself, thereby killing itself and halting desire.

—necessarily the biological father of the child, nor is the Father necessarily male. Often, Lacan speaks of the ‘paternal function’ when describing the establishment of the law, and this paternal function could just as easily be performed by a dominant mother or a non-familial primary caregiver.


To bring radical music and expressive noise into the discussion, we can begin to understand the relationship between radical music and expressive noise as one of the Law and desire, taboo and transgression. The codes of music are mediated by the culture from which they arise and they are beholden to the Law in a manner similar to language (although we will see in the following section how music itself has special transcendent powers that are not available to language). Radical music and expressive noise, on the other hand, function similarly to the transgressive power of jouissance—a dangerous gravitational force that points the listener to a space outside of music, a space where unrestrained, expressive sonic power dumbfounds the listener in a dazzling display of awe and terror.\(^\text{151}\) This space beyond the power of the signifier—beyond the power of language to determine and structure—is what Lacan refers to as the Real.

Merzbow, for example, contends that “sound work is an accumulation of pleasure, and the desire for pleasure is endless,”\(^\text{152}\) which is to say that expressive noise is an aesthetic experience that draws us toward the boundless jouissance promised by object (a). Recall, however, that despite the intensity of pleasure promised by jouissance, it is always excessive pleasure, always more than the subject can stand. Likewise, radical music and expressive noise promise the awesome power of erotic transgression, but it too is always excessive. Thus, it is not without both pleasure and pain that one experiences radical music and expressive noise.

### 4.1.4 The Real

The first thing to understand is that the Real has nothing to do with reality, the former existing outside of the realm of time, society, culture, religion, and intersubjective experience, and the latter existing as the opposite—a sociocultural construct that is not only a total product of

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\(^{151}\) A more nuanced treatment of the agent I refer to as “the listener” will follow below.

the Symbolic, but is constituted on an intrasubjective basis for any given individual—and in this way, we can consider reality to be a sort of delimitation of the Real at the hands of the Symbolic, for it is only through language that the concept of reality, which can be discussed as such, is possible. Fink writes, “the real is perhaps best understood as *that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist ‘alongside’ and in spite of a speaker’s considerable linguistic capabilities.”¹⁵³ He explains this by way of two examples: first, there is the infant’s body prior to its induction into the Symbolic through toilet training, language acquisition, and general socialization; second, there is the Real that persists in the adult psyche as a kernel that has, as yet, remained unsymbolized, such as an experience from a time before the subject had the capacity to understand the experience, which would have allowed him or her to process it through the Symbolic.¹⁵⁴ The Real becomes progressively symbolized in the psyche of an individual as he or she matures. Fink describes the state of pure undifferentiated being experienced by infants as an “original” Real “being left behind though it can never all be drained away, neutralized, or killed. *There is thus always a remainder which persists alongside the symbolic.*”¹⁵⁵ This gives way to a second-order Real, which results from the eternal deficiency of the signifier—the inability of words to say it all.

As for Lacan’s “reality,” Ellie Ragland-Sullivan describes it as being “built up by structures, effects, and the fragments of perceived fragmentations. Reality, therefore is to be

¹⁵³ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 25. Original emphasis.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 24-29. It is also worth noting that some theorists like Julia Kristeva believe that the structuration of the infant’s Symbolic begins during the prenatal stage where he or she experiences the vibrations of the mother’s body. Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 27. Original emphasis.
assessed in details, allusions, and wisps of meaning, instead of in unified thought systems.\textsuperscript{156} Just as the subject is fooled into believing that thoughts originate in the Imaginary, Lacan writes, “the world is merely the fantasy through which thought sustains itself—‘reality’ no doubt, but to be understood as a grimace of the Real.”\textsuperscript{157} The Real is literally impossible to describe with words because the moment one attempts a description, it is, \textit{ipso facto}, filtered through the Symbolic, dissol


process it through the Symbolic as it occurs, provided the encounter is sufficiently severe. It is also important to note that the trauma need not necessarily be experienced as a totally negative phenomenon. Some may enjoy the masochistic thrill of confronting something that powerfully overwhelms their psyches, but whether the encounter with the Real is experienced as a positive or a negative, the important point is that the Real is a phenomenon that engulfs the psyche in the radically unfamiliar.

In one sense, the Real is a universal category, insofar as each subject’s psyche has a realm that exceeds the Symbolic. In another sense, the fact that each subject has a different body of experiences and a different Symbolic constitution means that each subject’s Real will vary. A child starts out with a great deal of phenomena that is yet unSymbolized, but as the child matures into an adult and gains new experiences, his or her Symbolic expands in an individualized manner. At its core, the Real is a concept that encompasses a transcendent experience—something that drastically exceeds a subject’s ability to process it. The possibilities of a Symbolically transcendent experience may be very different between, say, a fire fighter and a schoolteacher, but since neither can be said to have a complete realm of experience, they will have plenty elements left in their respective Reals.

In the latter portion of his career, Lacan became interested in the possibilities of topology, for it provided him a series of what he considered to be pure signifiers that were unencumbered with signifieds (whether any signifier can exist without a signified is, however, a major point of contention). In essence, Lacan saw the natural sciences as a field devoid of the signifier of the Symbolic—the symbol that stores and modifies meaning in a diachronic and synchronic fashion—and was therefore able to represent certain concepts, such as the Real, without mediation through the Symbolic. In his words, “every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that
signifies nothing,”158 hence the use of “real,” or non-functional, signifiers in the Borromean knot to explain the tripartite psyche.

But the natural sciences were not the only field that Lacan felt could potentially circumvent the Symbolic. He writes,

Of course, works of art imitate the objects they represent, but their end is certainly not to represent them. In offering the imitation of an object, they make something different out of that object. Thus they only pretend to imitate. The object is established in a certain relationship to the Thing and is intended to encircle and to render both present and absent.159

The “Thing” to which Lacan refers is a translation of *das Ding*, Freud’s term for “the cause of the most fundamental human passion,”160 which would later be known as object (a). As an object situated in the Real, *das Ding* is indescribable; however, in the case of art, one may get a sense of the Real resulting from the manner in which art offers a transcendent experience. Even if we do not wish to go as far as to say that art, like the natural sciences, use signifiers without corresponding signifieds as Eduard Hanslick might have said if he had had a penchant for Saussurian linguistics, we can at least admit that the abstraction and subjectivity in art lend an impression of something unnamable that constitutes the appeal of art. Even in objective-representational art, Lacan is correct in pointing out that—no matter how literal the representation—the work still changes its object, communicating in excess of the object itself. If we take music as an example, it becomes even easier to accept Lacan’s view of art: there is no art less tethered to the Symbolic than non-linguistic, non-pictorial music.

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Plato’s description of art as mimesis was cause for banishment not because art could merely represent its object, but because of the deception of what art communicates in excess of itself. The excess of a work of art was, for Plato, the form—a metaphysical element, perfect in its unity—of which all material objects were but poor, incomplete realizations. Art has, by its nature, a way of accessing a beyond-of-signification that Plato found dangerous and Lacan found fascinating. As an example, Lacan speaks of the value of icons: beyond being pleasing to the eye and representing Christian ideas, “what makes the value of the icon is that the god it represents is also looking at it. It is intended to please God. At this level, the artist is operating on the sacrificial plane—he is playing with those things, in this case images, that may arouse the desire of God.”  

This is only one example of how intangible qualities found in art serve to connect art to the Real without recourse to the Symbolic.

Even though Lacan’s examples tend to revolve around visual art, this is no less true in music. To take a straightforward example, consider the opening movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 in A minor (1811): without imposing a program on the music, one can detect a general impression of joy and celebration, but this says very little, for one can improvise a reasonably happy-sounding melody using only the white keys of the piano. What is it that makes Beethoven’s ascending scales so particularly exuberant? Beethoven uses a common practice musical language, but in that realm that we conveniently refer to as genius, we find a token of the Real—a message that has not been mediated by the Symbolic, an unsymbolized message that we cannot translate or articulate or duplicate through language. Moreover, if we understand Beethoven to be the subject behind a given enunciation—in this case, a symphony is the

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162 One can describe certain situations in which the Real has been shown to emerge, and one can attempt to describe the effect of the Real after the fact, but in any case, one is simply talking around the Real without being able to describe it precisely.
enunciation—we can begin to account for his presence as subject. Just as Lacan is interested in what is communicated in excess of conscious speech, I am interested in what is communicated in excess of any tangible musical material—the unnamable thing in music that be spoken of, but never fully explained, talked around, but never captured by words.

Although these ideas are potentially useful for discussing any type of music, they are particularly apropos when examining radical music and expressive noise. In the context of expressive noise, the Real is, perhaps, the most apparent because the mediation of the Symbolic (in this case, the cultural codes of Western music) is extremely minimal, especially when compared to other forms of music. The Real of expressive noise dehisces the cocoon of the Symbolic, appearing as pure immediacy of affect—an experience for which there is no signifier to create conscious understanding. We may take the composer’s subjectivity qua enunciator of the work into account, and we may also understand radical music and expressive noise as transgressing upon the Law of musical convention, but the concept of the Real is fundamental to the idea of expressive noise. This is, perhaps, the primary reason that it is so difficult to define, or even speak about, what expressive noise really is. If one could actually find the words to perfectly describe the Real, it would cease to exist because it would be processed through the Symbolic. Correspondingly, if one could invent a code to describe expressive noise in absolute detail, much in the way that the discourse of music theory and musicology describe music, then expressive noise would become music through the very process of signification. But one cannot describe the nature and behavior of the Real immanently. We can only know of it through the effect it has on the Symbolic and Imaginary, just as we can only ever understand expressive noise through difference and opposition. This does not, however, mean that we must stand mute in front of expressive noise. Lacan spent decades describing the unconscious, but this
illumination did not lessen the power it exerts over a given subject. In the course of this study, I explore expressive noise from many angles, but my goal is not to render non-music into music. My goal is to enhance understanding and appreciation of a sonic art on whatever terms are appropriate, not limited to what traditional aesthetics deem worthy.

Notably, the way in which an encounter with the Real brings a subject into confrontation with something outside of the Symbolic—something unassimilable—is not incredibly different than Ricoeur’s use of Heideggerian mood in his conception of mimesis in music. Just as Fink suggests that the Real can be thought of as that which has not yet been symbolized, the mood suggested by the musical work discloses a certain sense of pre-conscious affect—a sense of the great plane of pre-conscious existence external to conscious perception. Each is equally extrinsic to a given subject and thus each has a uniquely powerful grasp when they are activated through music. Even if the particulars of Ricoeur and Lacan’s conceptions become a bit more divergent, the fundamental idea of a space beyond consciousness and rational explanation remains very similar.

4.2 Lacan and the Social

If one reads Lacan in a particular way, one could accuse him of presenting a monolithic view of humankind that negates the import of the social. This, however, is not a productive way to approach Lacan. What he provides is a way of articulating modes of experience and behavioral patterns that are actually very general. Often times, readers find terms borrowed (and abstracted) from Freud’s Oedipal metaphor to be too culturally loaded to understand them in the abstract capacity that Lacan intends; however, taking the Father as an example, can one not at least allow that, irrespective of one’s sociocultural situation, most human beings confront a governing entity that instills a belief in a higher power (whether divine or mundane, it makes no
difference) who designates the permisable from the unpermisable? For Freud, it was the literal father who establishes the concept of the power of authority in the psyche of the subject. For Lacan, the Father (capitalized to designate its Symbolic function) could be a dominant mother or a non-familial primary caregiver or some other influential disciplinary force, but in each case, the subject confronts a more powerful entity who fulfills the establishment of taboo and prohibition so that the subject can exist within the society within which he or she is born. As a member of Western European society in the twentieth century, Lacan’s metaphors will speak most powerfully to those with a similar sociocultural background, even if there is some degree of social interoperability at a deep structural level. Perhaps it is best to understand Lacan, my use of Lacanian theory, and my project in general as primarily speaking to a Western reader/listener.

Because the impact of the Real on the auditor figures so prominently in my interpretations of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, it is prudent to revisit the Real apropos of the individual as listener. If the Real is experienced as a trauma, and if each subject has a different realm of experience, to what extent can one speak of the Real emerging from an unchanging work of music? It is easy to imagine a stereotypical librarian’s psyche being totally overwhelmed by listening to a composer like Merzbow, even at moderate volume, but what of a person who works in a machine shop all day and is continually bombarded with loud, inharmonic sounds? Certainly, each listening subject will have a different level of tolerance for loud sounds, which is significant insofar as one of the most obvious places where the Real emerges in experience is a sudden confrontation with sound that is more powerful than one is prepared to accept.

A number of factors determine what the experience will be for any given listening subject. Staying with Merzbow as an example, let us consider a range of listeners from someone who listens to popular music casually to someone who has experience with loud music of a
conventional variety (e.g., heavy metal played at a high volume) to someone who has listened to so-called “noise music” before. The way each perceives the sonic power of Merzbow will partially depend upon their previous experience with music that is both unconventional and extremely loud. Radical music will be the most powerful in terms of sonics to an inexperienced listener, but radical music may be most powerful in terms of aesthetic transgression to a seasoned listener who possesses a stronger grasp of musical convention.

Speaking from personal experience, I have listened to Merzbow for fifteen years, and I have a very solid set of expectations when I listen to a new work by Merzbow. I know what to expect in terms of form (typically, a lack of discernable form), timbre (lots of inharmonic sound), rhythm (a lack of regular pulse, typically), and volume (extreme amplitude levels) on an intellectual level. After the intense shock of listening to Merzbow for the first time, my own experience of the Real began to be mediated as I formed a Symbolic framework through which Merzbow became increasingly comprehensible; however, even after more than a decade, the sound remains jarring, louder than I expect, more intense and enveloping than I am prepared for, because an intellectual understanding of the Real is insufficient to counteract the sense of danger it provokes. To put it in plain language, Merzbow has not necessarily become substantially “easier” to listen to.

A boxer may become accustomed to getting punched in the face, a stunt car driver may get used to being in automobile accidents, and a music scholar may be familiar with the phenomenon of having one’s ears blasted, but when the trauma is sufficiently excessive, it is very difficult to eradicate every trace of the Real, to understand the experience totally (i.e., intellectually, emotionally, physically, and psychically), to become inured to the trauma. I believe that every human psyche has the ability to be overwhelmed by certain base level
instincts, which implies that socialization is not totally responsible for the meaning created by these experiences. Socialization is an important factor, but it is not the only factor. A sense of fear or confusion resulting from a loud sound works at least two levels: on one level, the specifics of the auditor’s social environment will trigger varying thoughts (e.g., a city dweller might think of gun shots, a rural dweller might think of a propane tank explosion); on another level, both should theoretically feel a fear that transcends socialization insofar as they are both humans and should instinctually be worried about damage to their ears.

4.3 Interpretation in Psychoanalysis

As I now being to bring Lacan and Ricoeur together in an attempt at what Ricoeur would call a “secret communion,” we must first understand the nature of interpretation in Lacanian theory. I will draw a few connections to Ricoeur in this section before enlarging the scope of my comparisons in the following section.

The common perception of interpretation in psychoanalysis centers on the idea that an analyst listens to the analysand describe his or her dreams and then provides a univocal interpretation (e.g., “your dream of chopping down a mighty oak tree means that you secretly want to cut your domineering father down to size”), and in fact, this is what Freud and his pupils did with great success during the inchoate stage of psychoanalytic practice (prior to 1910). At that point, bringing a hidden idea to language was sufficient to surprise the analysands with something that they perhaps felt, but could not consciously articulate in their own mind. Soon, however, the efficacy of these interpretations dropped off considerably and while analysands might accept the interpretation consciously, they would find no relief from their symptoms.163

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Let us consider this change in Ricoeurian terms. Initially, Freud provides interpretations that, like a good metaphor, help the analysands to see themselves standing before a proposed world—a radical redescription of their reality. Soon after this initial period of success, Freud and his pupils began publishing their case studies and, as a result, the interpretations became widely known to the point that an analysand might offer his or her own Freudian interpretation of a dream quite without the aid of the analyst. The Freudian interpretations became, in a sense, dead metaphors as they entered the broad cultural consciousness. Rather than harnessing the redressive powers of poetic language, the interpretations seemed commonplace and unsurprising. While some Freudian factions decided to pursue increasingly complex interpretations in hopes of staying a step ahead of their analysands, Lacan proposed a different solution.

Rather than focusing on a straightforward interpretation of symbols, as some Freudians had done, Lacan proposes that analysts “play on the power of symbols by evoking them in a calculated fashion in the semantic resonances of [their] remarks.”¹⁶⁴ The analyst, then, should not present symbols in a definite, univocal capacity, but should instead exploit the natural polyvalence of language. This technique, he writes, “would require a profound assimilation of the resources of a language, especially those that are concretely realized in its poetic texts.”¹⁶⁵ If this seems quite similar to Ricoeur’s conception of the power of poetic language, then it is even clearer when Lacan seems to be describing the very sort of ontological hermeneutics that Ricoeur has theorized at length. Lacan writes, “for in its symbolizing function, speech tends toward nothing less than a transformation of the subject to whom it is addressed by means of the link it establishes with the speaker—namely, by bringing about a signifying effect.”¹⁶⁶ What is this

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 244.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 245.
“signifying effect” if not Ricoeur’s power of metaphor brought to the dialogic encounter? In this case, however, the dialogic relationship is not one of a shared horizon and common ostensive reference points, but one where the speaker deliberately attempts to exceed the horizon shared with the interlocutor. The analyst offers deliberately polyvalent statements that require a noematic exercise from the analysand, thereby unleashing the affective power of language brought to life through interpretation.

From here, Lacan envisions a new style of interpretation that is less about making sense and convincing the analysand of its truth than about creating a certain effect. In Lacan’s estimation, previous analysts had failed to convince their analysands of the interpretations that they offered because the analysts insisted on trying to fit a diverse array of particulars into a selection of predetermined archetypes—a sort of symbolic decoding. Instead, the analyst should offer disruptive challenges to the analysands that forces them to interpret the interpretation itself, which the analysands will do in light of the unconscious sentiments they carry, but cannot articulate. To put this in Ricoeurian terms, the analysand must resolve a semantic impertinence into a predicative pertinence; the act of metaphorical resolution vivifies the interpretation itself. Just as Ricoeur avowed the power of the surprise inherent in the logical absurdity of metaphor, Fink writes, “often [interpretations] must startle, perplex, or disconcert the analysand.

167 “It is not the conviction with which it is received by the subject that counts, its well-foundedness instead being gauged by the material that emerges afterward.” Jacques Lacan, “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power,” Écrits, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 497.

168 Žižek’s explanation of Lacanian interpretation is especially similar to Ricoeur’s idea of appropriation in hermeneutics: “an interpretation is a gesture which is always embedded in the intersubjective dialectic of recognition between the analysand and the interpreter-analyst. It aims at bringing about the effect of truth apropos of a particular formulation of the unconscious (a dream, a symptom, a slip of the tongue, etc.). The subject is expected to ‘recognize’ him or herself in the signification proposed by the interpreter, precisely in order to subjectivize this signification, to assume it as his or her ‘own’: ‘Yes, my God, that’s me, I really wanted this.’” Slavoj Žižek, “The Seven Veils of Fantasy,” in Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1998), 210.
[... ] Interpretations that have the most impact are rarely ones that the analysand is expecting. Lacanian interpretation was thought to be at odds with hermeneutics insofar as hermeneutics was thought to be equivalent to exegesis, which would imply an attempt to explain the definitive meaning of a text rather than propose a possible meaning. Comparative study shows that Lacan and Ricoeur were actually exploring similar issues with respect to interpretation, even if the abstruseness of Lacan and the rigorous philosophical language of Ricoeur obscure this connection.

5.0 Ricoeur and Lacan

Ricoeur and Lacan had a vexatious relationship, each occupying a different place of importance in twentieth-century French intellectual culture. Ricoeur did not care for Lacan’s elliptical prose style or the sort of self-aggrandizing, bombastic rhetoric that he practiced in his seminars. Meanwhile, Lacan was angered by Ricoeur’s lack of recognition and deference toward his own work. After some brief encounters (including Ricoeur attending Lacan’s seminar for a period at Lacan’s invitation), Lacan and his followers would accuse Ricoeur of stealing his ideas—a point which Ricoeur refutes by pointing out that the book in question was almost completely written by the time he attended Lacan’s seminar. The point in recounting this background is to show that perhaps it was more an issue of personality than philosophy that obstructed these two famous intellectuals from engaging in fruitful dialogue.

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5.1 Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Because Ricoeur concentrates almost exclusively on Freud, let us begin there before attempting a synthesis of Ricoeur and Lacan. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur frames psychoanalysis as a hermeneutics because both rely on the interpretation of intrinsically multivalent symbols. The implication here is that, because symbols are culturally contingent, psychoanalysis and the natural sciences are not epistemologically equivalent. Freud’s desire to present psychoanalysis as a science of the mind is therefore untenable. The truth offered by psychoanalysis is akin to the truths of hermeneutics, which we examined earlier as part of the referential capacity of the work. These truths have a propositional character rather than an ostensive connection to reality, as such.

From here, Ricoeur begins to find lines of continuity between phenomenology (what Ricoeur considers to be the larger category encompassing hermeneutics) and psychoanalysis. A key point is the limitation that he recognizes in phenomenological perception.

The impossibility of total reflection, hence the impossibility of the Hegelian absolute knowledge, hence the finitude of reflection...[is] written into this primacy of the unreflected over the reflected, of the operative over the uttered, of the actual over the thematic. This unawareness proper to the unreflected marks a new step toward the Freudian unconscious; it means that the co-implicit or co-intended cannot completely attain to the transparency of consciousness precisely because of the texture of the act of consciousness, i.e. because of the invincible unawareness of self that characterizes intentionality in act.173

Without diminishing the role of intentionality to the extent that Freud does, Ricoeur allows that there are indeed powers of consciousness and unconsciousness that are coextensive in each individual. With respect to the technique of phenomenological reduction,174 for instance, Ricoeur

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174 In the practice of phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, one suspends questions of objective existence when reflecting upon an object. The experience of, say, listening to Carl Perkins sing “Blue Suede Shoes”
writes that here “phenomenology [is turned] directly toward psychoanalysis” \(^\text{175}\) because phenomenology begins by diminishing the importance of present consciousness. \(^\text{176}\) It is through the dissociation of what is true in reality and what is self-consciously understood as truth that “phenomenology reveals the self-misunderstanding inherent in immediate consciousness.” \(^\text{177}\)

After outlining a number of striking similarities between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, \(^\text{178}\) Ricoeur asks, “are they not both aiming at the same thing, namely the constitution of the subject, qua creature of desire, within an authentic intersubjective discourse?” \(^\text{179}\) There are, however, important differences. First, phenomenological reduction and what Ricoeur calls an “archaeological excavation” of the subject are not equivalent. Phenomenological reduction is, according to Ricoeur, a reflexive discipline because “the displacement of reflection with respect to immediate consciousness” \(^\text{180}\) occurs as a methodological maneuver. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is not reflexive because it relies on an analyst to help the subject understand what he or she would be otherwise unable to see. For Ricoeur, it is a matter of the slavery to the unconscious versus the freedom of intentionally suspending immediate consciousness. \(^\text{181}\) Inasmuch as Lacan continues this tradition of the

\(^{175}\) *Ibid.*, 376.


\(^{177}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{181}\) *Ibid.*
subjugation of consciousness, Ricoeur’s argument exposes the limitations of strict Lacanianism because of its sweeping claims regarding intentionality.

Second, phenomenology and psychoanalysis have different conceptions of the unconscious. In phenomenology, one may speak of non-consciousness, but this is really what Freud called pre-consciousness.\(^{182}\) What psychoanalysis refers to as the unconscious is not represented in phenomenology. The unconscious in phenomenology can, like the Freudian preconscious, be recalled relatively easily because there is no factor of repression involved, but when one considers the Freudian unconscious, filled with inarticulable, repressed thoughts only discoverable through analysis, then the difference becomes more apparent. Ricoeur writes, “it is indeed another text that psychoanalysis deciphers, beneath the text of consciousness. Phenomenology shows that it is another text, but not that this text is other.”\(^{183}\) The bar of repression separating the conscious from the unconscious is not accounted for in phenomenology. Through phenomenology, we may understand that “the lived meaning of behavior extends beyond its representation in conscious awareness,” but an additional technique is required to “understand the remoteness and the division at the basis of the distortion and substitution that make the text of consciousness unrecognizable.”\(^{184}\) The dissimulation that occurs as an operation of the unconscious is not explained in phenomenology. It is, however, explained by Freud through the use of “energy metaphors [that] replace the inadequate language of intention and meaning.”\(^{185}\) The cathexis of representations coordinates desire and language in

\(^{182}\) Pre-consciousness in Freud refers to thoughts that are unconscious, but not repressed, and as such, are more easily recalled. See Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 103.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 392.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 393.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 393-4.
such a way that we may speak of drives. Thus, psychoanalysis is a hermeneutics that is unique in its ability to account for the energetics of the unconscious, and so we may see this as an important contribution of psychoanalytic technique to hermeneutics.

Third, the importance of linguistics is greater in psychoanalysis, especially since Lacan declared that the unconscious is structured like a language. Ricoeur insists that if this is true, then "the world ‘like’ must receive no less emphasis than the world ‘language.’”

Rather than Lacan’s transposition of linguistic principles into the realm of language, Ricoeur characterizes the workings of the unconscious as "paralinguistic distortions" involving the infra- and supralinguistic. He writes,

> On the one hand, the dream mechanism borders on the supralinguistic when it mobilizes stereotyped symbols parallel to those ethnology finds in the great unities of meaning known as fables, legends, myths. […] On the other hand, displacement and condensation belong to the infralinguistic order, in the sense that what they achieve is less a distinct relating than a confusion of relations.

The unconscious, then, does not deal exclusively with natural language proper, but also jumbles culturally embedded symbols (the supralinguistic) and lower level linguistic operations (the infralinguistic) together to create a paralinguistic distortion. Although he appears to believe himself to be engaging critically with Lacan, I believe that Ricoeur’s reassessment of the nature of language vis-à-vis the unconscious is very consistent with Lacan’s own presentation. Perhaps Ricoeur, like many others, has interpreted Lacan’s dictum too literally, as it seems clear that Lacan has always intended that language serve as a metaphor for the mechanism of the unconscious. In fact, Lacan would later abandon this method in favor of topological models (e.g., the Borromean knot) that provided a more abstract, less culturally contingent metaphor.

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186 Ibid., 404.

187 Ibid., 404-5.
Ultimately, Ricoeur seems to appreciate the benefits of the linguistic model offered by psychoanalysis so long as one can make a meaningful distinction between the natural language used in analysis and the paralinguistic distortions of the unconscious.

Fourth, the topic of intersubjectivity is common to both phenomenology and psychoanalysis albeit with an important exception: phenomenology involves the reflection of an individual, while psychoanalysis involves the technique of analysis—a dialogic encounter that “brings to light, in a special context of disengagement, isolation, and derealization, the demands in which desire ultimately consists.” The analyst must guide the analysand through the sequence of resistance, transference, and repetition; it is not a process that one can perform independently. Freud writes, “transference is itself only a piece of repetition, and…repetition is a transference of the forgotten past not only onto the doctor but also onto all the other aspects of the current situation. [...] The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering.” In sum, transference involves a revival of all manner of psychological experiences as they become applied to the analyst in the present. The analyst must exploit these transferred emotions without satisfying them, and thus the economy of desire is central to the practice of psychoanalysis, but not phenomenology.

Ultimately, Ricoeur concludes, “psychoanalysis is a unique and irreducible form of praxis” because it is able to address something within ourselves that is not quite attainable through conscious phenomenological reflection. To summarize the above differences, we find that psychoanalysis offers some meaningful extensions to phenomenologically grounded

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188 Ibid., 406.
190 Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy, 418.
hermeneutics through its treatment of the unconscious as a thing that exceeds our powers of conscious reflection, namely in the cathexis of experience and the economy of desire. Both Ricoeur and Lacan agree that language provides a point of entry to the analysis of the unconscious, even if the wording of their concepts differ slightly. However, Ricoeur insists that consciousness is not merely a slave to the unconscious and is unwilling to accept the absolute necessity of an analyst in uncovering the workings of the unconscious.

5.2 Two Hermeneutics

Ricoeur offers a re-interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* as a way of distinguishing between what he sees as two types of hermeneutics: “one is orientated toward the resurgence of archaic symbols and the other toward the emergence of new symbols and ascending figures.”

Freud famously rejected the traditional interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* that dealt with the confrontation of fate and autonomy because where the ancient Greeks cosmology involved mythical gods who intervened in human affairs, contemporary audiences held no such beliefs. Ergo, he reasoned, we must attribute the sustained affective power of the tragedy to something else. Freud writes, “[King Oedipus’s] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.”

For Freud, the tragedy is absolutely transcendent and thus it applies

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to and speaks to everyone irrespective of culture or familial relations. The tragedy grips us because we continue to identify with it because it speaks to our own experience of maturation.

Ricoeur affirms that Freud’s interpretation (if not the scope of his conclusion) is “possible, illuminating, and necessary,” but he also offers a second interpretation that is, in a sense, more complementary than contrary. Because the “first drama” of incest and patricide has already occurred before the beginning of Sophocles’s tragedy, Ricoeur highlights a “second drama” that deals with truth and self-consciousness. He writes,

Thus, Oedipus enters into a second guilt, an adult guilt expressed in the hero’s arrogance and anger. At the beginning of the play Oedipus calls down curses upon the unknown person responsible for the plague, but he excludes the possibility that that person might in fact be himself. […] Oedipus must be broken in his pride through suffering; this presumption is no longer the culpable desire of the child, but the pride of the king; the tragedy is not the tragedy of Oedipus the child, but of Oedipus Rex.

Ricoeur concludes that the downfall of Oedipus was not due to patricide and incest—crimes he committed in ignorance, thereby precluding his own ethical responsibility—but due to his presumption as king that he is not affected by the truth. The arrogance of his lack of self-consciousness brings about his guilt.

Freud’s psychoanalytic reading is concerned with the first drama—the story of Oedipus prior to the action of the play—while Ricoeur is concerned with the second drama—the events that constitute the action of the play. Freud’s reading looks to the past while Ricoeur’s reading looks to the present, but neither is simply correct. Ricoeur’s bivalent conception of symbols is

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194 Ricoeur, “Consciousness and the Unconscious,” 115.

195 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 516.

instructive in this regard because it mirrors the duality of hermeneutic methods. He writes, “on the one hand, [a symbol] is a repetition (in all the temporal and atemporal meanings of this term) of our childhood. On the other, it explores our adult life.” Ricoeur describes enculturation as an epigenetic process where symbols carry traces of originary meaning while simultaneously collecting new meanings that modify themselves. So too in hermeneutics do we find value in looking back and looking forward.

The dialectic of these two hermeneutics is not a simple opposition, one oriented toward the darkness of the unconscious and the other oriented toward the light of consciousness, but neither is it a simple complement. “We cannot,” Ricoeur writes, “simply add up Hegel and Freud and give to each a half of man. Just as we must say that everything about man is equally physiological and sociological, so we must also say that the two readings in question cover exactly the same field.” We must understand the conflict of interpretations dialectically rather than eclectically, and as proof of this, Ricoeur argues that everything that can be said about one hermeneutic can also be said about the other. “Do not both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and analytical anamnesis finish with a return to the immediate? Conversely, is not psychoanalysis’ regression to the archaic a new march to the future? Is not the therapeutic situation in itself a prophecy of freedom?” The hermeneutical methods are coextensive and we must consider both of them as we move toward a dialectical synthesis of interpretation.

### 6.0 Toward a Hermeneutics of Radical Music and Expressive Noise

My final task in this chapter is to bring the above together so as to explain my own theory of hermeneutics that is designed to be especially useful for radical music and expressive noise.

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There are three levels at work in my hermeneutic theory moving from general to specific: On the first level we have Ricoeur’s general theory of interpretation, which is the foundation that both allows the interplay of the other levels and serves as the conceptual basis for the nature of interpretation; on the second level we have a dialectical synthesis of Ricoeur’s unique style of ontological hermeneutics and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory; on the third level, we find the ad hoc use of concepts selected to address the exigencies of a specific work. This may include anything from formal analysis to cultural studies to historiography to arcane occult philosophies, all selected according to the needs of a given work. All of the above comes together under the umbrella of Ricoeur’s larger interpretation theory.

The first level is the fundamental category that makes the subsequent levels possible, and as such, its principles rarely enter the discussion of specific works. This is the level of foundational hermeneutical and epistemological assumptions—the level where concepts like work, discourse, and author are grounded. The second level is the active conceptual foundation of a specific interpretation. Here we find the use of ontological hermeneutics and psychoanalysis as they pertain specifically to the work at hand. At this level we might consider, say, the work of Merzbow examining his sonically transgressive work while looking at the ramifications on the conscious and unconscious of the listening subject. What can we hear in Merzbow? How does it make us feel? Can conscious reflection provide answers for these feelings, or does the work reach us more in the unconscious? How can conscious reflection and unconscious analysis be combined to lead toward a fuller understanding and appreciation of the work?

The third level is the metastructural category that is charged with two tasks: the exploration of the various features of the specific work and an investigation into the composer and his or her conceptual work. Ricoeur greatly diminishes the importance of the author and his
or her socio-historical context in the creation and designation of meaning, and although I find his reasoning to be cogent, one cannot ignore the continued importance of the author who continues to live on—in some capacity—almost five decades after the Barthes declared the author dead. Because Western culture continues to find Romantic idea of the author so compelling, there is surely something to be gained from considering the author and his or her mentalities, at least to a certain degree, in the construction of a holistic interpretation. When contemplating radical music and expressive noise, it is all the more important to consider the composer because if he or she has rebelled from convention enough to warrant the title of radical composer, he or she probably has a very idiosyncratic concept of music, which will feed an interpretation in an important manner.

This is not to say that the radical composer has any more dominion over the meaning of the work, for the aforementioned limits on authorial control hold true. One may be fascinated with the quirky biographical details of a composer while finding a greatly divergent meaning due to any number of factors not limited to historiographical errors. Rather, the composer continues to be important because he or she enters the work through implication. In the case of a composer like Zorn, Galás, or Merzbow, their conceptions of the nature of music and the role of noise and transgression are so unique and powerful that the concepts themselves permeate the work, thereby implicating the author as enunciating subject in each sonic utterance. To a certain extent, every work created by Merzbow is *about* Merzbow’s concept of music and sound. Thus, the tasks of the third level involve both the use of concepts (e.g., social theory, cultural studies, area studies, feminism, literary theory, postmodernism) to interpret the features of the work and an engagement with the composer that attempts to understand his or her context while also trying to
understand how he or she conceives of fundamental concepts like music, sound, performance, and authorship.

Diamanda Galás’s *Wild Women with Steak Knives*, for example, is wildly heterogeneous and instigates discussions of biography, post-structuralist feminism, gender studies, Greek lament traditions, and conceptions of death. Perhaps these categories are less heterogeneous than they may seem, for in the case of Galás, we find that in certain Greek traditions death is considered feminine. Exploring this conceptual diffraction may help us to understand what archaic ideas on death, femininity, and music mean for a Greek-American artist in the late twentieth-century postmodern era. A successful interpretation of a work, then, will involve a coherent synthesis of its conceptual strands against the framework of the larger hermeneutic theory. This is what I call a thick interpretation.

A thick interpretation aims to satisfy the basic criteria of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic: first, a thick interpretation must attempt to cover the greatest number of the work’s particulars, including relevant connotations, connections, and derivations; and second, a thick interpretation must suggest the best possible synthesis of the work’s features under consideration, along with any possible contextual issues. The musical work and its contextual cluster of concepts provide clues that feed my interpretation, which attempts to provide a broad understanding of the work through the carefully woven convergence of musical and extra-musical features. I do not present a thick interpretation in hopes of offering an ironclad, unassailable interpretation, but I do hope to open the world of the work up to my reader so that he or she may experience this illumination, not only through my perspective, but through the illumination inherent in the metaphors I create in service of the work.
Although the concept of a think interpretation can be applied broadly to any work, my contention is that it is particularly useful when tackling a musical work that abandons musical convention because, in lieu of customary interpretive techniques, one must spare no effort in following the limited amount of interpretive clues suggested by the work. In theory, one could analyze the score of a Haydn symphony, or one could conduct a literary analysis of the text of a Schubert lied, and in each case, one could construct an idea of the meaning of the work. Perhaps these methodologies would not lead to a comprehensive understanding of the work, but when one considers the number of scholars who find the results of score or literary analysis to be an entirely sufficient mode of musical understanding, it is clear that there is no single-methodological approach that contributes toward an understanding of a work of radical music in the same way and to the same extent. When faced with the hermeneutic challenges of radical music and expressive noise, it becomes crucial to examine every angle simply because conventional musical concepts are so insufficient in these cases.

Radical music and expressive noise are both categories that are radically other; they speak to the fringes of experience and existence. In many cases a discussion of the mimetic power of music (i.e., its ability to redescribe reality in the form of a phenomenological mood) is obviated because there are other features that are either more conventional (e.g., form, harmony) or more directly referential (e.g., programs, lyrics) that one may cover with the satisfaction of having explained enough of the elements to be considered thorough; however, in the case of radical music and expressive noise, the lack of conventional features makes the affective power all the more important. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) sociopolitical grounding of radical music and expressive noise provides a few anchoring points for contextual analysis, but the power of its transgression exceeds an assessment of its mere difference.
As I have shown in section 3.2, Ricoeur’s ontological hermeneutics work well with musical works, and in section 4.1.4 I have argued that the addition of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is advantageous when confronting radical music and expressive noise. The role of psychoanalysis requires the most explanation, and although it will become clearer in the following chapters, I will offer a few remarks at this time. As I see it, psychoanalysis can contribute in two main areas: at the broad level of cultural analysis and at the specific level of the work. Both are potentially useful, but in the present study, I will focus primarily on the latter because, far from making sweeping claims about music and society at large, I am content to tackle the interpretation of specific musical works as a first step toward the introduction of Lacanian theory into the discourse of musicology.

In the case of the cultural analysis, we may follow the model initiated by Freud and exemplified in his extrapolation of the Oedipus myth to Western culture, as well the more contemporary applications from scholars such as Slavoj Žižek. In the case of the specific level of the work, we have two options: the workings of the Lacanian psyche can serve as an extended metaphor for the work, but it can also be applied literally to the subjective experience of listening. Both uses speak to the affective dimension of musical experience and the meaning created therein. For example, let us consider the Lacanian Real. The Real is a powerful metaphor for that which exceeds one’s capacity for representation and understanding (as we find in radical music and expressive noise), and it is also a way of describing the actual experience of listening, especially with respect to expressive noise, a sonic phenomenon that traumatically exceeds one’s capacity for representation and understanding in a very literal manner. My approach to musical hermeneutics may involve, at times, both literal and the figurative applications of Lacanian concepts depending upon the nature of the work at hand. This should not, however, imply that
every listener’s reaction would be exactly the same. As stated above, the diverse and unique body of experiences that each listener brings to the work will necessarily impact the psychical effects of the work.

The reason behind the comparative readings of Ricoeur and Freud in section 5.0 was to demonstrate not only the ability of Ricoeur and Lacan to work in concert, but to show, as Ricoeur argues, that psychoanalysis is a hermeneutics and that the conflict of interpretations—the archaic and the present, the conscious and the unconscious, the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological—is actually a productive, dialectical collision of coextensive interpretations. Few would be willing to surrender the efficacy of volition that strict Lacanianism appears to require, but if we counterbalance the power of the unconscious with the power of conscious reflection, then we arrive at a far more tenable hermeneutic.

Ultimately, the hermeneutic theory outlined above is of little consequence if it does not serve the music. It is not my goal to promote the use of Ricoeur and Lacan in the musicological discourse beyond the level that they offer helpful concepts for the interpretation of musical works. Although I believe my thick interpretation hermeneutic is potentially useful for a great variety of musical practices, I will not argue that position here. I simply propose the thick interpretation hermeneutic as a means toward a fuller understanding and appreciation of a vital and important musical practice that is underserved through existing hermeneutic approaches. As I continue with cases studies focusing on John Zorn, Diamanda Galás, and Merzbow, I hope that the effectiveness of my method will become apparent.
Chapter 2 – Towards a Theory of Radical Music and Expressive Noise

1.0 Introduction

Radical music tends to provoke a range of strong emotions, from shock to extreme consternation to utter confusion. Whatever the reaction, one can assume that neutrality or passivity is not one of them. Often times, the listener instinctively reaches for the volume knob because, irrespective of the actual amplitude level, the sonic shock is so far beyond one’s musical experience that the aural discomfort is incorrectly attributed to excessive loudness. The inevitable question follows: what is this? Previously, one had two basic options when attempting to answer the disquieted listener: either surrender any hope of terminological specificity and refer to the music as “experimental,” or launch into a lengthy explanation of whatever neologistic stylistic label the composer had deemed appropriate for his or her music. In this chapter I propose two terms around which we may build a general discourse of extreme and transgressive artistic sonic expressions: radical music and expressive noise.

The goals, then, of this chapter are fourfold: 1) to present a selection of important stylistic moments in the history of radical music; 2) to explain the concepts of radical music and expressive noise; 3) to situate them within the musicological discourse, as well as within discourses of art, sound, and media studies; and 4) to reflect on the relationship of music to sound—and sound art—on a conceptual level. In the course of my explanation of radical music, I will provide a brief survey of some important moments in the history of music that helped make radical music possible, and this will lead to a preliminary set of commonalities, including philosophical and aesthetic goals, as well as musical features. My explanation of expressive noise will focus more on the concept of noise as I survey what the idea of noise has represented to music and sound scholars in the twentieth century. In the final section, I will confront the
challenges to the concept of music issued by art, sound, and media theorists, especially as they pertain to the idea of sound art.

2.0 Radical Music

If radicalism is the quality of extreme deviance from convention, then we must first outline the principles of said convention. My assumptions cover three categories: material, concept, and development. The materiality of conventional music consists of the standard components of music including rhythm, pitch, meter, texture, melody, harmony, and form. Any given musical expression is likely to have many or all of these components. The concepts of conventional music are diverse, but have included such notions as music as fine art, entertainment, and linguistically transcendent expression. Conceptions of music have varied from era to era, and within different types of musical practices, but when we look at pre-twentieth-century Western musical practices, it appears that the range of concepts are different ways of describing something that has remained relatively stable. Finally, the development of music involves a series of changes within ongoing streams of musical practice. The extent to which this change is an evolution (as opposed to simple difference) is unclear, but suffice it to say that within the temporal progression of a given musical language, whether vernacular or high art, there is at least a short-term awareness of what has come before and a desire to forge a new path for oneself, which typically involves building upon the work previously done in a way that avoids drastic paradigm shifts in favor of incremental modifications.

Radical music, then, involves any intentional, aesthetic, aural expression that exhibits a particularly transgressive character with regard to both musical convention and many musical traditions. There are degrees of transgression, as not all radical music will eschew every single

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200 For the purposes of this study, I am limiting my discussion to Western music and, to an extent, the greater cosmopolitan practices that are largely derived from Western musical traditions.
one of the constitutive material or conceptual components of music. Looking briefly to my case studies, we find a wide range: John Zorn’s *Astronome* has form, meter, rhythm, and texture, but few discernible pitches,\(^2\) little that we could safely call melody, and very little harmony of which to speak; Diamanda Galás’s *Wild Women with Steak Knives* has virtually no intentional rhythmic content, no meter, no systematic pitch relationships, and only the loosest of formal organization; and Merzbow’s work—especially *Pulse Demon*—uses almost none of the musical components listed above, approaching the theoretical opposite of music—pure, formless timbre.

Radical music crosses a threshold where the assumption that a culturally aware listener could necessarily identify the acoustical information as music is thrown into question. It crosses a threshold where traditional analytic and hermeneutic methodologies cease to yield material or cogent interpretations of meaning immanent to the music because the music itself defies the terminology all the way down to the atomic level of pitch. In short, throws the concept of music into an ontological crisis. In this place where our vast heritage of Western analytical techniques cannot tell us anything substantive, where historically based assumptions are discarded, where cultural associations are invalidated, one finds radical music.

I have chosen to call this music “radical” instead of experimental or avant-garde for semantic and historiographical reasons. Looking first to semantics, the term “experimental” implies that the composer was simply testing out a compositional idea with the resulting work amounting to a mere outcome, rather than a carefully crafted, finished artistic statement. Perhaps this label is appropriate in a few instances—Xenakis’s most exploratory works like *Achorripsis*

\(^2\) The bass guitar is ostensibly playing specific pitches, but due to heavy distortion, the pitch content becomes generalized to the point that we can only pick out contours.
(1956-7) come to mind—but for the vast majority of music that has been labeled “experimental,” the word is inappropriate. Varèse, for example, denies that what he creates is experimental music: “I offer a ‘finished product:’ it is for the audience…to make the experiment of confronting a new work.”

The “avant” in avant-garde implies a trajectory of musical progression wherein what is currently before will ostensibly become during and then after, as if music as a whole will catch up to these culturally deviant expressions, and then move beyond them—a view which is not supported by twentieth-century musical history where the avant-garde remains perpetually “ahead” of the mainstream, even decades later. Are Babbitt or Stockhausen’s serialist feats any less alienating to general listeners today than they were at the time of their conception? David Nicholls argues that there are varying degrees of this phenomenon, citing Steve Reich and Philip Glass, who both began their careers as avant-gardists before becoming establishment figures of musical postmodernism with a large non-specialist following. This use of the term “avant-garde” makes logical sense, but it is questionable that Reich and Glass would have ever fit the criteria of radicalism as outlined above. Their musical expression may have arrived before the general listening public was ready to make sense of it, but their reintroduction of conventional triads alone precludes them from being considered substantively radical. One could also argue that some of the techniques of high modernism, for example, have found their way into the

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202 In *Achorripsis*, Xenakis sets about testing his thesis of minimum constraints. In this case, he actually did conduct an experiment based on ideas of the “fundamental phases of a musical work.” He set out to determine the absolute minimum of musical features required to constitute a musical event, and *Achorripsis* was the result. Iannis Xenakis, “Free Stochastic Music,” in *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Music* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 1992), 22.


public consciousness, particularly in film music, but there is surely a sizable difference between
the appreciation of Penderecki’s “sonority pieces” as underscoring for an ax-wielding madman in
Stanley Kubrick’s film, *The Shining* (1980), and widespread acceptance of the same work qua
concert music.

Both terms present a historiographical problem as well, insofar as they have already been
used in the musicological literature to refer to specific movements in twentieth-century
Modernism. The terms typically mark a discursive divide between European avant-gardists who
push boundaries while remaining committed to their inherited tradition of art music excellence
and American experimentalists who reject the European style in favor of novel and individualist
musical inventions. The extent to which this contradistinction reflects much beyond the
historian’s framing is difficult to discern—as we will see in section 2.1.3—but the idea still
obtains. The experimental/avant-garde divide will become clearer during the following historical
discussion, but for now it is sufficient to understand that these are both loaded terms already at
work in the discourse on musical modernism.

2.1.0 Key Moments in the Development of Radical Music: A Historiographical Problem

Let us consider the historical aspects of radical music: where did the practice originate,
what are some lines of influence, what ideas have made it possible, and when can we speak of its
inception, if indeed there is one? Radicalism itself is a historically transcendent concept and
there are plenty of examples within music to which one could point. Carlo Gesualdo’s madrigals,
for instance, contained a degree of chromaticism that would remain unmatched for at least two
hundred years. Surely one could refer to him as experimental, avant-garde, or radical. As I define
radical music, however, it is a decidedly twentieth- and twenty-first-century practice and is
inextricable from the disintegration of the Enlightenment project at the hands of postmodern
incredulity. Perhaps there is a limited value in applying the term anachronistically to the few composers that worked against Enlightenment ideology; however, this is a difficult task considering the way in which non-canonic composers had been jettisoned by the creation of history until the dawn of new musicology. There may have been numerous radical composers working against the mainstream of music, but through historiographical filtration as well as the inability to record or somehow preserve the work of these hypothetical composers, it would be nearly impossible to find evidence of their existence, much less their music. Although there are numerous cases in Western musical history where a composer was “ahead” of his or her time, these composers are better understood as innovators who pushed music in new directions that would eventually influence other composers. In contradistinction, radical composers tend to transgress cultural norms so extensively that they do not lead to widespread cultural shifts. When these cultural transgressions do not fit within the narrative of stylistic development that had been a central component of many musical histories, they are discarded as aberrations for the sake of historical coherence. Ultimately, perhaps it is most useful to say that the intrinsic element of radicalism is historically transcendent, but because the music that is the topic of this dissertation is so bound to the postmodern paradigm shift, “radical music” is most clearly defined when it is associated with late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century composers.

Given the inherent heterogeneity of the composer that I am calling radical, a conventional historical-aesthetic trajectory would appear to be impossible to construct. On the one hand, a significant part of the compositional mentality of a radical composer involves a rejecting of tradition; on the other hand, however, there are numerous precedents for radical music in the twentieth century, and one can actually trace some lines of influence for composers such as Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow. Even if their aesthetic lineage does not share the developmental coherency
of, say, the Germanic art music tradition stretching from Bach to Schoenberg—especially insofar as the composers themselves intentionally sought to align themselves with the tradition, at least after Beethoven—perhaps one could consider radical composers as belonging to a tradition of transgression—a tradition of aesthetic deviance that rejects the musical status quo in a rigorous and substantive manner.

Although it is not my intention to present an exhaustive history of radical music at this time, it is helpful to survey a selection of important historical moments so that we may understand some of the various threads of the past that have contributed to the development of radical music. The construction of a linear narrative made more sense for a time when composers were not as historically conscious as they are today. Prior to the Romantic period, composers were most likely to know the music that directly preceeded them, which is a very different way to experience the musical past. Today, when one considers the immediate ease of listening to anything from Chopin to Nine Inch Nails to field recordings of Balinese gamelan music—all from the comfort of one’s personal digital music collection—questions of traceable, singular influence become increasingly irrelevant. Zorn is the quintessential example here, for an attempt to account for each of his lines of influence would result in an unintelligibly complex and comprehensive history of Western and non-Western music.

2.1.1 Key Moments in the Development of Radical Music: A Brief History

My present task is to select a few crucial moments in the development of aesthetic mentalities that made radical music possible. These are not so much historical epochs as they are situations that expanded conventional conceptions of music and art. There are three primary moments: First are the early twentieth-century modernist movements in Europe, especially including Futurism (ca. 1909-1916) and Dadaism (ca. 1916-1924); second are the two main
movements in musical modernism including the European avant-garde and the American experimental tradition (ca. 1920-1970); and third is the rise of electronic music including *musique concrète, elektronische musik*, and the sundry technological innovations that have ramifications beyond electronic music itself (ca. 1949-). Undoubtedly, one could select any number of musical, aesthetic, and philosophical streams that helped create a space for radical music to develop, and I offer these only as a preliminary survey. Following these three moments, I will also introduce some transitional figures and practices that have roots in musical modernism, but who also bridge the gap between modernism and postmodernism in a philosophical and aesthetic sense.

2.1.2 Early Twentieth-Century Modernist Movements

The first of our moments is found at the turn of the twentieth century with the movements that Andreas Huyssen describes as the historical avant-garde.\(^{205}\) This includes Expressionism, Dadaism, Futurism, and Constructivism, although for the present discussion, Dadaism and Futurism are the most centrally important. Although these movements were not explicitly concerned with music, per se, they were important for their rebellion against the aesthetic standard of late Romanticism. In place of transcendent works by autonomous, genius artists, these movements had a decidedly destructive impulse that sought to defile art through the introduction of the popular, the prosaic, the absurd, and generally through any means capable of transgressing convention.\(^{206}\) *L’art pour l’art* was rejected in favor of a politically conscious art


made to attack the dominant institutions of taste and morality. Art became less concerned with pleasing the sensorium with beauty and more concerned with stimulating the mind through conceptual means. Any preoccupation with decoration, ornamentation, or beauty was promptly discarded as trivial, bourgeois decadence.  

Looking first to Futurism, there are two particularly pertinent manifestos, one by founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and the other by Luigi Russolo, who was the most explicitly musical of the group. Marinetti’s Manifesto of Futurism (1909) exhibits a straightforwardly, aggressively transgressive spirit. Marinetti provides eleven incendiary points, five of which include:

1. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.
2. Courage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry.
7. Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man.
9. We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.
10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.

The hawkish, misogynist, chauvinist rhetoric of the Futurists has not persisted, but the vigorously transgressive spirit lives on in radical music. The important difference is that rather than “[setting] fire to the library shelves” and “[turning] aside the canals to flood to museums,” radical music does seek to destroy the artistic past. Rather, it seeks to destroy the hierarchies

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209 Ibid., 188.
created by an overvaluation of the artistic past that leads to aesthetic prescription. Instead of negating the past, radical music negates the notion that the classic works of venerated masters are intrinsically superior.

If manifestos like Marinetti’s were important to future of transgressive art in general, Luigi Russolo’s seminal manifesto, *The Art of Noises* (1913), was of particular importance for multiple streams of unconventional music. John Cage’s *Credo: The Future of Music* (1937)—itself an important manifesto for American experimental music—is partially derived from Russolo’s manifesto, the idea of an “art of noises” would be inspiring to the pioneers of electronic music in the 1950s, and certain early industrial music bands would also cite Russolo as an influence. Beyond the direct influence of Russolo’s manifesto on radical musicians (especially Merzbow and other composers working with “noise”), *The Art of Noises* affected so many of the musical streams that would make radical music possible by the latter part of the twentieth-century.

As for the manifesto itself, *The Art of Noises*, was a clarion call to look beyond the conventions of melody, harmony, and traditional instruments, and it continues to resound today, especially insofar as it is mentioned in virtually every book on sound art. As Cage would echo two decades later, Russolo writes, “every manifestation of life is accompanied by noise. Noise is thus familiar to our ear and has the power of immediately recalling life itself. […] By selecting, coordinating, and controlling all the noises, we will enrich mankind with a new and unsuspected

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210 Nicholls outlines some of the similarities in both concepts and typographical presentation. In a number of cases, Cage’s writing is a virtual paraphrase of Russolo. This is, however, no great secret, as Cage lists *The Art of Noises* amongst the ten books most influential on his thought. Nicholls, *American Experimental Music*, 190; John Cage, “List No. 2,” in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), 138.

pleasure of the sense.” To a certain extent, Russolo’s proposal has traces of convention. He envisioned an “orchestra” of noise-generating machines that would realize compositions created according to a new language of “noises” rather than harmony. The latter point is, perhaps, the most important because it signals a shift towards the centrality of timbre instead of the traditional central concern of intervallic relationships. Russolo stops short of Cage’s great innovation—the use of natural, non-aestheticized sound within the framework of an aesthetic expression—but his call to consider a music centered on timbre rather than harmony was of the utmost importance.

In contrast to the violent, fascistic rhetoric of the Futurists, Dada was marked by a desire of childlike simplicity—a desire to know nothing. As Francis Picabia put it in his *Dada Manifesto* (1920), “Dada itself wants nothing, nothing, nothing, it’s doing something so that the public can say: ‘We understand nothing, nothing, nothing.’ The Dadaists are nothing, nothing, nothing—certainly they will come to nothing, nothing, nothing.” Rather than the aggressive proclamations of the Futurists, the Dadaists wished to surrender control and logical sense to chance. Robert Hughes describes these early avant-garde movements as buying into the “central myth…that by changing the order of language, art could reform the order of experience and so alter the conditions of social life”—a myth that would disintegrate with the advent of World War II. The Dada solution was to forsake all knowledge in favor of the nonsense of chance. As Tristan Tzara asserted, “logic is a complication. Logic is always wrong. It draws the threads of notions, words, in their formal exterior, toward illusory ends and centers. Its chains kill, it is an

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enormous centipede stifling independence." Having recently emerged from the trauma of World War I, the ideal of logic and sense had, for the Dadaists, clearly failed humanity. It was time for a new beginning and that beginning was Dada.

The Zurich-based Dada practitioners like Hugo Ball and Jean Arp are notable for their rejection of tradition, but the Dada movement was not neatly contained within Switzerland and, in fact, two of the most interesting Dadaists—Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp—were actually peripheral figures with divergent aims driving their art. With Schwitters and Duchamp, there was much less rhetoric concerning the burning of libraries and museums, and much more emphasis on the elevation of everyday objects to the level of art.

Initially, Schwitters collected various scraps of waste paper—advertisements, documents, whatever he might find—and created collage works that he referred to as “Merz” paintings. Soon, however, he began work on his masterpiece, the Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery (1923), which was a house in Hanover that became a massive installation in a perpetual state of development. As Schwitters would walk around the city, he would find various discarded junk items, return home with them, and work them into the Merzbau. Much like Duchamp’s more widely known “readymades,” Schwitters’ work is remarkable for “contaminating” the realms of high art with everyday objects. Where art had been previously governed by aesthetics, Schwitters

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216 Incidentally, we see this same phenomenon happen in the post-1945 avant-garde in Europe where the atrocities of war spur drastic aesthetic and conceptual action.


218 The most thorough documentation and analysis of Schwitters’ Merzbau can be found in Elizabeth Burns Garnard, Kurt Schwitters Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).
and Duchamp pushed art into the realm of the concept. Each in their own way, they forced the spectators to question the very nature of art and artistic presentation.

Cage would go on to explore these same ideas in the 1950s, this time pertaining to sound.\textsuperscript{219} Rather than defacing the \textit{Mona Lisa}, however, he would attest to the beauty of non-musical sound presented within a musical context both through his writings and through certain works like \textit{4’33’’} and \textit{0’00’’}.\textsuperscript{220} Although I will discuss the significance of the introduction of non-aestheticized sound a bit later, we may now appreciate the visual precedent of Cage’s sonic innovation.

To summarize the elements of the historical avant-garde that are most important to radical music, we must include the willingness to adulterate fine art with everyday objects—junk from the streets, sounds from the city—along with a generally apostatical attitude towards artistic traditions amongst the most important. Russolo’s proposition of introducing non-instrumental sound into the concert hall, as well as his avowal of the primacy of timbre over harmony, would go on to influence Cage and his exponents, the pioneers of electronic music, and radical composers (both directly and indirectly). Schwitters’ and Duchamp’s use of found objects would set the precedent for the use of non-aestheticized sound within a musical context, and Duchamp’s turn toward the conceptual would be of particular importance for the American experimentalists as well as for radical composers directly.\textsuperscript{221}

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The key difference between these movements and radical music is that the past no longer needed to be destroyed. The past, like everything else, is available to be used and abused according to whatever means are desired. With respect to Western music’s most cherished institution—the European classical tradition—it was not necessary to demolish the concert hall, burn the scores, and murder the conductors. Instead, the tradition was subverted and put on equal footing with every other class of music.

2.1.3 Musical Modernism

Musical modernism, as a stylistic period and movement label, refers to one of the most heterogeneous movements in the conventional history of Western music. Modernism in music is not so much ill defined, as it is impossible to define in the same manner as other stylistic periods and movements because of the importance that its practitioners attribute to thoroughgoing originality. Much like the case of radical music, we can point toward some important figures and some important moments, but there is no pervasive aesthetic, and in fact, one of the tenets of modernism is the value of abandoning a pervasive aesthetic. From these comments alone, one can already see the similarities between musical modernism and the practice that I am calling “radical music.” The modernist situation is further exacerbated by a discursive divide between European modernists (often referred to as “avant-garde”) and American modernists (often referred to as “experimental”). In this section, I will comment on some of the general mentalities and stylistic trends present in modernist musical practice across both continents, and I will present a survey of the debate between American and European modernist practices.

Just as the period after World War I had provoked a thorough reconsideration of the role of art in life for the Dadaists and Futurists, the period following World War II provoked another response in musical practice. The difference here is that while World War I ravaged Europe, it
did not match the horror of the Holocaust or the existential dread that accompanied the atomic age. Conventional conceptions of art seemed altogether trivial and even delusional. Adorno’s familiar maxim, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” neatly sums up the post-1945 sentiments. Some composers like Ernst Krenek would even attempt to remove all human agency from their music in hopes that the rigorous objectivity of serialism (objective in the sense that correct and incorrect notes could be determined by reference to the a priori compositional scheme) would allow music to be composed in a manner untainted by human fallibility.

Even if many composers were less pessimistic about the human element of music than Krenek, many were still operating in the Adornian paradigm of music as an autonomous, uncontaminated essence that is, by virtue of this quality, able to critique the society that it alienates itself from, thereby affecting progressive social change. These ideas, now too easily dismissed as “elitist,” obtained for numerous strains of modernist music—particularly those styles derived from Webernian serialism including the work of Pierre Boulez and the Darmstadt school in Europe and Milton Babbitt in the United States—until the dawn of postmodernism.

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223 Krenek writes, “Actually the composer has come to distrust his inspiration because it is not really as innocent as it was supposed to be, but rather conditioned by a tremendous body of recollection, tradition, training, and experience. In order to avoid the dictations of such ghosts, he prefers to set up an impersonal mechanism which will furnish, according to premeditated patterns, unpredictable situations.” In this extreme case, it appears that, when read in the context of postwar disillusionment, Krenek is advocating a sort of agentless composition on the grounds that humanity is fallible and cannot be trusted with the whimsy of chance qua the traditional idea of inspiration. Ernst Krenet, “Extents and Limits of Serial Techniques,” in Problems of Modern Music: The Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: Norton, 1960), 90.

224 Adorno writes, “[this] type of music is that which, without consciousness of its social location or out of indifference toward it, presents and crystallizes its problems and the solutions thereto in a merely immanent manner. […] It ‘represents,’ to be sure, not a pre-established harmony, but certainly an historically produced dissonance, namely, social antinomies. This…type, as ‘modern’ music is the only music which offers a serious shock to the listener, is represented essentially by Arnold Schoenberg and his school.” Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music,” trans. Wes Blomster, revised by Richard Leppert in Essays on Music, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 396.
The importance of social and political change through music only seemed to intensify, as the full magnitude of the atrocities of World War II became known. It should be noted, however, that a bit of equivocation may be in order, insofar as it is difficult to speculate on the degree to which the innovatory attitude toward aesthetics was driven by the sociopolitical issues versus the natural inclination to forage one’s own artistic path amplified by the newfound twentieth-century freedom to offer divergent aesthetic expressions. Certainly existential anxiety played a role in post-1945 modernist aesthetics, but it is unlikely that it accounts for the entirety of the aesthetic innovations in this period. Some composers like Stockhausen thought of themselves as dutifully pushing their inherited musical tradition into new realms, while others like Iannis Xenakis considered a fundamental break from tradition as the best way forward. Despite the war, the perennial desire to move art into new realms was present.

Discussions of modernism in music use the terms “experimental” and “avant-garde” in two ways: the first has to do with the straightforward dictionary definitions, but the second has to do with the discursive division mentioned above. In this second usage, experimentalism and avant-gardism present a number of dichotomies: Experimentalists are American (or figures like Varèse who were most active in the United States) while avant-gardist composers are European; experimentalists are not affiliated with institutions while avant-gardists receive plentiful institutional support; experimentalists reject their musical inheritance while avant-gardists accept its fundamental premises and attempt to further the surface level musical language, above all,

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225 Stockhausen has said that, “the contemporary composer is responsible above all for the protection and the continuity of the great traditions.” Mya Tannenbaum, Conversations with Stockhausen, trans. David Butchart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 8.

226 McClary speaks about this issue, framing the avant-garde steam of ostensibly humorless music that has embraced increasingly rigorous uses of serialism as it attempts to establish a new aesthetic language in continuity with the prestigious tradition of European art music. Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” Cultural Critique 12 (1989): 57-81.
experimentalism is inextricable from American mentalities of independence, self-reliance, and exceptionalism while avant-gardism takes the preeminence of the European art music tradition as axiomatic.\textsuperscript{227} So goes the narrative.\textsuperscript{228}

One must ask, however, to what extent this discursive divide is a productive way to differentiate between modernist musical practices that are already so thoroughly divergent in their musical particulars even within the same continent. After all, we can find caricatures of the dour, academic serialist in Babbitt just as easily as we can in Boulez; likewise, we can find caricatures of the gleeful, non-academic indeterminist in Kagel just as easily as we can in Cage. Before I ask if there is a true essence of “American experimentalism” existing in contradistinction to “European avant-gardism,” let us survey some of the features common to both modernist streams.

Composers on both continents made considerable musical innovations in both material and aesthetic terms. Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique initiated a fascination with a priori compositional systems of a novel variety, and this trend continued, not just in the expansion of twelve-tone music to serialism to integral serialism, but also in explorations of indeterminacy. Without the assumption of tonality, avant-garde composers found that the realm of compositional systems was now open for exploration, thus leading to everything from the


\textsuperscript{228} Recently, Amy Beal has shown that there was actually a measure of overlap and cross-pollination. Even though she frames American experimentalists in contradistinction to European serialists—as is standard—she shows how post-1945 modernist composers like Cage, Earle Brown, and David Tudor had a presence in West Germany during the initial years of the Darmstadt summer courses. Amy C. Beal, \textit{New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
rigorously mathematical compositional schemes of George Perle to the loosely circumscribed graphic scores of Earle Brown.

An important part of these novel compositional systems was the concept of musical time and its regulation (or at least circumscription) by form and rhythm. Common practice music typically uses a linear, goal-direct construction—each moment building upon the last—thereby creating a sense of listener expectation. Morgan attributes this characteristic to two factors: “a relatively fixed set of hierarchical tonal relationships and a rhythmic framework, also hierarchically ordered, based upon the recurrence of regular durational units.”229 As these hierarchical relationships break down in modernist music, fundamental assumptions about form and the passing of musical time are invalidated. Stockhausen used the concept of “moment form” where a musical progression gives way to a series of interrelated, but independent, moments. In a work like Kontakte (1958-60), each musical segment is derived from an overall plan, but the progression from moment to moment does not convey a sense of narrative development. Cage’s a priori structures were not derived from elaborate mathematical algorithms, but his works are equally destructive of conventional notions of musical time. Works like Water Music (1960) remove all sense of musical time and replace it with the literal, bodily time inherent in everyday actions and events. Moreover, both composers, for all their differences, explored the use of absolute time markings to replace the relative units of rhythm found in common practice music.

Although there are numerous examples of composers performing their own music throughout European art music history, modernist composers do not seem to have the same expectation that their music will travel far beyond the situation of their immediate involvement. Mozart performed his own work, but he could reasonably assume that his music would be

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published and performed by other musicians. Many modernist composers did not have these same expectations of musical dissemination, and thus they found it necessary to perform their own work if it was to be heard at all. In some cases, self-performance was virtually a necessity, as in the case of Harry Partch whose music was scored for an ensemble of Partch’s own instruments. In other cases, the work was so idiosyncratic that it would be very difficult to represent in a score, and thus the composer’s direct involvement would be crucial. In still other cases, the composer was the performer by default, as we find with electronic music where the creation of the material of the work is coterminal with its aural realization.

The issue of timbre in modernist music is multifaceted. It is not just that there were new instruments to be found (e.g., extended percussion, non-instruments used instrumentally, electronic instruments) or an interest in exploring all manner of extended techniques; rather, it is a shift toward an interest in qualities of sound that was previously a secondary concern at best. Chou Wên-Chung, a student of Varèse and one of the first Chinese-American composers to find prominence in the West, notes that in many Asian musics, there is,

> great emphasis placed on the production and control of tones, which often involves an elaborate vocabulary of articulations, modifications in timbre, inflections in pitch, fluctuations in intensity, vibratos and tremolos. [...] Such concentration on the values of a single tone is the antithesis of traditional Western polyphonic concepts, in which the primacy of multilinearity and the acceptance of equal temperament make the application of such values limited and subordinate.\footnote{Chou Wên-Chung, “Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Western Composers,” \textit{The Musical Quarterly} 57, no. 2 (1971): 216.}

Where Western music’s primary expressive unit tends to be the interval—the relationship between two pitches—in Asian music, the emphasis placed on timbre is at least equally important to the relationships between individual tones. While we know that American composers were particularly interested in Asian musics, there is not a great deal of evidence to
suggest that the same is true of European composers. My point is not to argue that modernist composers were deeply influenced by Asian music, but rather to demonstrate just how significant this newfound interest in timbre was for Western music. Krzysztof Penderecki’s “sonority pieces” are perhaps the ultimate example of modernist explorations in timbre. The wide variety of extended techniques in *Fluorescences* (1962) or *De Natura Sonoris* (“Of the nature of sound,” 1966) show a new style of composing where conventional intervallic writing is almost completely eradicated.

This shift toward timbre as a possibility for the central concern of a musical work leads us directly to the explosion of instruments permissible within an ostensible “art music” setting. This includes not only the extensive percussion sections that Varèse introduced in works like *Ionisation* (1929-31) and *Arcana* (1925-27), but also electronic instruments, non-instruments used in an instrumental fashion, and the exploration of extended techniques on conventional instruments. I will focus on electronic music in the following section, but at this time it will suffice to understand their importance in terms of the theoretically infinite timbral possibilities they offered composers. As for non-instruments used instrumentally, this could include anything from Cage’s turntable in *Cartridge Music* (1960) to George Brecht’s conceptual works like *Comb Music (Comb Event)* (1959-62) or *Drip Music (Drip Event)* (1959-62).

Now that we have seen some of the avenues of exploration common to both continents, let us return to the discursive divide to see if there is truly a meaningful difference between

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231 Lubet provides a sample of composers and their various tranethnic influences (e.g., Harrison and Javanese, Chinese, Korean, and Middle Easter musics; Reich and Ghanaian drumming, Hebrew cantillation, Balinese gamelon). Lubet, “Indeterminate Origins,” 98-99.

European avant-gardism and American experimentalism. We have but to open a music history textbook to see that there is a great inequality in the style of coverage. Not that these modernist musical streams are in any danger of receiving too much attention when compared to the more popular neo-classical and neo-romantic composers, but one can tell that it is easier to write about a tradition like serialism with an obvious origin, a genius inventor, his students, their followers, and the like than it is to write about a collection of individuals without straightforward developmental trajectories. For decades, American experimental music was dismissed as the work of a few reckless individuals working isolation, and its story is only beginning to emerge.\textsuperscript{233} If I spend a moment now surveying the so-called American experimental tradition, it is for two reasons: first, because the variety of opinions and interpretations of this body of music have, thus far, remained obscure; and second, because their impact on radical music has been remarkable.

Let us first survey the sundry definitions, explanations, and circumscriptions in use today. There is only the most general consensus on the “what” and “when” of experimental music. David Nicholls proposes the largest spectrum as he locates the origins of the American experimental tradition in the work of Ives, Cowell, Seeger, Ruggles, and other such composers of the early twentieth-century. Michael Nyman, on the other hand, uses the term to refer to the cohort of mid-century American modernists (e.g., John Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman) who were exploring indeterminacy in music.\textsuperscript{234} Amy Beal adopts a similar

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\item[]{\textsuperscript{233} Although this may be somewhat true in the cases of Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles, Nicholls shows that many of the composers were aware of each other and helped support each other through the establishment of various “new music” groups that offered support to composers and staged concert series. David Nicholls, \textit{American Experimental Music: 1890-1940} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 218.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{234} Michael Nyman, \textit{Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-30.}
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position, framing the experimental composers in contradistinction to the Schoenbergian serialists and the Stravinskian neo-classicists.\(^{235}\) Joanna Demers presents a relativistic definition of experimentalism. She defines "experimental as anything that has departed significantly from the norms of the time, but with the understanding that something experimental in 1985 could have inspired what was conventional by 1990."\(^{236}\) Although there are certain benefits to conceiving of radical music as this sort of relative category, the type of musical transgression described by the term "radical music" is too connected with the philosophical and aesthetic mentalities of the postmodern turn to benefit from a relativist definition.

As for the question of what experimentalism is, there is a similar distribution of varying concepts. Nicholls provides a set of musical features common to the practice including "extreme chromaticism," "tone-clusters and noise," various rhythmic complexities, and indeterminacy.\(^{237}\) Cage, at one stage in his career, provided a similar definition stating that experimentalism was "the introduction of novel elements into one’s music."\(^{238}\) Robert Morgan and Christopher Small characterize experimentalism conceptually, with Morgan presenting it as an example of "rugged American individualism"\(^{239}\) and Small speaking of the "ideal of individual liberty" that led to a rejection of the European way.\(^{240}\) Henry Cowell even frames the ideology of American liberty in


\(^{239}\) Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 296.

American ingenuity and individual liberty, however, does not go far enough for some scholars. Catherine Cameron, for instance, attests to the importance of the rejection of the European tradition, which she describes as apostasy and abandonment. For her, it is not simply starting a new musical tradition, but the beginning of a struggle between hierarchies of value, between the venerated art music tradition of Europe and the lowly “experiments” of American composers who were ignorant of the more sophisticated European techniques. And finally, through the example of Charles Ives, Gayle Sherwood Magee shows that these ideas of American individualism and experimentalism are often at least as discursive as they are actual.

To the extent that we can compare two diverse continents, it appears, then, that the American experimentalists differ from the European avant-gardists in the way they approach musical tradition. The American composers tended to follow in the path of the historical avant-garde, insofar as they rejected their European musical inheritance while the European composers embraced their history and if they appeared to work against it at times, it was only to move the art of music forward into the future.

Clearly this view is oversimplified, especially since one can point to composers who saw themselves as part of the lineage like Babbitt and Elliott Carter in America just as one can point

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241 Cowell writes, “It becomes increasingly clear to me that ethical individualism cannot flourish under radically extreme political conditions. Thus I abhor communism, under which individualism is impossible and expression of liberal thought is punishable; and I abhor its right-wing counterpart under which innocent liberals fear persecution and reprisals of various sorts if they express their sincere ideas for the betterment of the government.” One should note that this statement was made in 1954 and, according to Dick Higgins, its zeal may be partially attributed to the anti-communist sentiments of the day. Henry Cowell, “Music Is My Weapon,” in Essential Cowell: Selected Writings on Music, ed. Dick Higgins (Kingston: McPherson & Co., 2001), 48.


to composers who did not, like Xenakis in Europe. Cowell was branded a true American radical, but his own writing disabuses this notion. Writing in the 1920s and 30s, Cowell argues that “modern music is distinctly not attempting to disregard the classic but rather to do exactly what those same classics accomplished in their day—to add new principles to what had been established before.” At the same time, some composers were more forthright in their apostatical advocacy. Harry Partch—a composer generally grouped with Cowell in the same American experimentalist milieu—stresses the importance of forging one’s own path, of rejecting the evolutionary terms that deterministically bind one to his or her inherited tradition. Cage also echoes these sentiments by framing avant-garde composers in Europe as maintaining “continuity with the past, which is expressed in each work as an interest in continuity whether in terms of discourse or organization.”

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244 Babbitt certainly considered himself to be an art music composer in the classic sense of the term, complete with strong ties to the European tradition; however, this did not stop him from noting a certain inequality in musical acceptance and prestige that accompanied European music even into the 1950s. He writes, “Only in the recording realm is the American composer—denied as he is official sponsorship and patronage—not at a crucial disadvantage in the international musical arena.” Milton Babbitt, “Musical America’s Several Generations,” in The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt, ed. Stephen Peles (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 34.


246 Partch writes, “It would seem axiomatic that any music, whether it is that of a well-known writer of symphonies or that of an anonymous folk singer, reveals the philosophic attitude of its creator. It also seems self-evident that if his attitude is vigorous and individualistic, his practical requirements are not necessarily satisfied by the traditions he was born to; they may even require direct antitheses. Simple repetition does not, and cannot, fulfill the creative urges of such a person. He is living his, a new, life, and though he is a generated bundle of physical and mental similarities to millions of other entities, he is still a new being. Neither physically nor mentally is he a simple repetition.” Harry Partch, Genesis of a Music: An Account of a Creative Work, Its Roots and Its Fulfillments (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 3.

247 Cage goes on to assert that European composers will eventually, and inevitably, “give up Europe” in favor of the “silences of American experimental music.” After all, “the world,” he writes, “is one world now.” Cage, Silence, 74-5.
outright rejection of) the European heritage, and based on this ideology of difference, it follows that American experimentalists would contribute more directly to radical music—at least in a philosophical sense—than the European avant-gardists, insofar as many European composers maintained a connection to serialist practices.

This is not, however, to say that radical music is a simple continuation of the American experimental tradition. By the late twentieth century, the United States was emerging as the dominant cultural center of the world and certain issues of musical heirachies of value (at least where the Europe/America relationship was concerned) were not as central to American composition as they had been during the initial break. In the early part of the century, we find composers like Cowell and Partch writing compositional treatises that explicitly situate themselves in opposition to the European tradition, arguing that rejection is a necessary step in claiming an American identity; however, in the latter part of the century, we do not find the same sort of urgency in staking out a space for an American musical tradition. Where American composers had been considered—even domestically—as second-class imitators of Europe’s esteemed tradition who were only worthwhile if they had at least studied in Europe, the American-trained experimentalists were finally accepted as legitimate, important composers by the latter part of the twentieth century. When it was no longer crucial to fight for a space within Western art music, the struggle between musical hierarchies of prestige was ameliorated, at least in part. Moreover, the pluralism of postmodern aesthetics encouraged the mixing of any styles, no longer excluding European art music on the grounds of a discursive battle for cultural prestige.

To summarize, certain issues like the existential anxiety of the post-World War II era and the heirerachies of musical value between the United States and Europe would fall away with the
end of the Cold War and the shift in artistic activity from Europe to the United States. Radical composers may find critical opposition, but this now has more to do with its intrinsic transgressiveness than with its divergence from the European style. Similarly, cultural mentalities like the ideology of “American individualism” have become less specific to the United States with the encroachment of liberal capitalism on the greater cosmopolitan world. Individualism may persist inasmuch as radical music tends more toward originality than derivation, but it is difficult to argue that this trait should still be considered inherently “American.” Many of the other interests of modernism continue directly in radical music such as the interest in novel, a priori compositional systems, the explorations of new concepts of musical time, the focus on timbre over intervals and harmony, and the use of both new and old instruments to create unfamiliar sounds.

2.1.4 The Dawn of Electronic Music

The dawn of electronic music is our next event. It marks the beginning of a new style of music, an enormous expansion of available timbres, a brand new instrumentarium that differs drastically from all previous instruments, and a decrease in the expense surrounding the means of musical production, which lead to greater flexibility for composers to operate independently. Through advances made by the exploration of electronic music, a composer like Galás could venture into new sonic territory, building entire works out of layers of her own voice, just as these new tools would allow a composer like Zorn to build elaborate arrangements using the recording studio as an instrument itself. These advances would also allow non-institutionally supported composers access to the means of production and dissemination without the prohibitive cost of, say, hiring an orchestra of musicians, booking a concert hall, and selling
tickets. Most of all, fundamental conceptual issues would be explored, especially including the use of pre-recorded sound in general, and the use of untreated, sounds from reality, specifically.

Composers sporadically began exploring the use of electronic instruments in the first half of the twentieth-century, but around 1950, the Western world saw the establishment of the first major electronic music studios. Pierre Schaeffer’s *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (GRM), founded in 1948, is usually presented in contradistinction to Stockhausen and Herbert Eimer’s *Studio für Elektronische Musik* at the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR), founded in 1951. Schaeffer was exploring the manipulation of found sounds (i.e., *musique concrète*), typically reflecting his urban environment, while Stockhausen, after a brief stint at the GRM, was exploring the creation of new sounds through electronic sound synthesis (i.e., *elektronische musik*). Significantly, both the GRM and the WDR were hosted by public broadcasting institutions, which afforded composers the chance to work with a wide array of electronic gear, although little of the equipment was actually designed to be used as a musical instrument. The Columbia-Princeton Tape Music Center was also founded in 1951, but its primary composers—Vladimir Ussachevsky, Otto Luening, Milton Babbitt, and Roger Sessions—were initially more interested in using computers to enhance composition than in creating music using electronically produced or manipulated sounds.

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248 For instance, Messiaen’s *Fete des belles eaux* (1937) for six ondes-martenot, Respighi’s use of a phonograph in an orchestral setting in *Pini di Roma* (1924), and Max Stein’s use of Theremin for the film score to *King Kong* (1933).


250 The Columbia-Princeton Tape Music Center would be rechristened as the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1959.

251 Manning, 2004, 76.
Schaeffer’s invention of musique concrète was an important moment for many reasons: first, it was one of the first sustained investigations of a non-instrument used to create music; second, it was the progenitor of our contemporary tradition of sampling; and third, it began chipping away at music’s anti-representational bias through the use of found sound, albeit in an unintentional manner. On this last point, it is important to note that Schaeffer did not intend to create a music based on the actual sounds of everyday life; that is just the unavoidable result.\footnote{Douglas Kahn, \textit{Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 110.} He attempted to reduce his field recordings to the theoretical \textit{objet sonore} (sound object)—a unit of pure timbre free of any external reference, especially to its source. Schaeffer’s concept of \textit{acousmatic} listening involved the listener engaging in phenomenological bracketing, which involves the “bracketing out” of any external referent so that the listener may concentrate solely on the experience of the sound object. This proved to be impossible, as Schaeffer found that even when instructed in the art of phenomenological bracketing, listeners could not help but attempt to discover the source of the sounds. Although he found that removing the attack transient from a sound could fool the listener into hearing the sound as something else, the listener still had not abandoned the desire to discern the sound’s source. Even if Schaeffer’s goal of creating a mode of “reduced listening” failed,\footnote{Ibid., 110.} his experiments (in the literal sense of the term) had not only introduced a novel new conceptual approach to music, but had also created a vital new technique—sampling—that would directly contribute both to popular music and the postmodern music collage artists.

During the early years of the GRM, Stockhausen was living in France and studying with Messiaen. He created the exploratory work, \textit{Etude} (1952), using tape splices, but he quickly
abandoned the idea of this sort of composition. By 1953, he had returned to Cologne and began working at the WDR and experimenting with the array of electronic instruments at the studio. These, however, proved unsatisfactory for Stockhausen, who recalls,

> An irrevocable step became necessary: I returned to the element which is the basis of all sound multifariousness: to pure vibration, which can be produced electrically and which is called a sine wave. Every existing sound, every noise, is a mixture of such sine waves—a spectrum. [...] Thus, for the first time, it was possible to compose—in the true sense of the word—the timbres in a music, i.e., to synthesize them from elements, and by doing so, to let the universal structural principle of a music also effect the sound proportions.²⁵⁴

Thus, Stockhausen began exploring additive synthesis—an electronic music technique that involves adding sine waves together to create complex composite waveforms—as well as a new system of composition involving the total determination of all musical elements. Messiaen had created considerable excitement at Darmstadt in 1949 with the presentation of his piano work, “Mode de valeurs et d’intensités” from his *Quatre etudes de rythme* (1949-50; *Four Rhythm Studies*), because it was the first European example of integral serialism—a compositional method involving the serialization of not only pitch and rhythm, but also duration, dynamics, and attack.²⁵⁵ It was inevitable that Stockhausen would take integral serialism one step further including the construction and modification of synthetic timbre within the total organization of integral serialism.

> By 1971, Stockhausen had codified his concept of electronic music into four criteria: unified time structuring, the splitting of sound, multi-layered spatial composition, and the

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²⁵⁵ Ruth Crawford Seeger is credited with applying serialist procedures to musical elements other than pitch as early as the 1930s, and Milton Babbitt’s *Three Compositions for Piano* (1947) marks the official introduction of “total serialism.” It appears that both of these composers arrived at this invention independently. Judith Tick, “Crawford, Ruth,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed March 7, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/06796.
equality of sound (or tones) and noise. Unified time structuring involves an awareness of the malleability of time in electronic media. Just as one could speed up a string quartet such that it lasts only one second and is perceived as a unique timbre, so too could one extend a one-second sound into a 20-minute duration, also create a unique timbre. The splitting of the sound involves the manipulation of the constituent elements of a synthesized sound. If one has a series of oscillators producing sine waves at various amplitudes to produce a particular composite wave, then each oscillator can be manipulated in terms of frequency and amplitude, thereby affecting the composite output. It is a way of composing the sound itself. Multi-layered spatial composition involves dispersing the sound throughout a given space and sending unique signals to each output channel—a technique that Varèse had used in Poème électronique (1958). Finally, we have the equality of noise, which is something of a misnomer inasmuch as this is not an echo of Russolo and Cage calling for musicalization of any and all sounds. Rather, Stockhausen promotes the controlled use of noise such that it balances with tones and does not overpower the work. Noise, thus defined, is more akin to sound with an aperiodic waveform than to Cage’s more general idea of noise as sound that one does not like.

Stockhausen’s four criteria present a number of innovatory techniques that radical composers would use to great effect. Even though his concept of noise is a bit conservative when compared to Cage, composers such as Merzbow would use time modification as a way to create new timbres. Spatialized sound would be important for certain works by Galás, and they would be absolutely central to the sort of site-specific works presented under the title of “sound art.”

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257 Ibid., 110.
Although Schaeffer and Stockhausen command the most attention in histories thus far, there were important advancements made to electronic music by other composers such as Cage and Xenakis. Unfortunately, their lack of affiliation with a major electronic music research center has made their contributions difficult to weave into the conventional narrative of *musique concrète* versus *elektronische musik*. Cage, for one, was experimenting with the use of phonographs as a musical instrument almost a decade before Schaeffer would begin his own explorations.\textsuperscript{258} *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939), for instance, uses two variable-speed turntables playing test records that produce either a constant or a variable frequency. Although Cage did not explore the use of field recordings, the work is notable for the use of a non-instrument in an instrumental context. By 1952, Cage was working on *Williams Mix*, which is remarkable both because of the way that it exposes the medium as the message and because of its repurposing of pre-recorded material. Where tape had been used in the recording studio as a way to surreptitiously assemble a composite of various takes, *Williams Mix* could be interpreted as a work about tape and tape splicing itself. Through intricate splices created according to chance operation, Cage creates a collage work out of extant recordings—a technique that is radical in its foregrounding of the medium and in its use of recorded music and sound to create a new work.

Although I will discuss the work of Iannis Xenakis in more detail in section 2.1.5, he was an important figure in electronic music and thus he deserves some discussion at this moment. Rather than focusing on the manipulations of complex sounds as Schaeffer had done or on the creation of new sounds through the addition of sine waves like Stockhausen, Xenakis explored the concept of sound mass through his stochastic compositional method, where an acoustical

\textsuperscript{258} Holmes, 2002, 113.
event would be created through a large array of small sound particles.\textsuperscript{259} For most physicists before the twentieth-century, sound had seemed intrinsically linear—the product of sound waves—but following the ideas of Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637) and Dennis Gabor (1900-1979), Xenakis began investigating the musical possibilities of conceiving of sound as particles, which led him to the concept of granular synthesis—a technique where tiny samples (ca. 1-50ms), or grains, are layered to create a cloud of minute sounds that, when sped up, blend and create a novel timbre.\textsuperscript{260} He also invented two remarkably original synthesis devices—the UPIC (\textit{Unité Ployagogique Informatique du CEMAMu})\textsuperscript{261} system and the GENDYN (\textit{Génération Dynamique Stochastique}) approach. The UPIC was a synthesizer with a digital tablet as an input device. This allowed composers to draw curves on an X/Y (pitch/time) axis, which can then be stored in memory and used as waveforms or amplitude envelopes. One of the important features of the UPIC is that it allows anyone to create music, even without prior training or experience, due to the intuitive nature of its input device. The GENDYN approach involves the continuous variance of a waveform according to a designated stochastic function.\textsuperscript{262} Rather than using notation to designate the manner in which an instrumentalist should create acoustical vibrations in the environment, the GENDYN approach involves manipulating these audible changes in air.


\textsuperscript{260} Xenakis writes, “All sound, even all continuous sonic variation, is conceived as an assemblage of a large number of elementary grains adequately disposed in time. So every sonic complex can be analyzed as a series of pure sinusoidal sounds even if the variations of these sinusoidal sounds are infinitely close, short, and complex. In the attack, body, and decline of a complex sound, thousands of pure sounds appear in a more or less short interval of time.” Iannis Xenakis, “Markovian Stochastic Music—Theory,” in \textit{Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition}, ed. Sharon Kanach (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 1992), 43.

\textsuperscript{261} CEMAMu (Centre d’Etude de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales) was an interdisciplinary center established by Xenakis in 1966 dedicated to the study of art and science. Today the center exists as CCMIX (Center for the Composition of Music Iannix Xenakis).

pressure directly, thereby bypassing layer upon layer of compositional and performative methodology. Ultimately, the important point is not to understand exactly how these original synthesis techniques function, but to note their originality both within the field of electronic music and within the larger practice of musical modernism.

The avenues explored by composers of electronic music had an effect on radical music four main ways. First, the new style of electronically produced music pioneered by Stockhausen, Schaeffer, Xenakis, and others would prove inspiring to a large variety of radical composers such as Merzbow, Francisco Lopez, and Mika Vainio. It is surely difficult to envisage a novel approach to musical composition when one is restricted by the nature of conventional instruments. The mechanics of instruments and the requirements of performance practice serve to channel ideas within a certain space. For instance, there is a finite amount of air that a wind player can supply without taking a breath, and thus phrase lengths tend to fit within a certain durational window. Likewise, the timbre of certain instruments—violins for example—have strong sonic connotations and thus even if a composer like Cage writes a work like 26’1.1499” for a String Player (1953-55), the music is never wholly about the sounds of a culturally neutral chordophone; rather, there is an inescapable element of symphonic degradation that remains in the work. This is not to say that electronic music can ever be truly free of connotations or restrictions, but rather to say that it opens a new constellation of connotations and restrictions, many of which have yet to be explored.

Second, the fundamental change in the physics of sound production had an enormous impact not only on the types of sound that could be produced, but also on the nature of those sounds. One could generate a sine wave that would last for a year without wavering, or one could replace the attack transient of a piano with that of a trumpet thereby creating a physically
impossible hybrid sonic event. As Chou has noted, Western music had been focused primarily on
intervallic relationships as opposed to timbre.\textsuperscript{263} The new sonic possibilities both offered novel
sounds to composers, but also served to shift the focus of music to the qualities of the sound created.

Third, the exploration of electronic music provided a new array of instruments, but it also
led to the development of a new series of tools used for recording and audio production—tools
that composers would then use as musical instruments. In \textit{I am sitting in a room} (1969), Alvin
Lucier uses standard recording tools—a microphone, a tape recorder, and loudspeakers—as
musical instruments to build a work that explores the material properties of the equipment and
the room itself. He records himself reading a short amount of text and then replays his recording
through the loudspeakers and re-records it. He then continues this process until the resonant
frequencies of the room have completely obscured the intelligibility of the narration. More
recently, Merzbow has used broken and malfunctioning audio equipment to generate novel
timbres and unpredictable sounds. Broken playback equipment has been particularly interesting
insofar as it takes the now familiar art of sampling and adds an indeterminate component related
specifically to the equipment used. This practice of using production tools as musical instruments
is not unique to radical music (The Beatles \textit{Sgt. Pepper’s} album, for example, is one of the most
famous examples of the recording studio used as an instrument itself), but it is a practice that is
common in radical music.

Fourth, there is the pragmatic issue of accessibility of means. The lack of a viable
patronage system and the declining interest in non-commercial (or at least that which is not
“popular music”) would create significant problems for radical composers, were it not for the
democratization of musical production that accompanied the lowering cost of audio equipment.

Initially, this was not the case. For all of the bold new directions explored, we must remember that early electronic music was institutionalized from the beginning. Those who controlled the finances of the institutions had a large influence on what was allowed to happen within the early studios. The institutional affiliation served to legitimize the music produced in these studios, but it also restricted the freedom of composers like Xenakis who did not want to work within the approved research areas.\textsuperscript{264} In Thom Holmes’s view, “there was nothing liberal about the social context of electronic music. It was only liberated by those who cast off the institutions and produced it themselves.”\textsuperscript{265} While this is true insofar as composers were not absolutely free to explore anything at all, the liberation inherent in exploring a brand new instrumentarium was still a major event in the formation of radical music. As technology progressed during the 1950s, new means became available that would allow composers to reclaim some of the artistic freedoms of which Holmes speaks. Tape recorders, in particular, offered an inexpensive alternative to the massive computers that Babbitt used or the studios full of oscillators and testing equipment available to Stockhausen at the WDR. Under the auspices of the San Francisco Tape Music Center,\textsuperscript{266} composers like Morton Subotnick and Pauline Oliveros were able to work with a much higher degree of autonomy.\textsuperscript{267} By the 1990s, composers could use their personal computers as virtual recording and production studios thereby allowing them an unprecedented

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\item \textsuperscript{264} Xenakis spent some time working at the GRM, but his focus was not in \textit{musique concrète}, and thus he was at odds with Schaeffer’s research interests. Harley, \textit{Xenakis: His Life in Music}, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{265} Thom Holmes, \textit{Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in Technology and Composition} (London: Routledge, 2002), 85.
\item \textsuperscript{266} The San Francisco Tape Music Center was a non-profit center founded in 1962 by Morton Subotnick and Ramon Sender.
\item \textsuperscript{267} Holmes, \textit{Electronic and Experimental Music}, 85.
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amount of freedom. This is one of the primary factors that allowed Merzbow and others like him to operate with relative independence from any significant source of financial support.

2.1.5 Transitional Figures

While the majority of modernist composers and practices fit somewhere within the terms of my survey in section 2.1.3 and 2.1.4, a handful transcended modernism and the array of conceptual and aesthetic goals that are outlined above. This group of composers and practices might be considered pre-radical because they exhibit clear signs of radicalism while remaining connected to the modernist project in some substantive way. Take, for instance, Xenakis: He devised a number of compositional systems that were intentionally different from the Western art music tradition at a fundamental, philosophical level. At the same time, he was an unapologetic positivist who believed that the rationalism of science was the best hope of structuring a socially edifying artistic practice. Similarly, Cage began his career with modernist intentions, but he would later issue some of the most radical challenges to the foundations of Western music that have ever occurred. In this section, I will spend a bit of time examining some transitional figures—including Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and Xenakis—to show how they have originary connections to the modernist movement while also contributing works that are still quite radical.

At this point, I have mentioned Cage as a modernist and as an electronic music pioneer. Now I am returning to Cage as a transitional figure leading to, and practicing, radical music. Even if this amount of coverage seems excessive, it is still proportional to Cage’s influence and importance as a transgressor of musical convention. Many are familiar with his infamous 4’33” (1952), but it is much more than just a “silent” work or a work about the potential beauty of

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environmental sound. In describing Cagean indeterminacy, Taruskin borrows the surrealist concept of automatism where an artist attempts to surrender all agency while channeling some sort of unconscious spirit. The obvious inappropriateness of the terminological transposition notwithstanding, the idea of a composer surrendering his or her agency is profound. After all, what has art been, if not the intentional expression of something? This is undoubtedly an important facet of the work, and Cage devotes some space to the idea of giving up control in his article, “Experimental Music.” And yet not even this is the most important innovation of 4’33”, especially insofar as there were already precedents for ostensibly agentless art works.

The absolutely, fundamentally subversive act that Cage executed was to “let sounds be themselves.” Previously, one could offer a definition of music that involved some sense of music as the intentional, aesthetic production of sound filtered through some sort of cultural system in accordance with whatever standards pertained in this hypothetical historical/cultural period. The key ideas here are “production” and “filtration.” At very minimum, someone must produce a sound intentionally as art and he or she must also filter this sound through an aesthetic system. Cage rejects these fundamental premises and argues that the sound need not be intentional, just as the intervention of an aesthetic filter is not necessary.

Previously, if sounds were allowed to exist unmodified, it was not even considered mimesis; it is simply reproduction. Roger Scruton claims that, “when music attempts the direct ‘representation’ of sounds it has a tendency to become transparent, as it were, to its subject.

270 Richard Taruskin, Music in the Late Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55.
271 Cage, Silence, 9-10.
272 Ibid., 10. See also Christopher Shultis, Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 85-126.
Representation gives way to reproduction, and the musical medium drops out of consideration altogether as superfluous.” Scruton’s comments are typical of the anti-representational bias that has existed at least since the nineteenth century debates on absolute versus program music. Where music has denoted intentionally aestheticized sound, Cage shows that the minimum constraints for a musical work are simply a temporal circumscription of an otherwise uncontrolled event.

Granted, few composers have been compelled to take matters to the extreme of 4’33”, but the liberation of non-instrumental, unintentional, and un-aestheticized sound has been enormously important in the realm of American experimental music, “sound art,” and of course, radical music. Rather than focusing mostly on the aural, music after Cage was free to focus on the conceptual. Although certain sounds theorists like Brandon LaBelle see this as a “[move] away from an overtly musical framework…toward an increasingly contextual and ‘extra-musical’ one,” I am not so ready to describe Cage as moving away from music, per se. Rather, I see him as subverting musical convention while existing within the general realm of expressive sonic practices that we refer to as music; however, the “music” that Cage practices at this stage has been stripped of a necessary connection to such fundamental features as melody, harmony, rhythm, or even the intentional production of sound. In this way, Cage becomes a radical composer.

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276 LaBelle has his own discursive reasons for reading Cage as a sort of post-music liberator. Cage thus described is a pivot point between musical modernism and “sound art,” which theorists such as LaBelle see as substantively different from music. Conversely, Landy finds no compelling reason to abandon the term “music” for expressive sonic practices. See Leigh Landy, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 5-9.
Pauline Oliveros is another transitional figure with strong ties to modernism. She studied with Robert Erickson (himself a student of Sessions and Krenek) at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in the 1950s when modernist musical practices were in full swing. She was involved with the San Francisco Tape Music Center from its inception and then took over as director in 1966 when the SFTMC joined the Mills Center of Contemporary Music. There were relatively few female composers working in any style, and a female experimentalist was even more rare. Oliveros belongs to a small group including Ruth Crawford Seeger, Bebe Barron, and Delia Derbyshire, and even though these were all pioneering female composers who could not have been unaware of their role as trailblazers, Oliveros was particularly outspoken when it came to issues of gender and sexuality. Arguing from a decidedly postmodernist position, Oliveros advocates against the Western canon and its favoritism toward male composers. “In traditional, establishment music,” she argues, “people are educated to the music of the European masters, who are all men. As long as they’re educated to that, that’s what they’re going to elevate. […] You’ve got to start programming music by women, and you’ve got to fill the library with music by women. But it’s hard to get that to happen, because the canon is so entrenched in all the educational institutions.” It is not simply that there are no viable female composers; it is that the hegemonic nature of the canon promotes certain works and composers at the expense of the Other. Just as radical composers are inherently transgressive toward standards and convention, Oliveros avows that art must “be subversive, very subversive.”


279 Ibid., 33.
Bye Bye Butterfly (1965) remains Oliveros’s best-known work with good justification due in large part to its program. It encapsulates a simultaneous critique of both the common practice canon and gender politics. Oliveros writes, “Bye Bye Butterfly bids farewell not only to the music of the 19th century, but also to the system of polite morality of that age and its attendant institutionalized oppression of the female sex.” The work calls for two oscillators, two amplifiers, two tape recorders with delay, and a turntable from which an excerpt from Puccini’s Madama Butterfly (1904) plays. The first section of the work is composed of purely electronic sounds, but at 3:25, Butterfly’s opening aria begins to play on the turntable. This “sample” is mixed in such a way that the electronic sounds seem to dominate it, as Oliveros creates powerful juxtapositions between acoustic and electronic sound sources, between old and new, between a cherished masterwork and a humble, but pernicious composition for electronic equipment.

According to Oliveros, a recording of Madama Butterfly was used because it happened to by lying around the studio when she was creating Bye Bye Butterfly. If this is indeed true, it is remarkably serendipitous, for there are many parallels to be found. At the level of narrative, the character of Butterfly is an oppressed woman—an Other both in terms of sex and in terms of ethnicity—whose only power is in choosing the time of her death. Taking a step back, the entire opera can be read as an orientalist treatment of a cultural other. Oliveros is a woman fighting against the sexual politics of the Western establishment, just as she is a composer fighting against the aesthetic politics of the Western music canon.


282 Ibid.
The reason behind this discussion of gender is to show the way that political and musical subversion fuse within her music, but this is not to say that Oliveros was primarily remarkable for being a woman as opposed to a gifted composer irrespective of gender. Fred Maus points out that Oliveros’s interest in subverting binary oppositions is not limited to gender. In actuality, Oliveros is a dialectically minded composer who seeks out oppositions—logical reasoning versus intuition, time versus stasis, determinacy versus indeterminacy, masculinity versus femininity—and endeavors to appreciate each while observing how they might contribute to each other.

One way this interest in oppositions manifests is in Oliveros’s use and misuse of electronic equipment. She recalls,

I used to listen to my grandfather’s crystal radio over earphones. I loved the crackling static. […] I used to spend a lot of time tuning my father’s radio, especially to the whistles and white noise between the stations. […] I also loved our wind-up Victrola, especially when the mechanism was running down with a record playing. I loved all the negative operant phenomena of systems.

The affordability of tape recorders made them an obvious choice for Oliveros’s initial explorations and, even though the SFTMC could not afford a great deal of equipment, her personal ingenuity allowed her to discover a number of sound modification techniques without the aid of specialized equipment. For instance, hand winding the tape while the machine was in record mode allowed Oliveros to make variable speed recordings. Even without access to

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285 Oliveros describes a number of these techniques in a radio interview. For instance, she found that her bathtub could be used as a resonant chamber for reverb effects. She also fashioned a primitive microphone filter using a cardboard tube. Alan Baker, “An Interview With Pauline Oliveros,” American Public Media, January 2003, accessed March 12, 2013, http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/interview_oliveros.html.
multitrack recording equipment, she was able to build up fascinating sound worlds using sophisticated tape delay setups.\textsuperscript{286} Where electronic equipment was a means of ever more precise serialist calculations for Babbitt, and where electronic instruments offered Stockhausen complete serialist control over every dimension of a musical work, Oliveros took basic equipment and subverted its regular functionality. The radicalism of her interest in the “negative operant phenomena of systems” is precisely what Merzbow would spend decades exploring in the latter part of the twentieth-century. Although she began her career during the peak of musical modernism, the deconstructive impulses of her work on both sociocultural and aesthetic fronts situate Oliveros within the emerging field of radical music.

In terms of pure aesthetic transgression, Xenakis can be considered as the first major radical composer who wrote, almost without exception, in a truly radical style for the duration of his career. The only significant challenge to Xenakis as a radical composer is the fact that his philosophy was so thoroughly tied to structuralism, and to an extent, positivism.\textsuperscript{287} In his theoretical writings, Xenakis attempted to discover deep structural formations in music, which would allow him to define the minimum criteria necessary to define a musical art. Regarding one such attempt, he remarked,

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\textsuperscript{286} Some of these are described in Pauline Oliveros, “Tape Delay Techniques for Electronic Music Composers,” in \textit{Software for People: Collected Writings 1963-80} (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 36-46.

\textsuperscript{287} Aside from the predominance of structuralist thinking in France around the mid twentieth-century, Xenakis’s biography also provides clues as to why he would be inclined to trust scientific rigor over the irrationality inherent in humanity. During the 1940s, Greece was subject to occupation first by the Axis powers and then by British forces brought in to restore the monarchy. As a member of the communist National Liberation Front, Xenakis was an active participant in the armed resistance of both occupying forces. During his college years, he was gravely injured by a tank shell and lost his left eye, but he was still able to graduate with his degree in civil engineering. A few years later, after the right-wing government began to gain power, former resistance fighters were being hunted and thrown into concentration camps. He was sentenced to death, but managed to escape Greece, eventually landing in France where he would reside for the rest of his life. Nouritza Matossian, “In Childhood and Resistance,” in \textit{Xenakis} (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990), 11-33.
Supposing I had lost my memory, how could I extrapolate the principles of composition from music? What are the basic and necessary rules upon which music is founded, not merely compositional techniques deriving from particular traditions and cultures, but the underlying rules which all forms of music have in common? In his article, “Symbolic Music,” Xenakis searches for the most fundamental, non-contradictory elements of music and builds up a general theory of music from there. The idea is to outline such general terms that any music from Mozart to Webern could be included as a particular case. From this point, Xenakis could then devise a system of his own particulars in radical contradistinction to the Western style.

Central to Xenakis’s philosophy was the importance of science in discovering new modes of artistic expression. Xenakis writes, “I shall not say, like Aristotle, that the mean path is the best, for in music—as in politics—the middle means compromise. Rather lucidity and harshness of critical thought…is the path to follow.” Unlike Krenek, however, Xenakis did not find the total determinability of serialist procedures to be a comforting sort of objectivity. Just as he saw Western tonality as needlessly restrictive, he also saw serialism as a deterministic hindrance on individual freedom. Rather, he writes, “when scientific and mathematical thought serve music, or any human creative activity, it should amalgamate dialectically with intuition.”

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289 Although Lévi-Strauss is never mentioned in Xenakis’s *Formalized Music*, it is inconceivable that such an influential theorist’s work would have escaped the attention of an intellectual like Xenakis, especially as a composer based in France.


all artistic creation must be rigorous and scientific, but one must also allow self-expression to shine through.

Where Xenakis saw the determinacy of Western music as mirroring the Enlightenment project of understanding the world through reason and rationality, he sought a music that could confront the irrational. He writes,

Since antiquity the concepts of change (tyche), disorder (ataxia), and disorganization were considered as the opposite and negation of reasons (logos), order (taxis), and organization (systasis). It is only recently that knowledge has been able to penetrate chance and has discovered how to separate its degrees—in other words to rationalize it progressively, without, however, succeeding in a definitive and total explanation of the problem of ‘pure chance.’

This search led to his use of stochastic processes to render the indeterminacy of the world in musical terms; however, just as Xenakis found the serialists to be too determinist, he found composers like Cage to be too indeterminist. After all, Xenakis argues, what has Cage done, but hand over his responsibility as composer to the performer? And what will this performer do, but inevitably fall back on the nature of his musical training? For Xenakis, Cage’s work was misguided, and it did not confront indeterminacy in a rigorous, critical manner. Stochastic laws allowed Xenakis take a complex, dynamic event and determine probabilities that were then assigned to musical features. Thus, he invented an utterly original compositional system that deliberately avoided conventional uses of musical components such as form, melody, harmony, and rhythm.

His first stochastic work was Achorripsis (1957), which finds Xenakis exploring two avenues: first, he set about testing his thesis of minimum constraints—a search for the fewest

293 Xenakis, Formalized Music, 4.

logical constraints necessary for the construction of a musical process—and second, he attempted to “attain the greatest possible asymmetry.” On this last point, Xenakis’s idea is to negate “traditionally inherited behavioral frameworks.” By starting with the minimum conditions necessary to create music, Xenakis is in a position to avoid any sort of structures based on cultural convention. *Achorripsis* is unique in that he did not seek to add much on top of these minimum constraints. With other works, however, he would take this meta-musical approach as a starting point to build up a new system, often derived from the musical theories of the ancient Greeks, especially including Aristoxenus. Works such as *Aïs* (1980) render the ancient Greek influence explicit not only in the use of Greek modes and text declamation style, but also in terms of textual borrowing.

Xenakis’s search for a deep structure common to all music is itself a structuralist endeavor, but the idea of subverting the dominant cultural practice—the culturally determined aesthetic filter, if you will—is entirely radical in its aim. We see this sort of subversive aspiration in the work of many radical composers from Zorn’s dismissal of musical class structures to Merzbow’s dismissal of the fundamental materials of virtually all music. Xenakis was responsible for a great number of original compositional techniques and to describe them would require a dedicated chapter. Ultimately, even though Xenakis’s philosophical perspective was

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295 This led to the creation of his “fundamental phases of a musical work”—a series of eight steps from “conception” to “sonic realization.” Xenakis, *Formalized Music*, 22.


closely tied to the structuralist milieu of France (his adopted homeland), the resulting aesthetic innovations fit equally well within the context of radical music aesthetics.

2.2 Toward a Definition of Radical Music

As I have said above, the task of attempting to explain a type of music dedicated to defying explanation is daunting. As soon as one begins creating criteria, numerous exceptions quickly become apparent and the task seems all the more impossible. My goal in presenting a preliminary set of features of radical music is not to develop an exclusive standard by which we may determine if a composer is “radical enough” or “too conventional to be included.” Moreover, a given composer does not need to work in an exclusively radical style to be considered radical in certain instances. Galás, for instance, has created some very radical works like *Vena Cava*, but she has also recorded CDs like *Malediction and Prayer* that are more bluesy than radical. Rather than creating a simple rubric, my purpose in offering the following features is to assist in comparative analysis and interpretation. By identifying common features, we create reference points that allow us to establish a discourse within which we can situate certain streams of music that until now have existed in the vast nebula of ill-defined “experimentalism.”

Few radical composers will create a single work that encompasses each of the points below, but they will create multiple works that touch on a selection of the points below. Even if a flawless set of features of radical music is impossible, it is still a useful endeavor so that we may identify elements of musical radicalism in works that I have not discussed qua radical music, and so that we may begin to see broader trends within a seemingly disparate category of music. It is easy to label music as experimental and consider that sufficient, but it is much more difficult to attempt to understand such a practice and search for ways to make some sense of it, even if it
results in some inevitable generalities. With that said, I present nine general features of radical music moving from the most fundamentally philosophical to the most musically specific.

1. Above all else, radical music is inherently transgressive. This may manifest as the sort of aesthetic transgressions that we see in Zorn’s refusal to accept boundaries of musical hierarchies of value and taste, or in Merzbow’s attitude toward the basic elements of conventional music. This may also be a social transgression, such as Galás’s deconstruction of traditional gender binaries and sexual politics. Lines of demarcation are invitations for radical composers, who are all too eager to overstep the boundaries of the mainstream. A bit more clarification is in order. First, musical radicalism often leads to innovative practices, but innovation is not sufficient to describe the extent of radical music’s transgressive attitude. Innovation is never merely a desire to explore something new for the sake of originality. Rather, it is symptomatic of radical composers’ deliberate attempts to explode a given category to expose its artificiality and constructedness. Second, the transgressions of musical convention and taste are not tantamount to a rejection of the works and people of the past. It is, rather, a rejection of how these canonized works and composers are used to define a prescriptive and exclusive aesthetic against which all other musical practices are judged. Radical composers may even employ conventional techniques at times, but in the context of a radical work, the use of a convention is changed and defamiliarized; through its recontextualization, tradition is subverted. In sum, radical music can take on many forms, but it all hovers around the gravitational center of transgression.

2. Radical music is a music of extremism—extremes of intensity and extremes of peacefulness, extremes duration and extremes of brevity, extremes of social confrontation and extremes of social transcendence. Although a sort of aural violence is visited upon the listener of
many works by Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, radical music need not be a display of aggressive strength. We could just as easily apply the term to a figure like Francisco López whose music consists mainly of field recordings often presented with limited authorial intervention. In many ways, Merzbow is the sonic opposite of López, but they are comparable in the extent to which their aesthetic extremism takes the music—excessive noise and near silence, respectively. Along similar lines, we find a remarkable density of ideas in some of Zorn’s works—especially with his band, Naked City—while in the work of the band Sunn O))), a single guitar riff performed at a glacial tempo is the basis for an extended-length work.

3. Radical music often has a prominent conceptual component that informs our perception and interpretation of the music. This is different from the aforementioned transgressive spirit of radical music because that is a general philosophical principle informing the deepest level of the work, while the conceptual component pertains more specifically to individual works. This conceptual drive exists across a broad spectrum. Aube, for instance, makes single-source recordings drawing from anything from an electroencephalogram to the burning pages of a Bible. The nature of his expressive language is transgressive when compared to musical convention, but on top of this, he also adds the conceptual layer of working with only one sound source. Similarly, Galás performs in a style that is aurally transgressive, as we find in the abject horror of *Wild Women With Steak Knives*, but beyond the transgressive sonics and aesthetics, her work also deals with themes of tolerance, justice, and vengeance. Although some types of radical music may be “about” the destruction of musical convention, a great deal of radical music also incorporates a prominent conceptual element in some capacity.

4. Radical composers are rarely affiliated with commercial, academic, or philanthropic institutions, often for a mix of pragmatic and ideological reasons. Ideologically speaking, radical
composers are fiercely protective of their freedom to create anything without oversight, influence, or control. They tend to hold a Romantic notion of artistic autonomy, but this autonomous ideal is also grounded in practicality. Commercial institutions like the recording industry tend to exert the most influence because the importance of profitability is absolutely central to every decision that is made. Academic institutions may offer greater artistic freedom, but these positions often come with certain requirements such as the possession of academic credentials. Because few radical composers are academically trained, even if the academy would support their work, they rarely possess the academic degrees and pedagogical experience necessary to be eligible for a typical professorship. Radical composers may occasionally receive grants from philanthropic institutions, but this is rare, and in these instances, the work tends to be less radical than which is self-financed. Ultimately, radical composers tend to support themselves through CD sales through either small boutique labels or through the artists’ own private label, both of which exist outside of the corporate structure of the mainstream recording industry.

This lack of institutional affiliation has ramifications beyond economics and artistic freedom, for it also implies a sort of break with the mainstream of music, at least in the minds of the composers. It is not necessarily that radical composers hold the naïve idea that it is possible to extricate themselves from their inherited traditions of music, but that they purposefully attempt to work against those traditions. Rather than conceiving of themselves as heirs to, say, the Germanic legacy while attempting to push it into strange new territories, as Stockhausen did, they question the value of the legacy itself. Again, it is important to note that radical composers do not seek to throw out canonic works; rather, they seek to discard the discourse of supremacy that has become attached to these works. Thus, the lack of institutional affiliation is both actual and philosophical.
5. In terms of musical construction, one of the most fundamental changes is the emphasis of timbre over intervallic relationships. Although there is a broader trend toward timbre—especially in popular music—over the traditionally important melodic and harmonic motion of most Western music, the significance of timbre is particularly pronounced in radical music. In the work of Autechre, for example, melody is either usually either non-existent or simple and repetitive, and thus one must trace the development of musical ideas through the changes in timbre rather than interval.

6. The material objects of radical music are typically recordings instead of scores. This is a significant change from the traditional split between composer and performer, for in radical music, there is virtually no thought given to the idea of a performance by someone other than the composer, or by someone without the composer’s direct involvement. Although rebellion against standard Western notation practice and the production of a performance score is not a requisite feature of a radical composition, many composers would find it difficult or unnecessary to translate their idea into a spatio-visual code, especially in the manner of the conventional five-line staff. If a radical composer produces a score at all, it tends to be a set of prose instructions for realizing the music. Moreover, radical composer-performers often employ an expressive language that is too idiosyncratic for another performer to duplicate effectively. To attempt to replicate the performance style of someone like Galás would be to reduce her expressive language—intrinsically bound to her life and background—to mere technique. Some radical performers also rely on a special performance technique or instrumentation that they have developed. This could range from the particular sampling methods used by Steve Stapleton of Nurse With Wound, or the unique way that Christian Fennesz approaches the guitar. The Finnish
duo, Pan Sonic, has even worked with an electrical engineer who invents electronic instruments specifically for their music.

7. Cultural hybridity figures prominently in radical music, and although it has been an area of interest for the American experimentalists and the postmodernists in general, cultural hybridity takes a different shape in the context of radical music. After the spread of late-capitalism, national boundaries have become decreasingly meaningful, even between the East and the West. Composers like Merzbow or Yasunao Tone create music that is just as Western as it is Japanese (or is it more accurate to say, “just as non-Western as it is non-Japanese?”). Certain strains of modernism can be read as an attempt to sever one’s roots, while certain strains of postmodernism seem to foreground the artists’ roots, especially if they are non-Western in origin. In radical music, we find artists who put down multiple sets of roots in a way that makes their work less explicitly tied to a strong sense of place. These artists exist across national boundaries, sometimes living and working in multiple countries, such as Ryoji Ikeda who is Japanese, but works primarily in Paris. Other artists practice a sort of critical cultural borrowing for sociopolitical reasons. Muslimgauze, for instance, was a tireless advocate for Palestinian liberation and many facets of Middle Eastern percussion are present in his otherwise electronic music.

8. The radicalism of the aural actuality of the music is amplified through other non-acoustic means. The extent to which we may consider something to be truly “extra-musical” is debatable, but there are certain elements beyond the realm of sound that are used effectively by radical composers. This may include album covers, artists’ statements about specific works, or even the communication of an aesthetic philosophy in general. Zorn’s album, *Guts of a Virgin* (1991), is aurally assaultive, but it also features a pathology photograph of a disemboweled woman. Even
before the music begins, the listener’s sensibilities are already agitated. Similarly, both Galás and Zorn have a history of making incendiary remarks and even though they do not necessarily pertain to a specific work, they color the listener’s perception of the sound of the music.

9. Radical music often uses space as an added musical dimension. Sometimes this involves a total sonic saturation where the intensity of the sound overwhelms the listener in a claustrophobically enveloping sound experience, as we find with a composer like Merzbow. Other times, the use of space may be quite subtle by allowing the sound to blend seamlessly into the listener’s sonic environment. In the case of a composer like Francisco Lopez whose work involves the recording of ambient sound, the space of the recording merges with the space of the listening environment. In other cases still, the use of space might involve multichannel sound setups where the listener is literally surrounded by audio transducers, as one finds with certain electronic works by Xenakis or Ryoji Ikeda.

Certain of these criteria are not unique to radical music. For instance, the move towards timbre over intervallic relationships is a trend that one can observe in many streams of twentieth and twenty-first-century music. Similarly, cultural hybridity is seen very broadly in works of the postmodern era, and the blurring of national boundaries is no longer intrinsically radical. My reason for including such trends in this list is merely to highlight the frequency with which they appear in radical music, irrespective of their use in other musical streams.

Finally, it is important to note that radical music is an original term that I have created to account for certain trends in music, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century. Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow do not refer to themselves as radical composers, at least in a manner that is specifically consistent with what I have outlined
above.\textsuperscript{299} It is unlikely that the composers would deny the radicalism of their work, but it is equally unlikely that they would accept a specific label that describes their work. Such is the relationship of the historian and the artist. In using the term, I am situating them as transgressors of musical convention in a very broad sense, but I am also situating them as belonging to a tradition of transgression that includes the figures described above in section 2.1. This is a different situation than that of, say, post-1945 modernism where we find a cluster of composers like Stockhausen, Boulez, and Maderna all exploring the same strain of post-Webernian composition together at the Darmstadt school, but even within the heterogeneity of their aesthetic goals, radical composers belong to a tradition of boundary breakers. In the present case, Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow each have unique ideas about what it is that they do and what their aesthetic goals are. I will save a detailed discussion on how they conceive of their own music for later. For now, it will be sufficient to understand that these three composers are united as boundary breakers, but the boundaries they break (and their reasons for breaking them) are quite different.

3.0 Expressive noise

Expressive noise is my term for the electric current that runs through radical music. Expressive noise is a metaphysical essence that wreaks havoc on stability, constantly threatening to overturn assumptions and conventions. The radical music of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow all uses expressive noise in some capacity. One may draw the easy connection between Merzbow’s work, commonly referred to as “noise music,” and expressive noise, but this relies on only the most basic distinction of noise vis-à-vis music. One may contest that some of Zorn’s music is actually quite lyrical and beautiful by conventional standards and is not “noisy,” per se. This too

\textsuperscript{299} Zorn, for instance, has coined the term “radical Jewish culture,” which one can assume includes at least some of Zorn’s explicitly Jewish-themed works and projects.
assumes a straightforward definition of noise involving ugliness, and this too is far too simplistic, as I will show.

Noise is not necessarily a pejorative, nor is it necessarily ugly, nor is it necessarily destructive. So long as we rely on conventional wisdom to provide the stable definition that we use in everyday language, we will continue to face difficulties in coming to terms with radical music. We must move beyond the common idea of noise as bad.

3.1 What Is Noise?

The word “noise” is colorful and evocative, but when we examine its usage in scholarship, we find that it is actually quite difficult to define. Because most of the prominent theorists of noise as an aurality are working in the field of sound studies and sound art, a survey of that literature is in order to gain an understanding of what noise has meant to various theorists. The discussion below pertains most directly to Merzbow because of the nature of his music, but it factors into the way I conceive of musical radicalism in Zorn and Galás as well. The following exploration of noise serves to introduce my concept of expressive noise, but I will revisit my definition apropos of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow’s conceptions of noise, especially as it pertains to their own music, within the case studies themselves.

The most fundamental issue regarding noise is unresolved and will likely remain so: does noise have ontological status? Is there a metaphysical essence that is isolatable, even in theory? The addition of the concept of music only compounds the difficulty in finding an essence of noise because we must now ask: is noise part of music? Is noise not part of music? If noise is not part of music, is it the opposite of music, is it merely outside the field of accepted cultural practice, or is it fundamentally other? Depending on one’s answers to these questions, there are various strategies of attack and defense for any of the possible positions, many of which are
outlined below. Because the concept of noise is so rich, a diverse array of commentators have created a similarly diverse way of speaking about it; however, upon reviewing the literature, the various conceptions of noise seemed to gravitate toward six general categories that I have named as such: acoustic, communicative, subjective, symbolic, transcendent, and phenomenological. Each of these categories offers benefits and limitations both for inclusion and exclusion of noise as a musical category.

**Acoustic**

In acoustic terms, noise consists of irregular waveforms, as in the common example of white noise. Within white noise we find a completely random combination of frequencies such that the resulting spectrum is flat, all frequencies being equally present on average. Much of the material of so-called noise music does use such inharmonic sounds, but limiting the idea of noise to a degree of randomness in a waveform merely describes the physics of the sound, which makes no distinction between noise and music. This assumes that noise can be reduced to a certain physical property, when it is common to use the term to describe sounds that are not inharmonic, but are nevertheless irritating for reasons that may have nothing to do with aperiodic waveforms. Because of the interpretive value in attaching a communicative, subjective, symbolic, and/or transcendental quality to the category of noise, we can consider this to be the most trivial definition of noise.

**Communicative**

The fundamental communicative definition comes from information theory, where noise is defined as a corruption of a signal. It is an unwanted artifact that obscures the transmission of information, whether linguistic, sonic, or otherwise, it makes no difference. Even if one were to

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temporarily consider noise to be extraneous to signal, Adam Collis points out that this extraneous phenomenon is not necessarily destructive, but can actually increase the information content of a signal.\(^\text{301}\) A musical example might be the nostalgia created by adding the hisses and pops, indexing an experience of listening to worn-out LPs on an old turntable, and thereby adding another layer of meaningful sonic information. Furthermore, what happens when a composer turns the sounds of signal degradation into the actual musical material? For example, Stefan Betke (Pole) has created multiple albums based around the unpredictable sounds generated by a broken Waldorf 4-Pole filter.\(^\text{302}\) For Betke, the corrupted signals routed through his filter are not extraneous, but rather the integral material of his work.

Subjective

In the twenty-first century the generalized field of art is (perhaps grudgingly) tolerant of virtually any form of expression, thus relegating aesthetic judgment (following Kant) to the position of personal preference. To define noise as unpleasant sound is to make noise a totally relative category. Cage said that noise is simply sound that we choose to ignore, thereby encompassing a huge variety of sonic phenomena from traffic and factories to pop tunes playing in the background at the mall.\(^\text{303}\) This says nothing about any specific timbral constitution, for the roar of traffic may come to resemble white noise, while the irritating background music in a store could be pleasant music to the same hypothetical individual in a different context. One might be tempted to venture that the ear fundamentally seeks out order, preferring the regularity


\(^{302}\) Betke’s most enduring works under the name of Pole are a trio of albums, simply titled 1, 2, and 3, are collected in Pole, 123, ~scape SC 54C, 2008, compact disc.

of a tone to the inharmonic waves of white noise, but this is an argument best left to structuralists. Furthermore, we cannot simply associate inharmonic waves with noise, for even a simple sine wave can serve as an irritant under the right conditions.\textsuperscript{304} If noise can only be defined subjectively, then it has no metaphysical essence and there is not much to say; noise is potentially anything and potentially nothing.

Varèse states, “anything new in music has always been called noise,” furthering the idea of noise as annoying, or misunderstood, sound; “but after all,” he continues, “what is music but organized noises?”\textsuperscript{305} Difficulty arises in parsing Varèse’s statement because he first uses the word ‘noise’ in its subjective capacity and then switches to a neutral meaning of noise, which might be better expressed as ‘sound’—abstract units of aural phenomena without a connotation of consonance or dissonance. The statement is interesting because it displays the effort of avant-gardists to take the ostensibly non-musical and reframe it as legitimately musical, a tactic that prefigures Jacques Attali’s views on noise.

\textit{Symbolic}

For futurists like Luigi Russolo, noise had a metonymic (and sometimes even directly representational) relationship to the increasing urbanization of the western world. In \textit{The Art of Noises}, Russolo advocates for futurist musicians to overcome the “limited variety of timbres that the orchestra possesses” through the expanded timbral pallet of “noise.”\textsuperscript{306} After their

\textsuperscript{304} In the case of the “Sonic Teenager Deterrent” (aka, the “Mosquito”), a sine wave around 16 kHz occupies a range typically audible only to youth and thus creates an irritant that floats beneath their conscious perception discouraging loitering in public spaces while leaving adults (ostensibly less likely to loiter in public) oblivious to its presence. Brandon LaBelle, \textit{Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life} (New York: Continuum, 2010), 186-188.


experiences in the Italo-Turkish War, the futurists wanted a way to express the experience of modern warfare, and Russolo found that while most of the battles were fought under the cover of night with a limited visual component, the sounds of war—mechanical and metallic—were what stuck with him, and therefore music was the ideal medium to render the experience of war. Throughout his essay, “The Noises of War,” Russolo offers descriptions of the aural experience, suggesting ways that noise might aestheticize warfare.

Russolo’s position on noise is symbolic, but also subjective, although it is not clear which position he takes: is noise a beauty lost on the majority of listeners, or is noise wonderful because of its inherent ugliness? Perhaps this ambiguity anticipates the paradox of noise qua music that Attali’s theory suggests when applied to Merzbow. Time has shown that the legacy of Russolo’s manifesto tends to be his liberation of timbres found outside of the western orchestral norm, as Merzbow and other such composers cite him as a foundational figure helping to make their work possible; however, many artists at the turn of the 21st century have shed Russolo’s symbolic use of noise, as the next discursive paradigm is founded upon Pierre Schaeffer’s anti-representational theory of acousmology and John Cage’s philosophy of letting sounds be themselves without deterministic structures imposed upon them.

Taking a different approach, one might conceive of noise in a symbolic form where its variance from the culturally standardized codes of music represents a rebellion against normative sociocultural values. Jacques Attali sees music as a symbolic system expressing social meaning. In this capacity, noise is a transitory, rebellious symbol that society has not yet assimilated—an abstract signifier prior to its enmeshment in a knot of culturally assigned signifieds—but it has

307 Russolo refers to it as the Libyan War, as is common in Italy. Russolo, The Art of Noises, 50.

308 Ibid., 49-53.
no special status as a sonic practice that is permanently outside the sphere of music in a given society; eventually, all noise will become an accepted cultural practice and will, ipso facto, lose its status as noise. Just as Varèse observed the art of the early twentieth-century avant-garde slowly move from rejection to (again, grudging) acceptance, Attali writes “despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information.”

I believe that Attali’s idea of music requires a metaphysical transcendence that is not found in historical experience, for a great deal of music remains at the periphery of canonized musical discourse long after it should have been assimilated. A composer like Iannis Xenakis may receive coverage in our histories of Western music, but he is framed as a perennial outsider, notable more for his intrinsic unassimilability than anything else. If Xenakis must be considered “noise” under Attali’s definition, how are we to understand an artist like Merzbow or Galás?

Transcendent

Rather than conceive of noise as extraneous, Christoph Cox proposes that sound is “a continuous, anonymous flux to which human expressions contribute but which precedes and exceeds these expressions. […] [He proposes] that this sonic flux is composed of two dimensions: a virtual dimension that [he terms] ‘noise’ and an actual dimension that consists of contractions of this virtual continuum: for example, music and speech.” This definition derives from Leibniz’s idea of the perceptual unconscious, where complex phenomena are absorbed at an unconscious level only to emerge as clear ideas once a structuring and limiting system has been instituted. This idea has an obvious precedent in the technique of subtractive synthesis

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311 The anti-Cartesian arguments of Leibniz foreshadow Freud’s own theory of the unconscious mind. For both philosophers, the mind is a powerful perceiving device that pulls out details that slip beneath conscious
where a complex sound (e.g., white noise) is filtered to produce a more harmonically focused sound. It also evokes the Fourier transform, which takes a complex timbre and breaks it into its constituent sine waves. The idea of transcendent noise avoids the issue of subjectivity, as well as composer intent versus the corruption of intent, but it also downplays the possibility of noise carrying intrinsic meaning as a totality. It does, however, fit nicely within the Lacanian framework as outlined in chapter 1.

Along similar lines to Cox, Paul Valéry writes, “a sound makes into a semi-presence the whole system of sounds—and that is what primitively distinguishes sound from noise. Noise gives ideas of the causes that produce it, dispositions of actions, reflexes—but not a state of imminence of an intrinsic family of sensations.” Here, again, we find noise as a transcendent sonic category from which sound is extracted and may begin to take on specific meaning, but as with Cox’s conception, the delineation breaks down when faced with two acoustically equal sonic events, one intentional (and imbued with meaning) and the other unintentional (with no intended meaning). Nevertheless, Valéry’s idea of noise as a transcendent category is, like Cox’s, a useful idea to retain when Lacanian theory is in play.

Phenomenological

The discourse of the practices known as “noise music” and “sound art” are riddled with phenomenological accounts of noise advocating the Schaefferian concept of acousmology—a method of reduced listening that seeks to focus all attention on timbre, free of any context.  

perception and uses them to form ideas and connections while the subject remains oblivious to this process. A key difference is that the Leibnizian subject’s conscious and unconscious mind work together harmoniously to the benefit of the subject, whereas the Freudian subject’s unconscious mind creates discord between itself and the conscious mind, often exhibiting a will of its own and causing psychical strife in the subject.


This tends to lead to shortsighted, reductionist readings of works because once one has surrendered to the ostensible impossibility of talking about music, all that remains is silent enjoyment of context-free sound. In this manner of thinking, there is no difference between noise and non-noise; they are both equally valid sonic occurrences. The phenomenological approach is likely attractive to so many within the noise music scene because value judgments are a non-issue—sound simply is—but Seth Kim-Cohen goes to great lengths to show how phenomenological under-readings—a sort of lingua franca for sound artists—repeatedly miss out on fascinating conceptual readings that add a further level of depth to the work.\textsuperscript{314}

From a purely philosophical position, reducing sound to pure, neutral timbre is useless if we are trying to arrive at an understanding of noise in contradistinction to whatever noise is not; however, Salomé Voegelin approaches her phenomenology of music through Merleau-Ponty whose philosophy involves an emphasis on the corporeality of phenomena, especially as they relate to the perceiving body. Her definitions of noise as sound that “deafens [her] ears to anything else,”\textsuperscript{315} makes noise relative in the Cagean sense, but as she develops the idea, she adds a physical component that, while not universally applicable, captures the crucial assaultive nature of the particular type of noise we find in Zorn’s \textit{Astronome}, Galás’s \textit{Wild Women}, and Merzbow’s work in general. The category of noise is not contingent upon deafening volumes, but in the case of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, volume is an essential experiential component.

Naturally, a phenomenological conception of noise will be subjective, but unlike Cage’s subjective idea of noise (i.e., sound that one finds unpleasant), Voegelin’s noise does not imply a

\textsuperscript{314} Seth Kim-Cohen, \textit{In the Blink of an Ear: Toward A Non-Cochlear Sonic Art} (New York: Continuum, 2009), 121-148.

\textsuperscript{315} Salomé Voegelin, \textit{Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art} (New York: Continuum, 2010), 44.
value judgment because it simply demands, for better or worse, the listener’s undivided attention. Although aural annoyance may not interest her, Voegelin incorporates a unique element that rarely pertains to expressive culture: actual physical danger. Russolo may have aestheticized war, but his idea of music was close enough to concert music of the early twentieth-century that one might find it distasteful, but not threatening. In the 21st century, for example, we find sound used to create extreme states of psychical discomfort for inmates in secret military prisons, and even within the realm of aesthetic practice, there is now the potential danger of hearing loss during many types of concerts. Every time one listens to Merzbow or many works by Galás and Zorn, there is a choice: does one experience the music as intended and play it as loud as possible, even to the point of pain; or, does one save oneself from certain hearing damage and weaken the composer’s work by attenuating the volume to a safe level? In the 21st century, sound may be not only ugly, but also physically dangerous.

3.2 The Paradox of Noise/Music

It is very unlikely that Attali was imagining these turn of the century radical composers when he wrote *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, but his theory nevertheless exposes a paradox within the idea of noise qua music: If the practice of noise carries within itself an anarchist sentiment—a desire to transgress boundaries—what happens when one begins to accept this noise as a legitimate expressive act within a cultural system? If the point of noise music is to be reviled, there is no need for Merzbow to release hundreds of CDs, to say nothing of the hundreds of less visible figures in the noise music milieu. One CD of transgressive, perpetually unlistenable noise should be sufficient as a conceptual artistic statement, much in the way that Duchamp did not need to create an endless series of urinals to fill galleries across the

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world in order for his message of rebellion, context, and conceptualism to propagate throughout the art world.

If a composer spends multiple decades working in a style, producing hundreds of works—many of which are perceptually similar, at least on a surface level—then we must assume that the artist is either wholly unoriginal, or that he or she is creating this work because it is at least partially constructive of some deeper form of expression than simplistic destruction for its own sake. This problematizes the idea of noise as a corruption of signal as well as Attali’s idea of noise as a harbinger of the future of society. In this sense, noise becomes signal, and that which is signal can exist within a cultural system.

This raises an ontological question: can radical music be music and noise simultaneously? Provided we do not insist on the binary opposition of information theory, we might conceive of noise in a nomadic sense, where it has the potential to exist within the same plane as music while slipping across the structural and delimiting borders of conventional music in a given culture. This allows noise to retain a significant portion of its oppositional quality while existing within a general field of music. At the lowest level of distinction, noise exists within the plane of general expressive culture, provided there is authorial intent behind it. From that point, the extent to which a specific cultural construct allows noise to pass within the boundaries of music is decided on a case-by-case basis. Noise will continue to transgress the boundaries of music, but for most definitions of music, noise will remain an outsider.

One may contend that this creates an asymmetrical power relationship between noise and music and reinforces ideas of beauty and ugliness, which surely must be subjective; but, I do not wish to retain value judgments that would define noise as the poor, wretched “other” of purified music, for there is great power in the disruptive force of noise. Bataille wrote that to accept the
writings of the Marquis de Sade as literature, as opposed to obscene works of horror, is to rob them of their disruptive power, thereby negating their threat to morality. Likewise, so long as noise retains its minority position, it retains the right to nomadicism, to freedom, to unrestricted disruption. The only way to conquer noise is to put it on equal footing with conventional music because only then will it be subject to the bondage of cultural codes.

Ultimately, noise qua music must retain its paradoxical essence if it is to have meaning apart from music. It may exhibit an oppositional relationship or it may exhibit a relationship of pure difference, but either way, noise cannot be subsumed by music. The listener must hear the noise as both noise and music (i.e., not-noise) simultaneously. In this way, noise shares much with Lacan’s dialectic of desire, where prohibition and transgression are absolutely dependent upon each other to sustain themselves and to give each other meaning. As I described in the previous chapter (section 4.1.4), the phenomenon of jouissance is the paradoxical motivator that maintains the desire to experience noise as both music and noise, impossibly and simultaneously.

When we take all of the above into consideration in the context of a composer like Merzbow, two elements are paramount: the paradoxical relationship to music and the expressive intent behind the sound. Referring to Merzbow’s work as “noise music” tames the word noise into a mere qualifier of music, which does not do justice to the otherness and subversive power of noise. Moreover, it broadens the meaning of music to the point of effective meaninglessness. After the above survey of conceptions of noise, I believe that simply referring to Merzbow’s work as “noise” is too vague because one does not necessarily need to understand the word “noise” as carrying authorial intent, nor does one necessarily understand noise as anything other than a matter of taste. Paul Hegarty’s history of noise in music uses “noise/music” as its title,

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which is a nice way of highlighting both the connectedness and the difference of noise and music, but there again one may reduce this distinction to music/non-music, non-music potentially meaning many things not limited to noise, such as silence.\footnote{318 Paul Hegarty, \textit{Noise/Music: A History} (New York: Continuum, 2008).}

For these reasons, I propose the term “expressive noise.” Expressive noise implies authorial intent—the most fundamental element of art—as well as a separation from music that allows noise to be its own expressive category, thereby highlighting its oppositional relationship to music. The creator may seek to minimize his or her determination of the final outcome, but the most elemental artistic enunciation or circumscription remains in effect, for even the most indeterminate works by John Cage, for instance, retain a trace of his presence as the instigator of the work. Authorial intent is an important component of expressive noise because from the position of the auditor, one could equate the experience of perceiving expressive noise with the experience of being in an uncomfortable sonic environment within which one has no control over the sound. The experience may be similar in some cases depending upon the sort of knowledge the auditor has about the work in question (i.e., can he or she understand the expressive noise as an artistic statement?), but the distinction between intentional and non-intentional sound is crucial when looking for meaning within a sonic expression. While the auditor may choose to find meaning within non-intentional sound (as in the case of Cage’s \textit{4'33''}), the sort of meaning that I propose to find, as outlined in chapter one, requires an enunciating subject who puts forth a specifically aesthetic statement.

It is also important to understand that my reasons for eliminating the word “music” have nothing to do with the reasons that so-called sound artists have for eschewing the term music. Although no two sound artists share the same definition of sound art, common themes include a rejection of the Western art music canon, a belief in the possibility of \textit{acousmatic} listening, a
greater importance attached to site-specific works, a struggle to define their practices independent of traditional ideas of music, and an attempt to divest themselves of an aesthetic history that they would sooner not come to terms with (even if this aesthetic history is inescapable). Rather than trying to negate a connection to music for the above reasons, my intention for choosing “expressive noise” instead of “expressive noise music” has to do with a mutually dependent relationship between music and noise, or as we have seen in chapter one, taboo and transgression.
1.0 Introduction

Within John Zorn’s exceedingly diverse oeuvre, Astronome stands out as one of his most challenging works both conceptually and sonically. Over its forty-five-minute duration, one must confront a cacophonous barrage of sound presented with a minimum of conventional features, all surrounded by occult themes are that never explicitly articulated. From the lack of discernible pitches and form to the wordless libretto, Astronome provides little to steady one’s self, and the experience is aggressively alienating. However, through a hermeneutic investigation, I will show how the work not only communicates a coherent theme throughout, but also how the musical materials actually support the meaning of the work through sound.

I will begin with some background on Zorn, his many compositional styles, and his philosophy of music. Along the way I will make a case for reading Zorn as a radical composer and demonstrate the value of my thick interpretation hermeneutic. My analysis of Astronome will begin by examining the influence of Zorn’s dedicatees—Edgard Varèse, Aleister Crowley, and Antonin Artaud—on the music materials and themes of the work. I will then show how the contributions of the three dedicatees can work together to form a coherent thematic reading of Astronome. From there, I will introduce a few additional Lacanian concepts that will aid in understanding how the sonic material of Astronome is able to achieve the thematic goals of the work. Above all, I will show how Zorn uses loudness, the voice, and expressive noise to create an extreme expressive language that forces the auditor to undergo a similarly extreme experience.
2.0 John Zorn

Attempting to summarize John Zorn’s creative output is a bit like attempting to summarize the multifarious streams of Western music in the twentieth century. In both cases, unprecedented stylistic diversity appears to be unified only by virtue of the timespan in which it occurs. As Zorn approaches the fortieth year of his career, he has written in virtually every conceivable style from virtuosic solos works like *Carny* (1991) and concertos like *Aporias: Requia for Piano and Orchestra* (1994) to the lounge music of the “Dreamers” ensemble (active: 2008—) and the hardcore, thrash-jazz miniatures of Naked City (active: 1988-1993). The disparate musical threads in Zorn’s oeuvre are held together by little more than the personal logic of his aesthetics. Ornette Coleman can exist alongside Mozart because Zorn insists on the equality of their musical import and the interoperability of their respective expressive languages.

Since the mid-1990s, Zorn has had a peripheral presence in musicological scholarship, although this typically amounts to the appearance of his name on lists of so-called “postmodern” composers. Save for a few articles and essays, Zorn would not be the central focus of an extended scholarly engagement until John Brackett’s monograph in 2008, which had the unenviable task of introducing and summarizing such a chameleonic composer.\(^\text{319}\)

By the time that Zorn began to receive substantive musicological attention, mainstream music journalists had already cemented his reputation as a “bad boy,” a “Downtown hero,” and a “postmodern prankster.”\(^\text{320}\) For his part, Zorn has done little to counter this mythology, and in fact, he seems to encourage it with antagonistic, profanity-laced interviews. If we are to confront a work like *Astronome* with the utmost accuracy, we must address this mythology, for if one can

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\(^{320}\) For instance, see Francis Davis, “‘Zorn’ for ‘Anger’: The composers John Zorn likes being the bad boy of new music,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 267 (1991), 97-100.
determine that Zorn is just a “bad boy” irreverently poking fun at cherished musical traditions, it is easy to dismiss his work as a single joke that has overstayed its welcome. I believe that what has been widely interpreted as irreverence is actually iconoclasm—a genuine attack on a value structure instead of a mere lack of respect. Moreover, one could make the mistake of thinking that Zorn has an attitude of irreverence toward, say, the Viennese masters, when this is completely backward. It is not the composers and their music that Zorn attacks; it is the superiority implicit in their canonization as masters of “serious” and “artistic” music. In one instance, Zorn actually compares himself to Mozart, arguing that if Mozart were alive today, he too would be exploring new instruments like the electric guitar and turntable as serious instruments with artistic potential.\(^{321}\) In some respects, Zorn does not see a fundamental difference between himself and Western art music composers of the past, although any willingness on the part of Mozart to experiment with new instruments is hardly tantamount to the much more aesthetically transgressive work that Zorn sometimes creates, such as *Astronome.*

### 2.1 Zorn and Postmodernism

Postmodernism, as a term, remains both ambiguous and controversial. There is a tendency to collapse its multiple meanings and uses into a single definition, and this leads to inevitable misunderstanding and condemnation. When discussing art, there are two important senses of the word: the first concerns philosophical postmodernism, which involves skepticism toward hegemonic structures;\(^{322}\) the second concerns aesthetic postmodernism, which involves

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\(^{321}\) Zorn states: “If Mozart were alive today, believe me, he’d be incorporating all those instruments [electric guitar, drum set, electric organ, saxophone, turntable] and writing for them. And he would also be listening to all this different music that is around. It’s not an unusual thing for a creative person to be interested in creativity.” Bill Milkowski, “John Zorn: The Working Man,” *Jazz Times*, May, 2009, accessed May 6, 2013, http://jazztimes.com/articles/24597-john-zorn-the-working-man.

an array of stylistic techniques such as intertextuality, quotation and borrowing, collage, and ironic juxtaposition. Many of these aesthetic features are made possible by the philosophical tenets of postmodernism, but even when a composer does not employ aesthetic postmodernism, philosophical postmodernism may still affect his or her work.

Zorn is frequently referred to as a postmodern composer, and in some ways, this label is apropos. In his music we find elements of aesthetic postmodernism such as a fusion of disparate styles, a blurring of the distinction between so-called “high art” and “low art,” the use of heterogeneous collage techniques, less emphasis on continuity and cohesion, and plentiful intertextuality. These are stylistic features common to aesthetic postmodernism; however, Zorn also exhibits traits of philosophical postmodernism in his skepticism toward hegemonic formations such as the Western art music canon. The postmodern straw man composer is said to enjoy smashing art and popular music together for the sake of irony while constructing a patchwork of depthless surfaces—and indeed the critics of postmodern aesthetics have gleefully trounced this straw man—but few of these critiques hold up under scrutiny, for a composer like Zorn is not simply piecing together surface features for a cheap laugh. Rather, there is a deeper philosophical message behind his use of aesthetic postmodern techniques. In Forbidden Fruit (first recorded, 1987)—a chamber work for string quartet, voice, and turntables—Zorn presents

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324 For a general polemic against aesthetic postmodernism, see Jean Baudrillard, The Conspiracy of Art (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005).
direct quotations of canonic works such as Mozart’s B-flat Major Piano Sonata and Beethoven’s *Große Fuge*. The use of these quotations reveal a number of things: first, their existence alongside newly composed material suggests a sort of equivalence of musical heirerachies of value; second, their context within Zorn’s own string quartet explicitly demonstrates Zorn’s indebtedness to the past; and third, their presence is liberating insofar as it signals a changing mentality toward European music, for the European hegemony that Cowell and Partch protested has ceased to pose an overwhelming threat and can now be reintroduced without necessarily implying artistic superiority. The very fact that an American composer can situate his or her artistic voice in communion with (rather than in opposition to) the European tradition signals the end of the Americanist experimental music project and indicates the arrival of the postmodern mentalities, even if postmodern aesthetics are not always used.

Reading certain works as aesthetically postmodern will undoubtedly lead to interesting interpretations. David Brackett, for instance, frames Zorn as a postmodern composer, but this is convincing because Brackett’s framing is based primarily on Zorn’s collage works (e.g., *Spillane, Godard*) and the music of Naked City—in essence, the music that Zorn was famous for at the time. Other works do not fit within the purview of postmodern aesthetics as easily. *Redbird* (1995), for instance, could be described as aesthetically postmodern only insofar as Zorn seems to be channeling Morton Feldman’s compositional techniques (e.g., limited pitch material, ample repetition, long duration, delicate timbres). Otherwise, the work fits within the sort of late modernist practice that Feldman continued to explore into the 1980s.

Even within a collage work like *Spillane*, however, Zorn exhibits some modernist tendencies as well. Despite the use of pulp novels in an art music context, Zorn is an admitted

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“control freak”—a supreme author creating a situation where he alone sees the full picture.326 Some improvisation and collaboration are built into the work, but this is a much more calculated, controlled endeavor than Cagean indeterminacy.327 His chamber works from the twenty-first-century such as _LeMômo_ (1999), _777_ (2007), and _A Rebours_ (2010) are even closer to musical modernism insofar as they are completely notated, are filled with the sort of extended techniques popular with avant-garde and experimental composers, have few discernible connections to the musical past, and employ a novel musical syntax.

Looking to _Astronome_ specifically, we find little evidence to suggest a postmodern reading. There is no real borrowing from music history, there is no discernible irony, this is not a collage work, and there are no recognizable quotations; rather, Zorn is using a language much closer to post-1945 modernism where the absolute purity of the concept is placed before (and often against) the idea of historical beauty, where radical means convey a radical message. Rather than the sort of cultural and historical borrowing found in Zorn’s more postmodern works, _Astronome_ exhibits a level of cultural transgression and comparative lack of referentiality to existing music that is more in line with musical modernism. The use of a rock trio instrumentation invites comparisons to popular music, but I am strongly against the tendency to examine Zorn’s music as popular music, even if popular music now approaches the same sort of cultural legitimacy that art music enjoys. In the case of _Astronome_, to read the music as popular music is to fail to see beyond the rock trio instrumentation while ignoring the fact that the other features are virtually antithetical to anything found in popular music. A popular music reading

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326 Liner notes to John Zorn, _Spillane_, 1987 by Elektra Nonesuch, 7559-79172-2, Compact Disc.

327 “You need to have a certain rein on people so that the compositional integrity is kept intact. You know, there’s a frame around a composition and there are things that belong in the frame and things that don’t. And it’s the bandleader-composer’s job to make sure that everything fits. But the most important thing is to keep that balance, where everything belongs but the players are injecting themselves into the work and doing their best. Duke Ellington was a perfect example of that.” Milkowski, 2009.
also contradicts Zorn’s compositional mentality, for even if he engages with the stylistic languages of various popular music traditions, he nevertheless presents himself as an artistic genius in the Romanticist sense. This, therefore, solidly implies a Western art music mentality, even though Zorn rails against the hierarchic of value with which it is concomitant.

This is not to say that popular music scholarship has nothing to offer my project. David Brackett’s analysis of Elvis Costello’s “Pills and Soap” in Interpreting Popular Music combines the best of musicology (analysis of the pitch content, without the common pitfall of focusing mostly on the song lyrics) and ethnomusicology (analysis of the sociocultural context of Costello’s writing and of the music’s audience). Brackett even takes the laudable step of looking beyond traditional analytic techniques for answers, as evidenced by his use of spectral graphs to examine texture, as well as a graphic gestural notation to show vocal inflections that fall between the cracks of traditional notation. Although harmonic and formal analysis may serve certain types of music rather well, with so much emphasis placed on idiosyncratic performance and timbre in popular music, accounting for the intervallic relationships offers only a simplistic reading of harmonically basic, but richly nuanced works. Brackett realizes that not all of the tools of classical musicology are going to serve emerging musical forms and styles, and thus he calls upon new techniques to serve his purpose. In this way, I too recognize the need for new tools to face the sort of hermeneutic challenges posed by a work such as Astronome, which is precisely why I propose that we view the work as radical music and subject it to my thick interpretation hermeneutic, as discussed in chapter one.

2.2 Zorn as a Radical Composer

In many ways, Zorn is a paragon of radical composition. Looking back to the features of radical music as outlined in the previous chapter, we find a number of similarities. First, much of Zorn’s music is inherently transgressive sonically, pictorially, and philosophically. For instance, consider Zorn’s band, Naked City.\(^{329}\) The instrumentation is straightforward—guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, saxophone, and vocals—and the music is anything but. In the course of one forty-second song, we hear a kaleidoscopic array of styles all smashed together, as if a hyperactive child was flipping through channels on the television. The song “Speedfreaks” is an often-cited example because it perfectly encapsulates the Naked City style: over the course of thirty-two bars at 200 beats per minute, the band changes styles—drastically and yet seamlessly—in each bar. One could interpret this in a postmodern sense and speak about the phenomenon of zapping or the elevation of stylistic surfaces over structural, developmental depth, but as John Brackett notes in his harmonic analysis, there is structural coherence underneath the admittedly zany stylistic strata.\(^{330}\) I would add that the way Zorn uses the familiar thirty-two-bar song form is a statement regarding his dismissal of hierarchical stylistic relationships. In “Speedfreaks,” each style receives its due in almost equal measure, for jazz exists alongside reggae, which collides with country, which leads to hard rock, which leads to funk and thrash and lounge and so on. Here, Zorn transgresses boundaries of taste, style, and musical hierarchies of value.

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\(^{329}\) Naked City consisted of John Zorn, saxophone; Bill Frisell, guitar; Fred Frith, bass; Wayne Horvitz, keyboards; Joey Baron, drums; and, unofficially, Yamatsuka Eye.

Astronome is transgressive in numerous ways. The thoroughgoing dissonance and sonic power aside, the work is also transgressive in the way it radically refigures the genre of opera. What is traditionally considered an elite genre—the height of refined beauty—is now gloriously debased with sonic cacophony of a decidedly noisy nature. Not only are the beautiful arias missing, but also the poetic libretti are replaced with grunts and screams, and in fact, there is a lack of many of the fundamental components of Western music such as melody, harmony, and discernible form. Most fundamentally, Zorn completely dismisses conventional aesthetics with this work that is deliberately ugly by conventional aesthetic standards. Although he is hardly the first composer to flout the necessity of aesthetic pleasure in music, his voice counts amongst the most consistently vigorous. In the context of expressive noise, two aspects are notable: the use of acoustic noise in the distorted electric bass guitar and the use of subjective noise in Zorn’s deviant approach to opera.

Second, much of Zorn’s music uses an extreme expressive language, but this is never merely for shock value. For instance, the brutal thrash-jazz of Spy Vs. Spy (1988) is a re-imagining of Ornette Coleman tunes through the language of hardcore punk using extreme sound levels to recreate the sense of aural and aesthetic shock felt by the audiences who first encountered Coleman’s initial explorations of free jazz. Again, Astronome is an excellent example, insofar as the intensity and volume are particularly excessive, even within Zorn’s oeuvre. Although one might draw comparisons to certain Naked City and Painkiller albums, instead of a blast of sonic aggression lasting for a matter of minutes (or seconds), Zorn now asks the listener to endure this style over the course of a forty-five-minute work. Electric guitar with heavy distortion is idiomatic to the sort of heavy metal style that Zorn references in Astronome, but now the distortion has become so heavy that the individual pitches are obscured. The fact
that Zorn uses a distorted bass guitar only exacerbates the difficulty of discerning pitches, for low frequencies are all the more difficult to pick out, even without intentional distortion. This brings the phenomenological aspect of expressive noise into play, because the sound overtakes the spectator both in terms of psychical disturbance and physical discomfort.

Third, Zorn has deliberately avoided any sort of support from commercial and academic institutions, with the brief exception of four albums released on Nonesuch Records and a single record released by CBS/Sony. Although Zorn has supported himself, in part, through CD sales, he chose to start his own record label to ensure that he reaches his audience unfiltered by pragmatic considerations such as marketability or political correctness. Despite the fact that Zorn uses recordings as a mode of financial support, Tzadik functions much differently than a normal commercial record label because where a conventional record label has certain financial concerns that supplant the primacy of autonomous artistic expression, Tzadik operates on an egalitarian profit-sharing basis. This notion of the romanticized, autonomous artist was instilled in Zorn during his early twenties, and the influence of Jack Smith is particularly notable. Zorn states that, “Jack was a symbol of purity, plain and simple. He never compromised in his life. It was not even in his vocabulary. He never even put himself into the situation where he could compromise—it was not even a question, it never even came up.”

Near the beginning of his career, Zorn rather famously quarreled with Nonesuch because he wanted to use some very controversial images for the cover of his second Naked City album. This experience, along with the pride of indigent independence and his deep-seated antiestablishment mentality led Zorn to

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331 The Nonesuch albums include *The Big Gundown* (1986), *Spillane* (1987), *Spy Vs. Spy: The Music of Ornette Coleman* (1988), and *Naked City* (1989). The CBS/Sony album is *Cynical Hysterie Hour* (1989). This album was only released in Japan and has been subsequently rereleased on Zorn’s Tzadik label.

eschew any sort of support structure in the future.\textsuperscript{333} As Zorn puts it, “Jack [Smith] and Richard [Foreman] and Ken Jacobs really instilled in me the love for the underappreciated and the love for doing things under adverse conditions, on small budgets—how money can be like handcuffs rather than something that frees you up.”\textsuperscript{334} One could argue that it is easier to hold these uncompromising values when one has achieved the sort of success that Zorn has, but one could just as easily argue that these uncompromising values led to the success that Zorn now enjoys.

Fourth, in many cases, Zorn’s music places emphasis on timbre instead intervallic relationships. Granted, certain works like \textit{kol nidre} (1996) and \textit{Contes de Fées} (1999) are carefully notated and use some sort of pitch organization scheme, but outside of his “concert music,”\textsuperscript{335} intricate pitch relationships are secondary to timbre and mood. Because there are so few moments in \textit{Astronome} where one can discern specific pitches, most of the listener’s attention is focused on the quality of sound created in the extended techniques employed by Patton, Dunn, and Baron. In the rare moments where discernible pitches do emerge, these seem to function as moments of auditory rest, but their appearances are too fragmented to form much in the way of melodic expectation.

Fifth, the material objects of Zorn’s compositional work tend to be recordings instead of scores. In some cases this is due to the fact that he has not created a traditional score that could be realized without the composer’s involvement. This is the case with Zorn’s file card works such as \textit{Spillane}, \textit{Elegy}, and \textit{Astronome}. The creation of these works involves a mix of notated

\textsuperscript{333} One might argue that the profit-sharing structure of his Tzadik record label acts as a support structure, but insofar as Zorn’s own recordings routinely outsell those of any other artist, Zorn still carries most of the risk for the label.

\textsuperscript{334} Gagne, 513.

fragments, oral instructions, and incrementally recorded sections that Zorn builds into the completed work. When creating music with this method, Zorn alone sees the bigger picture and knows where the piece is headed. The compositional work is only finished once the recording is completed, and thus, the recording stands as the central object of the work.

In other cases, Zorn does create a fully notated score that allows performers to realize the music independently; however, even in these instances, it seems that Zorn’s emphasis remains with the recording as the primary object of the work. The works are all eventually released on a CD on his Tzadik label complete with artwork and text that Zorn has selected as an extension of the aural actuality of the music. Furthermore, Zorn closely supervises the recording process to ensure that the release comes as close as possible to his exacting specifications. Although he may appreciate and encourage subsequent interpretations from different performers, there is always the sense that the recording as released by Tzadik is the urtext.

Sixth, Zorn’s aesthetic extremism extends beyond the sonic, often in a controversial manner. This tends to happen in two ways: in the artwork on Zorn’s album covers and in the persona that Zorn cultivates in interviews. It is not at all clear that these are “extra-musical” facets of the work because they are such an integral part of shaping the listener’s perception. Looking first to the artwork, Zorn states, “with me, the packaging is essential—that is my artwork…and I want to give people as many clues as I can. […] I’m trying to be as clear as I can, and when I put the pictures on the covers that I do, it’s really to tune you in to what’s going on.” While conceiving of a given work, Zorn will compile inspiring images, some of which

336 “I don’t really believe in the idea that you just write it and then you put it on the shelf, the way Charles Ives did. I write it for people I know, I get the best people to do it, I find the best possible venue, we rehearse it the best possible way and then we present it to people in as pure a way as possible.” Miłkowski, 2009.

337 Gagne, 531.
will often appear somewhere in the finished album’s artwork. Sometimes they are quite provocative, such as the stills from sadomasochistic Japanese films featured on Naked City’s *Torture Garden*. Other times they are completely benign, such as the use of Agnes Martin’s abstract expressionist paintings for the cover of Zorn’s tribute to her, *Redbird* (1995). Either way, the effect of the artwork is remarkable. In Ellie Hisama’s assessment of Zorn in “Postcolonialism on the Make,” she scarcely mentions the sound of his music, focusing almost exclusively on condemning his album artwork and track titles.\(^{338}\) Similarly, in his monograph on Zorn, John Brackett dedicates one of his four chapters to the artwork of Zorn’s albums, albeit in a less subjective and more analytical sense.\(^{339}\)

The brash, antagonistic persona that Zorn displays publically also plays an important role in shaping listener expectations and perception. There are plenty of anecdotes that speak to his concert antics, such as the Knitting Factory performance when Zorn told a loud group of people (including Madeline Albright) to “shut the fuck up.” Interviews are also an important outlet for Zorn to construct his “bad boy” personality. When asked about the way he blends high art and low art, Zorn replied,

> This is something I really react strongly against, the idea of high art and low art. I mean, that distinction’s a bunch of fucking bullshit. That’s the kind of thing created to make it look like you listen to classical music while you’re sipping champagne and with rock music you’re boogeying with a bottle of beer and jazz you’re in some dirty club with a shot of whiskey or some shit like that. That’s a fucking bunch of bullshit! There’s good music and great music and phoney music in every genre and all the genres are the fucking same.\(^{340}\)

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In this colorful rant, Zorn is espousing a very postmodernist statement on aesthetics in a deliberately profane manner. Here we find the core of Zorn’s dismissal of the elevation of the Romantic canon in Western culture—the essential core of his argument for the abolishment of musical hierarchies of value.

Because Zorn’s work is fundamentally transgressive, aesthetically extreme, avoids commercial institutional support, favors timbre over intervallic relationships, is more focused on recordings than scores, and uses extra-sonic means to support the aesthetic extremism, I argue that Zorn is a thoroughly radical composer. However, as with many radical composers, Zorn does not always compose in a radical style. Comparing Astronome to the sort of music he writes for the Dreamers ensemble is a bit like comparing Robert Mapplethorp to Thomas Kinkade. The music he writes in these instances is neither transgressive nor extreme; it is simple, pleasant music that appears to emphasize sensuous pleasure over confrontational aggression. The presence of these compositions does not make Zorn any less radical. It merely shows that he is multidimensional and is also able to engage in music in a way that has more to do with sensuous pleasure than the philosophically charged work that typifies his style.

As for Zorn’s own concept of himself, we find that he despises any sort of label, especially if it relates to postmodernism. In 1998, Zorn stated that, “composers don’t think in terms of boxes and genres. They just do what they do, and they love good music, whatever hits them. [...] Maybe once I’m dead people will look back and figure out what the hell I was doing. I personally would rather not know!”

Two years later in the inaugural preface to his Arcana book series, Zorn is even more forceful: “Rock. Jazz. Punk. Dada. Beat. These words and their longer cousins, the ism-family…are used to commodify and commercialize an artist’s complex

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personal vision. This terminology is not about understanding. It never has been. It’s about money.”

In the former quote, Zorn is expressing a sentiment very common to artists, especially insofar as artists tend to embrace the Romantic notion of a genius individual expressing something profoundly personal and removed from any practical consideration. There is no reason to expect that Zorn would be more pragmatic about definitions and labels than anyone else. The latter quote, however, seems to be a stronger reaction against not only the music industry, but against art criticism in general. I believe that part of this may be explained by the aforementioned mainstream music journalists who all too easily labeled Zorn a postmodernist and found themselves with a handy rubric for evaluating Zorn’s work without needing to confront each new work in a rigorous manner. Although Zorn would undoubtedly disapprove of my labeling of him as a radical composer, my purpose is to situate him within (and against) the larger field of Western musical practice precisely to lead to understanding in a rigorous, substantive manner. Undoubtedly, Zorn would prefer to be considered as a completely singular entity beyond label or categorization. This may be an important discursive tactic for an artist in a Romanticist mindset who wishes to present him or herself as utterly unique, but it is disingenuous to act as though one is beyond categorization. Without creating musical-historical concepts to understand the work of composers, the creation of reference points is impossible. Far from trying to avoid a nuanced engagement through the use of an existing set of opinions, the act of situating Zorn within the context of late twentieth-century musical practice actually allows us to understand his work better because we can form connections to practices with which we are already familiar. Approaching each composer only according to his or her specific criteria is not productive because it denies the obvious cultural situation from which the music arises.

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In another interview in 2000, Zorn appears less defensive and when asked what musical tradition he most closely identified with, he responded: “the avant-garde.” This is significant when we consider a similar description that Zorn would offer almost a decade later. Amidst a discussion of the various backgrounds of the musicians with whom he frequently collaborates, Zorn states that, “ultimately, I thought of myself as more of a classical musician who then got involved with different kinds of players [i.e., players from non-classical backgrounds].” This is significant not only because it shows Zorn’s composer-centric mentality, but also because it exposes a connection that he sees between himself and his Western art music heritage. For a composer so often casually framed as a bad boy wrecker of tradition, this statement is tantamount to a paradigm shift in mainstream conceptions of Zorn and his music. As I have said in chapter two, radical composers transgress boundaries and attack power structures like the Western art music canon, but they do not reject the music of the past. This is surely the case with Zorn.

3.0 Astronome

* Astronome * grew out of an informal request for an opera by playwright and avant-garde theater impresario, Richard Foreman. Zorn expressed ambivalence about writing an opera for a few reasons. In the liner notes to *Astronome*, Zorn states that, “writing an opera seems an awful waste of time. Just what role does opera play in our society today? It certainly does not have the kind of impact it had one or two hundred years ago when it was fresh, vibrant, and as much a

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344 Milkowsky, 2009.
part of daily life as eating.” Although many would disagree with Zorn’s assessment of the cultural irrelevancy of opera in the twenty-first century, its status as mass entertainment has certainly changed. As a composer, Zorn always prefers making an impact to creating a work as an intellectual challenge. Rather than the intellectual challenge of staging a traditional opera, Zorn endeavors to create a radical revisionist opera that “recapture[s] the intensity, immediacy and intimacy it once had.” Significantly, this remark echoes the theoretical writings of Artaud, as we will see in section 4.3.

Moreover, Zorn states that he finds it “impossible to set words to music.” Indeed, from Arto Lindsay’s nonsense phonemes in the improvised rock of his Locus Solus project (1983), to the manic screaming of Yamatsuka Eye and Zorn in Naked City, to his bel canto vocal writing in Rituals (2005), Zorn has deliberately avoided texts. When Zorn does use a text, it is almost always presented as spoken word, as in the narration of Spillane or the poetic recitations on the pieces on his New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands (1997) CD. The only linguistic content of Astronome is the vaguely suggestive scene descriptions, such as “A secluded clearing in the woods; a full moon illuminates a coven dancing around a large bonfire; an orgy.” The work does include a libretto, but it is pictorial and there is no explicit narrative created. The libretto features black and white photographs by Scott Irvine that are stylistically suggestive of Joel Peter

345 Liner notes to John Zorn, Astronome, with Joey Baron, Trevor Dunn, and Mike Patton, 2006 by Tzadik, 7359, Compact Disc.

346 Ibid.


348 There are a few exceptions. Naked City’s rendition of Ives’ “The Cage” maintains the sung vocal part, the Dreamers’ cover of “The Christmas Song” involves lyrics sung by Mike Patton in a conventional manner, and the sixth Moonchild CD, Templars: In Sacred Blood, involves some sung text. Considering the size and scope of Zorn’s oeuvre, these are rare exceptions indeed.

349 Liner notes to Zorn, Astronome, 2006.
Witkin, but even within the pictorial libretto, the images serve more to suggest a mood than to establish concrete meaning.

Thus we arrive at the inevitable question: in what sense is Astronome an opera? On the one hand, it is an extended, dramatic work for voice with instrumental accompaniment, it includes a libretto, and it is divided into acts and scenes. On the other hand, the connections to anything that one could easily identify as operatic are tenuous. There is no bel canto singing (or anything that resembles conventional vocal delivery), there is no dramatic narrative, and at the time of the work’s creation, there were no concrete plans to ever actually stage it. Moreover, the division of the acts into scenes is ambiguous, for the CD contains only three long tracks—one for each act. Even if one listens with the pictorial libretto in hand, there is nothing explicit in the music that cues the beginning of a new scene. Ultimately, there is little to tie Astronome to the operatic tradition. The three acts are through-composed and, on the whole, the music is quite sectional, often alternating between structured and freely improvised sections. At times, one of the three musicians is featured in a solo section, although to draw any facile connections between this and the idea of an aria would be an abuse of the term.

3.1 Form in Astronome

Although the music is through-composed, there are a few things to say about form. If there is anything resembling a consistent stylistic trait in Zorn’s variegated oeuvre, it is the use of sound blocks arranged to create a sort of “moment form,” which is a technique he grew to appreciate in some of his favorite composers—Ives, Stravinsky, Xenakis, and Varese—during

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his formative years. Jonathan Kramer’s tidy definition of moment form seems most apt for this analysis, as the music does in fact “consist of a succession of self-contained sections that do not relate to each other in any functionally implicative manner.”

There is exactly one thematic unit that is repeated across two movements, which means that all of the other sections are somewhat discrete. I do not, however, wish to suggest the full rigor of Stockhausen’s original formulation of moment form, in which the elements are far more disparate, insofar as Astronome does not actively eschew unity—it is simply through-composed with little direct repetition and no harmonic telos. Where Stockhausen’s concept seems to be a theoretical maximum of disunity, Zorn speaks of the painstaking process of arranging his musical moments into something that makes musical sense diachronically, even if one section is not, strictly speaking, the result of the previous section.

This leads to the question of creating unity from disparate elements. Stockhausen’s idea of moment form seeks the antithesis of unity, but Zorn does not share this outright rejection. Because he was initially known for his collage works, Zorn has a reputation as a “radical postmodernist” who employs principles of disunity as a modus operandi. Although there are degrees of disunity within some of Zorn’s work, he strives for some sort of large-scale coherence, even in very sectional works like Spillane. He states, “Spillane has a unity in the

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351 “I would say block structures developed over the course of years, through the study of Ives, Xenakis, Stravinsky, film and cartoon soundtracks, and Stockhausen’s ‘moment-form.’” Gagne, 512.


sense that each element deals with some aspect of Mickey Spillane’s world […] You try to give
a composition a coherent sound, the way Varèse used three pitches for *Octandre.* Even if the
music is not unified by a large-scale harmonic structure, Zorn uses other means. *Spillane* uses the
narrative element to create unity, while *Astronome* creates unity by virtue of the consistency in
instrumentation, timbre, theme, and character.

How, then, might one approach Zorn’s moment form? Gordon Fitzell conducts a
phenomenological reading of Zorn’s *Road Runner* (1986) in order to account for the extremely
discontinuous nature of the music (based, of course, on the music of Warner Brothers cartoons),
but this approach of considering each moment in itself as a discrete entity is more appropriate for
a totally non-teleological work. *Astronome* has a sort of forward momentum not present in
Road Runner, which does not carry a great deal of coherency between its blocks. All too often,
works in moment form lead to lengthy play-by-play descriptions that tell the reader nothing he or
she could not learn from simply listening to the work. In the process of finding a method to
understand *Astronome* from a formal perspective, I transcribed the entire work looking for
patterns, only to find nothing significant that was discernible on a large scale. If I were to
provide an account for all of the sections, it would surely fall prey to the problem of endless
phenomenological description. The best one could say is that there is a general alternation
between periods of intensity and rest. This does not mean that loud sections always give way to
soft sections, not does this mean that the alternation occurs with enough periodicity for a listener
to perceive any large-scale outline unless he or she has listened to the work many, many times.

356 Gagne, 530.

357 Gordon Dale Fitzell, “Time-Consciousness and Form in Nonlinear Music” (PhD diss., University of
Zorn states that his “music is put together...in a very...‘filmic’ way, montage. It’s made of separate moments that I compose completely regardless of the next, and then I pull them, cull them together.” The operative word here is “montage.” Looking to the theoretical writings of Sergei Eisenstein, the master and chief theorist of Soviet montage, we find surprising connections: In “Methods of Montage,” Eisenstein uses music as an extended metaphor to speak about the creation of ideas through editing. In Eisensteinian montage, the editing technique is not used merely to provide wider coverage of a single event or to focus the spectator’s attention on a specific element of the mise-en-scène by switching between medium shots and close-ups. Rather, it is used to create meaning that transcends the individual shots through the technique of rhythmic editing and juxtaposition, and in this way, the collection of shots communicate something greater than what is found in the individual shots.

Many of Eisenstein’s ideas are directly applicable to music, such as the case of metric montage, which is explained using musical meter. He writes, “pieces are joined together according to their lengths, in a formula-scheme corresponding to a measure of music...Tension is obtained by the effect of mechanical acceleration by shortening the pieces while preserving the original proportions of the formula.” Zorn inverts this principle in what I will call the “Astronome theme”—the only material to recur in multiple movements. The Astronome theme first occurs at 01:27 in the first act and lasts six bars in the following metrical pattern: 7/16 - 10/16 - 13/16 - 9/16 - 12/16 - 15/16. The entire pattern is typically present two or three times in succession and each repetition lasts around 16 seconds, knocking the listener off balance by the

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rapid onslaught of irregular, mixed meter, like a crazed reference to Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Where film tends to build tension by an acceleration of edits, Zorn creates tension by slightly expanding the meter and thereby deferring the downbeat the listener expects.

Elsewhere, we can find the principles of “rhythmic montage,” which Eisenstein describes as being equally concerned with both the length of the segments and the content within the frame. He writes, “formal tension by acceleration is obtained here by shortening the pieces not only in accordance with the fundamental plan, but also by violating this plan. The most affective violation is by the introduction of material more intense in an easily distinguished tempo.” An example of this occurs in act one, scene two between 09:14 and 09:59. Zorn repeats a four-bar phrase in 7/8 three times, each intercut with seven seconds of freely improvised, non-metered noise blasts. This section is very typical of *Astronome*’s construction. It is a semi-autonomous block of music containing local repetition of small sections within its purview, but does not contain any material that extends beyond the block itself. The sole exception to this principle is the Astronome theme.

Looking ahead to Varèse’s influence, Varèse writes, “each of my works discovers its own form. I could never have fitted them into any of the historical containers.” This is exactly the same process we have seen Zorn describe when speaking of his file card works and his studio works. His process is especially evident in the second act in two ways: upon simply listening to the music, one detects the segmented nature of the music, but does not discern any sort of pattern; and upon examining the contours of the waveform, looking at the act in its entirety, one can see clearly the various segments. As Varèse and Zorn state, the music has determined the

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form such that there is a logical progression from one moment to the next with tasteful alternations of intensities and relaxations. There is even a well-constructed arch of intensity in the second act, peaking in the middle of the 17-minute act with a quasi-inversion of the Astronome theme (07:30-08:20).

3.2 Zorn’s Collaborators

Zorn typically writes with specific musicians in mind, and Astronome is no exception. At the time of this paper, the three musicians have coalesced into a band informally known as the Moonchild Trio. Looking first at drummer Joey Baron, we find a long history of collaborations with Zorn, including his participation in two of Zorn’s most visible bands, Naked City and Masada. As his playing with these groups demonstrates, he is not only a master of many different musical styles, but he is able to quickly change styles, as is required by Zorn’s complex arrangements. Beyond his technical prowess, his playing is marked by an emphasis on timbre and timing—finding the perfect sound for the perfect moment. Oftentimes, rather than presenting a whirlwind of rhythms, Baron’s playing has an elegant simplicity that allows his sound choices to shine through. Although most of Astronome calls for drumming in the conventional sense of hitting the drumheads and cymbals, there are plenty of sections where Baron creates an interesting array of sounds by playing his drum set in an unconventional manner. Amongst other things, these techniques include striking the side of the drums and hardware, dragging various items like chains across the rims and drum heads, and dragging the tip of the drumstick along the grooves of the cymbal to create an eerie, piercing screech.

363 This is in reference to the first Zorn album that featured these musicians in this hardcore, metal, free jazz configuration. John Zorn, Moonchild – Songs Without Words, with Joey Baron, Trevor Dunn, and Mike Patton, 2006 by Tzadik, 7357, Compact Disc.
Baron’s range also includes the ability to shift easily from thunderous metal grooves to delicately nuanced improvisatory sections. In Painkiller, Zorn used Mick Harris, the drummer for the death metal band Napalm Death, whose drumming is uniformly loud and aggressive—a style that is entirely appropriate for the Painkiller music; however, because _Astronome_ calls for not only thrash metal drumming, but also for the creation of subtle percussive textures, we can surmise that Baron’s ability to play in both a metal idiom and a jazz/free improvisation style made him the obvious choice.

Trevor Dunn is known primarily for his work with various rock bands that specialize in musical complexity, detailed arrangements, and stylistic variance within a more popular music idiom. He, along with Mike Patton, was a founding member of Mr. Bungle, and he has gone on to work in other instrumentally virtuosic groups such as Secret Chiefs 3, Fantômas (again with Patton), and Trevor Dunn’s Trio-Convulsant.

Dunn is responsible for virtually all of the pitched material, and he is also responsible for providing the “electric guitar” impression so critical in a metal idiom, but this is not to say that one can necessarily discern pitches in his playing with ease. Rather, the tones are clouded by extremely heavy distortion to the point that one perceives contours above all else—low versus high, static lines versus multi-pitched lines. Like Baron, Dunn uses a number of extended techniques to create unusual timbres. These extended techniques coupled with an array of effects (e.g., chorus, various types of distortion, backward looping) lend a great deal of variety to the sound of Dunn’s electric bass.

Finally, we have the centerpiece of _Astronome_—the vocal performance of Mike Patton. One can detect traces of Patton’s style, even on his early work with Mr. Bungle. Although he does not use the same sort of wordless vocal techniques that Zorn would request in his work with
the Moonchild Trio, Patton’s ability to assume multiple personas within a single song (or even within a single phrase) is notable. The schizophrenic style that one hears on a track like “Slowly Growing Deaf” is taken to the extreme in Astronome, and it is all the more disconcerting because there are no lyrics to help the listener interpret the tone of the utterance. Over the course of Astronome, Patton portrays a number of different personalities. His voice is uniquely suited to this work, as he is able to produce an unusual array of extended vocal techniques, many of which are potentially damaging to one’s voice. Patton’s part also requires a sense of theatrical presence, which I will return to later in connection with Antonin Artaud’s theory of the Theater of Cruelty.

3.3 Authorship

The role of authorship with radical composers is often straightforward because the composers are usually also the performers and producers. Although a composer like Merzbow might receive assistance from a mastering engineer, he is responsible for virtually every part of the conception, creation, and aural actuality of the music. With Zorn, the situation is a bit different because he uses musicians to realize his work. Moreover, his music often includes elements of improvisation with varying degrees of structure. The music of Naked City, for instance, calls for frequent improvisation, but within the rigid structure of the music, the improvisatory space may be anywhere from a few bars to one phrase to one single beat.

Astronome uses three musicians with distinct personalities, and because the score is not always explicitly notated, we must investigate the issue of authorship for this work. Much in the way that Duke Ellington would tailor his compositions to the unique voices of his big band, Zorn chooses his musicians carefully according to the unique contributions that he predicts they will make. In this sense, the realm of composition extends beyond what can be notated and includes the selection of musicians, almost as one would select instruments in the process of
orchestration. A familiarity with, say, Mike Patton’s vocal technique must have influenced Zorn’s composition of *Astronome* inasmuch as he knows that he can get a particular sound and performance from this particular musician. Once in the recording studio, the musicians have freedom to contribute to the particulars of their own parts, but this is a limited freedom, as we will see.

Much like *Spillane* and Zorn’s other file card compositions, *Astronome* was constructed bit-by-bit in the recording studio not from a fully-notated score, but from Zorn’s notes that might include anything from chord changes to melodic fragments to prose descriptions of moods or performance instructions. In a radio interview, Zorn describes his approach:

Rock music is very much the oral tradition of working in the studio, so I had detailed notes of where I wanted the music to go and different intensities and different emotions I wanted out of the voice and exact rhythms and pitches, but instead of giving them written music, I would sing down to them what the next section would be, describe the melody or rhythm to them, we’d rehearse it, rehearse it, and then record it and then we’d learn the next section.\(^{364}\)

Thus, although Baron, Dunn, and Patton had certain freedoms within the compositional structure, they never had an overview of where the music was going, so it would be difficult for them to intentionally affect the outcome of the performance. In this way, Zorn is similar to a film director like John Cassavetes where the actors are handed new script pages each day as they contribute to the construction of characters without seeing the final resolution. On the realization of *Astronome*, Zorn states:

When you get a musician like Joey Baron, you don’t want to write out a drum part. You want him to do it his own way, so you write out the beats and the time signatures, what instruments you want them to use, and you also let them be creative. Mike Patton’s voice is capable of so much, and you can’t really write that kind of vocalization down, so what I had down was different

intensities and different modes of expression, different emotions and different dramatic scenes that I wanted him to imagine he was in.365

With respect to Baron’s and Dunn’s contributions, it would be difficult to capture the heavy metal idiom without allowing them to create parts that feel natural. Patton seems to have had the most artistic freedom, but again, without knowing where the work as a whole was headed, it would have been difficult for him to affect the outcome in an intentional (i.e., co-authorial) manner.

In speaking about authorship, we must consider Zorn’s role as composer and director of musical realization, but we must also consider the fact that Zorn selects and supervises his recording engineers as carefully as his musicians. Bob Musso (recording), Bill Laswell (“mix translation”), and Scott Hull (mastering) are all frequent Zorn collaborators, each contributing to dozens of his releases. Although their contributions are more technical than creative, they each contribute to the overall sound of the work, and their techniques create consistency across the Moonchild Trio’s recordings.

Beyond the compositional and technical components discussed above, we must finally consider the conceptual. I have described the musicians of the Moonchild Trio above, but the trio is more than a collection of musicians; it is also a compositional approach. Zorn describes the musical conception as “a project…combining the hypnotic intensity of ritual (composition) with the spontaneity of magick (improvisation) in a modern musical format (rock).”366 This idea of a rock band using ritual magic is undoubtedly inspired by Varèse, Crowley, and Artaud—the dedicatees of each of the Moonchild albums—and from this inspiration, Zorn has created a new

365 Ibid.

366 Liner notes to John Zorn, Moonchild – Songs Without Words, with Joey Baron, Trevor Dunn, and Mike Patton, 2006 by Tzadik, 7357, Compact Disc.
compositional approach that has led to a variety of works, including a song cycle (the original Moonchild album), an opera (Astronome), and a profane litany (Six Litanies for Heliogabalus). \(^{367}\)

Baron, Dunn, and Patton have each made important contributions to the musical material of Astronome, just as Musso, Laswell, and Hull have help to craft the sonics of the recording; however, when one considers the extent to which Zorn was responsible for the conception, realization, and production of the work, one can easily view Zorn as the main author of Astronome with the other contributors playing the role of demi-authors, as outlined in chapter one. Zorn’s comparison of his role to that of a film director is apt, at least in the auteurist sense that I believe he intends. Just as a filmmaker like Jean-Luc Godard would develop a script, create a storyboard to outline the cinematographic design, direct actors through the various scenes, oversee the myriad details that go into the sound and image, and maintain the overall vision of the film, so too does Zorn develop a series of musical moments, create a coherent order for them, direct the musicians through the various moments, oversee the other elements of production and recording, and maintain the overall vision for where the work is headed. For these reasons, I argue that it is appropriate to consider Astronome as a largely single-author work provided that we recognize the important contributions from Zorn’s collaborators.

4.0 Zorn’s Dedicatees

Let us turn now to Zorn’s dedicatees—Varèse, Crowley, and Artaud. We can unite all three through their mutual fascination with arcana—a secret knowledge hidden from our consciousness that is only accessible through radical transcendence, a work of alchemy, a transmutation of elements. For each of the three explorers of the unknown, this general goal

manifests itself in different ways: Varèse was a man of modern science, but he was also fascinated with the alchemist Paracelsus; Crowley’s connection to arcana is obvious, insofar as he was an occultist seeking spiritual transcendence; and Artaud was dedicated not so much to gaining a secret knowledge, but to transmitting this knowledge beyond words to an audience through theatrical means. By examining each of these figures in greater detail, layers of meaning in Astronome will begin to unfold, which will allow for a richer, more nuanced interpretation.

4.1 Edgard Varèse

Varèse’s contributions to Astronome are threefold: first is Varèse’s longstanding fascination with the Renaissance physician, astrologer, alchemist, and occultist, Paracelsus (1493-1541), which is evident both generally across Varèse’s oeuvre and specifically in his orchestral work, Arcana (1927); second is Astronome’s namesake, Varèse’s massive, unfinished theatrical work referred to alternately as L’Astronome and The One-All-Alone;\footnote{The work is sometimes confused with another similarly themed work, Espace—a work that was also left unfinished.} and third are Varèse’s compositional style and innovations, some of which are similar to Zorn’s.

It may be surprising to imagine a composer like Varèse, fascinated as he was by science and technology, finding inspiration in an occult figure like Paracelsus, but Paracelsus was more than an alchemist. He proposed a new approach to medicine wherein empirical methods superseded the use of cures based on ancient texts that had long been accepted as timeless truth. Naturally, this was considered heretical and left Paracelsus branded as a dangerous radical. Thus, we can speculate that beyond his importance to the advancement of modern science, Varèse probably also saw Paracelsus as a kindred spirit—a fellow radical pushing the boundaries of his
discipline, all while drawing the ire of his peers. In fact, the protagonist of Varèse’s *L’Astronome* is a sort of amalgamation of Paracelsus, da Vinci, and Varèse himself. However, the strongest example of Varèse’s interest in the hermetic philosophy of Paracelsus is found in the epigram to *Arcana*, wherein Varèse creates a number of analogies between music and alchemical mysticism.

*Arcana* is something of an anomaly in Varèse’s oeuvre insofar as it is scored for a full orchestra and features an orchestral language slightly more conventional than his previous chamber works such as *Hyperprism* and *Octandre*. He even refers to *Arcana* as a symphonic poem, which makes the work seem less revolutionary than the others. Nonetheless, Varèse comments, “it is perhaps in *Arcana* that you will truly discover my thought,” lending to the gravity of his homage to Paracelsus on the title page of the work, which follows:

> One star exists, higher than all the rest. This is the apocalyptic star. The second star is that of the ascendant. The third is that of the elements—of these there are four, so that six stars are established. Besides these there is still another star, imagination, which begets a new star and a new heaven.

In *Arcana*, Varèse is exploring this seventh star, this unknown star of pure creativity that begets new words of expression. Zorn, like Varèse, finds this to be a compelling metaphor for artistic creation and actually reproduces the title page of *Arcana* in the liner notes of *Astronome*.

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369 Fernand Ouellette, Varèse’s biographer, echoes this point while emphasizing that Varèse did not believe in alchemy, as such, but was drawn to these fellow explorers of the unknown who had done in physics and medicine what Varèse was trying to do in music. Fernand Ouellette, *Edgard Varèse*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: The Orion Press, 1968), 16-17.


According to Varèse, the links between the epigraph and the music of *Arcana* are overstated, and it appears that he did not have the quote in mind during the composition of the work; however, sometime before the work was published, he revisited Paracelsus’s writings and upon discovering the above quotation, Varèse felt compelled to include it on his title page not only in French, but also in the original Latin and in English. Varèse may downplay the importance of the Paracelsus quote as “an amusing analogy,” but clearly there is something more here. He continues, stating that there is an analogy “between the transmutation of base metals into gold and the transmutation of sounds into music, and also…the process of musical composition is the discovery of the arcana—the hidden secrets in sounds and in noises.”

Thus, whether Varèse had Paracelsus in mind when composing *Arcana* or found it later, we can note that he found an important affinity between his conception of music and Paracelsus’s hermetic philosophy. As we will see below, Zorn has a similar fascination with Aleister Crowley, for even though Zorn does not profess to be a practicing Thelemite, he does find Crowleyan mysticism to be a powerful metaphor for artistic creation.

*L’Astronome* (aka *The One-All-Alone*, aka *The Astronomer*) occupied Varèse’s attention for decades and he worked on it sporadically from the late 1920s until at least 1947. It was to be a monumental theatrical work involving three choruses, a large ensemble of brass and percussion, vocal soloists, actors performing pantomime, and spatialized electronic sound emanating from loudspeakers scattered throughout the performance space. Virtually every concrete part of the work has been lost (only a few bars of music and a few handwritten notes remain), and thus, most everything one can learn about *L’Astronome* is based upon the

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373 Varèse quoted in MacDonald, 191.
There are a number of libretti that were attempted and abandoned, but they all typically relate to the same core narrative: an astronomer notices a star and as he begins to communicate with it, the star begins to move toward the earth, thereby causing global catastrophes. An angry mob threatens the astronomer and implores him to cease his communication with star in the belief that the astronomer is bringing the destruction upon the earth, but he persists in spite of everything. During the climax, the astronomer is enveloped by the light, ascends into the heavens, and the angry mob begins to worship him as a Nietzschean Übermensch. The general idea of a fearless explorer boldly dragging the quivering masses into a brighter future resonates with both Paracelsus and Varèse.

There were three main problems that contributed to L’Astronome’s failure to reach completion. First, after working with a number of writers, Varèse was still unable to transition from the basic scenario that he developed to a libretto that communicated these ideas in manner that matched the radical nature of Varèse’s musical language. At one point, Alejo Carpentier, Robert Desnos, and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes were all working together on a draft of a libretto for Varèse, but despite the power of their own surrealist poetry, the collaboration did not lead to anything sufficiently radical. Varèse then began to work with Antonin Artaud, but this collaboration was similarly unsuccessful, as I will discuss below. Second, Varèse’s imagination outstripped the technology of the day, and his sonic ideas could not be realized, at least through

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374 The most complete account of the scattered fragments concerning The One-All-Alone can be found in Anne Jostkleigrewe, “Reaching for the Stars: From The One-All-Alone to Espace,” in Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary, ed. Felix Meyer and Heidy Zimmermann (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 242.

375 Sirius and Sirius B, the latter of which Varèse refers to as the “Companion.” Scientists had only recent discovered Sirius B when Varèse was developing the scenario, and he was enthralled by the incredible mass and gravitational power of the white dwarf, Sirius B, remarking “It’s the size of a fingernail, but its weight is beyond imagining. What Universe would achieve its disruption?” Varèse quoted in MacDonald, 222.

376 According to his wife, Varèse was in fact thinking of Nietzsche’s Übermensch when he devised this scenario. Louise Varèse, Varèse: A Looking-Glass Diary, Volume I: 1883-1928 (New York: Norton, 1972), 260.
any practically available equipment. In fact, Varèse would have to wait until 1958 to conduct the first experiments in spatialized electronic sound, which resulted in his *Poème électronique*. Third, the enormous expense involved in staging the work prohibited Varèse from staging even a compromised version without any of the electronic effects that had not yet been invented. Due to the lack of venues that could accommodate the particulars of Varèse’s vision, he considered staging the work in an enormous circus tent, but the cost of procuring and setting up all the theatrical elements (e.g., lights, a stage, audio equipment) made this impossible. For his part, Varèse unsuccessfully sought both technological and financial assistance so as to either develop original instruments or explore musical applications of existing sound technology, such as the equipment used by Hollywood movie studios.

Nevertheless, the general idea of *L’Astronome*, and more specifically, the idea of Varèse and Artaud collaborating seems to have inspired Zorn during the composition of *Astronome*. Varèse’s interest in the way language was to be used is particularly notable, not only because he involved four major literary figures during the development of the libretto, but also because of the way that Zorn seems to have taken some inspiration from Varèse’s ideas. After disbanding his first team of writers—Carpentier, Desnos, and Ribemont-Dessaignes—Varèse was introduced to Antonin Artaud and was impressed with his conceptual work on language and theater, especially as it was outlined in the essays that would eventually be collected in Artaud’s manifesto, *The Theater and Its Double*. Of Artaud’s work, the use of nonsense words, empty phonemes, guttural sounds, and even screaming, seemed to inspire Varèse so much that when

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Zorn writes, “The nexus of these two radical giants [Varèse and Artaud] seemed fascinating, and in the flights of my imagination I began to envision directions their work could have taken.” Liner notes to Zorn, *Astronome*, 2006.
Artaud delivered a draft of the libretto, Varèse was disappointed with its relative conventionality, which led, amongst other things, to the termination of their partnership.

Varèse then set out to rework an earlier draft, which struck closer to the tone he had envisaged, but this time he began to add nonsense words and extra phonemes himself in an attempt to subvert the deterministic function of language. Varèse understood the importance of the voice in perception, as the sound of a fellow human reaches our ears (and psyche) in a much different manner than the sound of, say, a trumpet, and he wanted to play with our perception through a number of means: first of all, Varèse wanted to separate the voice from the body, which he planned to accomplish by using a singer working in tandem with an actor performing pantomime—a mute body and a disembodied voice; second, Varèse wanted to create such a cacophony of simultaneous words that intelligibility was severely compromised; and third, Varèse wanted to use phonemes devoid of linguistic function to transcend the referential power of language—to give an impression of verbal communication, but to exceed the limitations of textual signification. Zorn seems to have borrowed this idea and taken it to the extreme in Astronome, which contains no actual words, save for obscure and poetic descriptions of atmosphere in the pictorial libretto. Over the course of the work, Mike Patton takes on numerous personalities. Some give the impression of speech, and some are far more atavistic and abstract.

It is difficult to determine how much Zorn knew about Varèse’s unfinished work when he composed Astronome. Malcolm MacDonald’s 2003 book, Varèse: Astronomer in Sound, provided the most thorough overview of all the available sources until Varèse’s estate changed hands and new documents relating to L’Astronome were finally made available in 2006. Zorn might have read MacDonald’s book during the research phase of his compositional process, but MacDonald also paints a fairly unflattering picture of Artaud. Indeed, Artaud had never actually
heard Varèse’s music, Artaud worked alone in his creation of part of the libretto, and when Artaud finally delivered some pages to Varèse, the libretto did not reflect the techniques of Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” and had little to do with Varèse’s original scenario. Rather than the cosmic scope of Varèse’s scenario, Artaud created something that MacDonald refers to as a “subjective manifesto with elements of political polemic.” Artaud even changed the title to *Il n’a a plus de firmament* (There is no more firmament). It is understandable why Varèse found Artaud’s contribution to be completely unacceptable.

The actual failure of the collaboration between Varèse and Artaud notwithstanding, it appears that Zorn is revising history and restoring the full conceptual weight of Artaud’s theatrical vision to Varèse’s *L’Astronome*. Within Zorn’s *Astronome*, Varèse’s pioneering music meshes perfectly with Artaud’s radical theatrical style to create the sort of overwhelming sensorial experience that Varèse had intended all along. As we will see, Varèse’s idea for the climax of *L’Astronome* has much in common with Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty and Zorn’s musical approach in *Astronome*. Carpentier recounts Varèse’s intentions for the climax:

> In the final scene when the astronomer is volatized into interstellar space, factory sirens and airplane propellers were supposed to come into action. The ‘music’ was to be as strident and unbearable as possible, so as to terrify the audience and render it *groggy*, as he put it. At that moment, he told me, the powerful spotlights supposedly raking the sky up on stage would be turned abruptly down into the auditorium, blinding the audience and filling them with such panic that they wouldn’t even be able to run away.

Here, Varèse is using extreme aesthetics to push the spectator beyond what he or she can comfortably process, to create an experience that forces one to react in a visceral instead of intellectual manner, to break down the barriers that allow spectators to observe passively from a

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378 MacDonald, 237.

distance. This description would be just as apt for Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty or Zorn’s *Astronome*. Imagine, then, if Varèse had staged his spectacle where his modernist music combined with Artaud’s confrontational theatrics to build into this perfect climax that pushes the spectator right over the edge. I believe this gets us closest to what Zorn imagined when creating *Astronome*.

In terms of general musical features, one can hear similarities between the compositional approaches of Varèse and Zorn in *Astronome*. Chou Wen-Chung notes that Varèse was one of the lone Western composers whose style was directed more towards timbre than towards intervallic relationships. In works like *Arcana* and *Hyperprism*, one can hear sound masses slowly shifting and colliding with one another in a way that decisively breaks from the Western tradition of harmonic and melodic motion. Charles Wuorinen notes that Varèse’s approach to musical time is marked by “the juxtaposition of differentiated elements, rather than the interconnection of evolutionarily related elements.” Rather than using intervallic motion to create temporal relationships that establish musical unity, Varèse uses timbre to create unity within works comprised of seemingly unrelated sections. In a similar way, Zorn does not structure *Astronome* according to any discernible harmonic or melodic scheme. Instead, motives are constructed out of rhythmic figures, timbre, and moods.

Varèse is also notable for the way that he uses blocks of sound that remain in a constant state of flux. Sound masses contract and expand with lively, polyrhythmic irregularity and maintain timbral consistency, which lends a sense of linearity to the music, even though the

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moment-to-moment movement seems to be highly discontinuous. In *Astronome*, Zorn’s sound blocks can be anything from guitar riffs and beats to sporadic blasts of free improvisation. Although Zorn’s sound blocks do not undergo the same sort of rigorously notated continual fluctuation that Varèse’s do, the use of apparently discrete blocks unified by timbre is similar.

### 4.2 Aleister Crowley

Aleister Crowley presents the most difficult challenge when attempting to understand the impact of the dedicatees to *Astronome*. First, hermetic philosophy is intrinsically obscure, jargon-laden, and difficult; and second, there is a dearth of scholarly material on Crowley. There are plenty of biographies bordering on hagiography that do not problematize the rather unusual nature of Crowley’s personal mythology. Most biographers either take Crowley at his (outlandish) word, or they call him a charlatan before replacing his theosophical claims with their own preferred theosophy.\(^{382}\) Considering the murky situation of Crowleyan discourse and the utter impenetrability of his own writing, if there is anything directly applicable to an interpretation of *Astronome*, it is beyond the abilities of this author to discern.\(^{383}\)

In some instances, there are more-or-less concrete connections to be found. John Brackett’s analyses of *Necronomicon* and *IAO: Music in Sacred Light* reveal the ways that Thelemic Kabbalah provides a way of determining micro- and macro-structural features of certain works.\(^{384}\) Because these two works are scored in a traditional manner, Brackett is able to find numerological significance in the pitches (represented by numbers) and rhythms, and even if

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\(^{382}\) The following sources are as rich in detail as they are impoverished of critical distance. Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002); Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).


the results are difficult (or impossible) to discern by audition alone, it is fascinating to see the way that symbolic numbers contribute to the structural aspects of certain works.

With *Astronome*, the absence of a traditional score compounds the difficulty of searching for numerical significance. Because Baron and Dunn aided in the construction of their own parts, looking at the specifics of the rhythms or pitches played will not expose the same sort of formal design that Brackett found in his analyses. There are a few places where numbers come into play, and these could potentially yield some sort of symbolic significance. One example is the six-bar, mixed meter motive (the Astronome theme) that appears four times throughout the three movements in the following pattern: 7/16 – 10/16 – 13/16 – 9/16 – 12/16 – 15/16. Crowley’s “table of correspondences” in his *Liber 777* may yield some significance, but to the uninitiated, it is nearly impossible to understand what the symbols communicate. For instance, the number 7 represents, amongst other things, victory, the sphere of Venus, A’arab Zaraq, Hathoor, Aphrodité and Niké, and “the vision of beauty triumphant.” Each number corresponds to more than twenty objects, concepts, or deities, but without a comprehensible way to use the information in the table of correspondences, the symbols communicate very little. In Brackett’s analyses, he found the use of certain numbers with Thelemic significance such as the number 666, which represents both the Beast in the Book of Revelation and Crowley himself. In the case of 7-10-13-9-12-15 (or 66 in sum), there are so many possible meanings for each number that no probable meaning emerges that reflects the importance of these particular numbers in this particular combination.

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Perhaps, however, the point is not to discover a singular truth hidden in the numerical content of Zorn’s work. After all, Brackett allows that his interpretation is exceptionally subjective by normal academic standards and that the ambiguous way that Zorn slips between Jewish Kabbalah and Crowley’s Thelemic variant means that one can interpret the number such that they can mean almost anything.\(^{386}\) In lieu of a conventional score, I propose that we understand Crowley’s influence in a more general thematic way. Zorn’s tacit suggestion to the listener that there may be numerological significance hidden within his music is sufficient to put the listener in the correct state of mind. There is an air of mystery, a riddle just out of reach, arcana hidden within the music. Perhaps this is the ultimate aim of Zorn’s invocation of Crowley. I propose that we read Crowley’s texts not as manuals for ritual magic, but as literary expressions of occultist aesthetics, because this reveals a number of themes directly applicable to the interpretation of *Astronome*.

Within Crowley’s theosopy, two elements seem particularly germane to music: ritual and the invocation of deities. Ritual is defined as “the uniting of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel; or, in the language of Mysticism, Union with God.”\(^{387}\) There are three main methods of invoking a given deity: first, devotion involves both the establishment of a shrine according to certain principles (e.g., it must be a place dedicated to the deity, there must be an image of the deity, there must be appropriate objects associated with the deity) and a lifelong commitment to living in a manner that pleases the deity;\(^{388}\) second, ceremonial invocation involves constructing

\(^{386}\) John Brackett, 2008, 75.


\(^{388}\) Aleister Crowley, “Astarte vel Liber Berylli sub Figura CLXXV,” *Equinox* 1, no. 7 (1912).
a ritual specific to the deity by assembling all the necessary elements according to Book 777, and repeating a prayer until the deity’s presence floods the participant’s consciousness;³⁸⁹ and third, and most apposite to Astronome, dramatic invocation involves the addition of an aesthetic component to the ritual. Crowley writes that a dramatic invocation is the most powerful, and he refers generally to historical usages of drama to religious ends. His idea is similar to Plato’s conception of art qua mimesis, which has been a powerful concept throughout history, especially in the Doctrine of Affections of the Baroque era. It also creates interesting parallels with Artuad’s Theater of Cruelty, which holds the ideal of a transcendent experience through the dramatic act wherein the spectator is shocked out of complacency, his or her spectatorial gaze interrupted by a violent outburst of unmediated truth.

The ability of art to transcend the linguistically communicable has been an attractive concept for artists for centuries, and it is unsurprising that Zorn finds Crowley’s writing to be enchanting in this respect. Zorn even goes as far as to create a metaphor out of the idea of ritualized, dramatic invocation. He writes,

I take “magical weapons” (pen, ink and paper), I write “incantations” (compositions) in the “magical language” (music)...I initiate “rituals” (recordings, performances)...I call forth “spirits” (musicians, engineers, printers, CD sellers and so forth…) The composition and distribution of this CD is thus an act of Magick.³⁹⁰

For Zorn, there is an analogical relationship between artistic inspiration and magick, and in fact, he has dedicated an entire volume in his Arcana series to essays exploring the connection between art and magick.³⁹¹


As Zorn explores the nature of artistic inspiration in *Arcana V*, we find another affinity to Crowley relating to the idea of ostensibly autochthonous creation. Both Crowley and Zorn express some concept of inspiration that appears to emanate from an external agent. In Crowley’s case, this accounts for the creation of *The Book of the Law*, the holy book of Thelema. The myth of its divine origin recounts how during a trip to Cairo, Crowley’s wife, Rose, prophesied that on three consecutive days between 12 and 1pm, he was to enter a room and transcribe the words of a deity who would identify himself to Crowley as Aiwass, “the minister of Hoor-paar-kraat.” Crowley describes how he was then compelled to write things that he could not have possibly invented in his own conscious mind. Zorn describes something similar in his preface to *Arcana V*, albeit in a more general manner and without reference to Thelemic variants of Egyptian deities. He writes,

One exists inside the hot crucible of creativity itself, connected with a spirit, energy or historical lineage that is overpowering, exhilarating, frightening. One is one’s goal, and the creative act is existence—rewarding in and of itself. At these times freedom (so normally equated with artists) becomes obeisance. One does what one is compelled to do, inevitably resulting in something beyond your known capabilities.

Here, Zorn appears to be attempting to describe in prose the creative act itself. For both Crowley and Zorn, the ego is set aside and an unknown agent is channeled through the artist, a perfect autochthonous utterance. In a sense, they are both describing the formation of an inchoate work by means of notional ekphrasis, whether divine inspiration or personal creativity, it makes no

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392 Here I am using the specifically psychological definition of “autochthonous” as a thought or action that seems to originate independently within a subject, as if from a foreign agent.

393 Aleister Crowley, *Liber AL vel Legis with a Facsimile of the Manuscript as Received by Aleister and Rose Edith Crowley on April 8, 9, 10, 1904 E.V.* (York Beach: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004), 7.


difference—the origin of the idea cannot be traced back to the subject in his or her own mind. As we have seen, Varèse shares these sentiments as well when he creates analogies between his composition and the alchemy of Paracelsus.

4.3 Antonin Artaud

In some ways, Antonin Artaud is the most important of the dedicatees, for he is a point of convergence between Varèse and Zorn. Through his extension and transfiguration of the voice in theater, we can approach the most peculiar and interpretation-resistant component of *Astronome*, namely the vocal performance of Mike Patton. Although a simple transposition of Artaud’s theory of the Theater of Cruelty would serve to illuminate Zorn’s work in interesting ways, an application of Lacanian theory will take us even deeper, enriching our capacity for hermeneutic discovery. In this section, I will provide some background on Artaud’s theory so that I may give a Lacanian reading of his goals apropos of the theater in section 5.1. If, unlike the previous to sections, I do not bring Zorn into the discussion just yet, it is because I wish to save elements of Artaud’s theory for the central analysis of *Astronome*.

Artaud held a negative opinion on the state of theater, centered as it was on “the lives of a few puppets” and serving merely to “[transform] the public into Peeping Toms,”396 that is, presenting a literalistic portrayal of scenarios involving well-worn theatrical archetypes, all the while distancing the spectator who could, for cultural reasons, no longer relate. Just as Adorno once theorized that Classical opera could no longer be performed live in its original form due to the fact that its clichés and conventions rendered it impotent and self-parodic to contemporary

audience, Artaud felt that contemporary theater had become staid to the point that the public was abandoning it for the visceral thrill of the movie theater. Artaud found the solution to his impasse in the Balinese theater, as he writes,

The spectacle of the Balinese theater, which draws upon dance, song, pantomime—and a little of the theater as we understand it in the Occident—restores the theater, by means of ceremonies of indubitable age and well-tried efficacy [sic], to its original destiny which it presents as a combination of all these elements fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear. This is where Artaud begins to formulate the Theater of Cruelty—a theater capable of smashing through the comfortable spectatorial wall, an immediacy of experience, a transcendent level of communication from which there was no hiding in the dim light of the darkened hall. He then goes on to explain the appeal of the Balinese theater in more detail, taking time to note the level of abstraction present. There may be a somewhat conventional story at the heart of the production, but the details are vague and suggestive, and little is communicated at the level of speech and language, which clears a space for communication by means of gesture—a beyond of signification. Western theater is to photography as Balinese theater is to painting. In this case, Artaud is striving to create something beyond literalist representation, beyond language. In fact, the way Artaud sought to use the vague and suggestive nature of Balinese theater, at least as he understood it, is quite similar to the way that Zorn’s libretto for Astronome is remarkably abstract, suggesting only the most general of ideas through its brief scene descriptions.

The Theater of Cruelty, then, is Artaud’s concept of a theatrical experience that will shock spectators out of their thoroughgoing passivity, “hence this appeal to cruelty and terror, though on a vast scale, whose range probes our entire vitality, confronts us with all our

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398 Artaud 1958, 53.
possibilities.”⁴⁹⁹ Artaud writes, “from the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.”⁴⁰⁰ If this is already reminiscent of Zorn’s declaration, “Powerful secrets are revealed through intensity and extremes of experience,”⁴⁰¹ a statement I will have frequent cause to return to, it is because Zorn was indeed reading Artaud during the inception of Astronome.⁴⁰² Artaud speaks of “a spectacle unafraid of going as far as necessary in the exploration of our nervous sensibility, of which the rhythms, sounds, words, resonances, and twitterings, and their united quality and surprising mixtures belong to a technique which must not be divulged,”⁴⁰³ a description that would be perfectly apt for Astronome itself. Elsewhere he writes,

The public will believe in the theater’s dreams on condition that it take them for true dreams and not for a servile copy of reality; on condition that they allow the public to liberate within itself the magical liberties of dreams which it can only recognize when they are imprinted with terror and cruelty.⁴⁰⁴

Artaud is radically re-imagining the possibilities of the theater in a way that will be impossible to consider from a dispassionate distance. Significantly, Zorn mirrors these sentiments exactly when he speaks of envisioning a new opera that “[captures] the intensity, immediacy and intimacy it once had.”⁴⁰⁵ Both Artaud and Varèse sought to use a radical expressive language to create a powerful, transcendent experience, and Zorn is no different.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 86.
⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 101.
⁴⁰¹ Liner notes to Zorn, Astronome, 2006.
⁴⁰² Ibid.
⁴⁰³ Artaud 1958, 87.
⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 86.
⁴⁰⁵ Liner notes to Zorn, Astronome, 2006.
Before relating Artaud’s theory to *Astronome*, we must take a brief detour through Lacan’s theory of speech and enunciation. This will allow us to better understand how Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty (and by extension, the techniques that Zorn borrows for *Astronome*) creates a unique psychical state in the listener. Following that, we may begin to unlock the centerpiece of *Astronome*—Mike Patton’s vocal performance.

### 5.0 Speech and Enunciation

Inasmuch as the constitution of the subject in the Symbolic makes the individual, the *I*, coextensive with speech and language, Lacan spends considerable time developing the concept of enunciation. Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance will aid in our understanding of the polyvocality of language both in the conscious and the unconscious writing: “every utterance participates in the “unitary language” (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces).”  

In the “unitary language,” we have what Lacan calls the “statement”—assemblages of abstract grammatical units, language according to socially normative rules—and in heteroglossia, we have the enunciation—an individual performance by a specific subject that is both situational and occurs at a particular time and place. Enunciations further represent a double inscription of the conscious and the unconscious, which the psychoanalyst endeavors to decode. This bivalent enunciation is further complicated by the Other because all communication is intersubjective: as Emile Benveniste writes, “what characterizes enunciation in general is the emphasis on the discursive relationship with a partner, whether it be real or imagined, individual or collective.”

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The statement and enunciation occur simultaneously, with the former deceiving the subject in the Imaginary—Lacan’s “I am thinking where I am not”—and the latter communicating a hidden message from the Symbolic. Lacan demonstrates this phenomenon by analyzing the statement, “I am lying,” showing that at the level of the statement, it produces a logical paradox, while at the level of the enunciation, we can consider the intersubjective nature of the utterance changing it to “I am deceiving you,” which the psychoanalyst can interpret as a true statement.408

This goes to show that there are a number of instances where the statement is banal, inapposite, illogical, paradoxical, or even nonsensical, but may also contain meaning if one examines it at the level of enunciation. Additionally, there are utterances that fail to register even as statements, including all manner of non-verbal sounds (which are of obvious interest to the present study), but nevertheless constitute enunciations that are potentially filled with meaning. Lacan writes, “Even if it communicates nothing, discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is destined to deceive, it relies on faith in testimony.”409 In a sense, this is analogical to the communicative aspect of expressive noise because where one might view these utterances as communication failures (i.e., the failure to convey an intelligible message), Lacan argues that they actually carry meaning within, even if the utterances appear to be mere “noise.”

Freud theorized the parapraxis so widely that it was renamed in his honor, and Lacan adds even more rhetorical devices, especially metaphor and metonymy. Anything that evinces a

break in the flow of speech is of interest: the unconscious may force an aposiopesis, drawing attention to what was left unsaid; an autochthonous utterance may point to something the subject is unwilling or unable to consciously articulate; and the verbal content of a prosopopoeia is only part of the interest. After all, tone and inflection sometimes communicate just as much as the statement itself. This is similar to the way distortion functions on an electric guitar or bass. One might consider the distortion to be a degradation of the pure signal of the guitar, but really, the degradation actually adds a layer of meaning and what appears to be communicative noise turns into expressive noise.

Finally, there is the somewhat counterintuitive idea that as little value as the statement itself carries, the actual words or sounds, not the conscious intent behind them, are the only matter of interest. One can only discern the enunciation through the particular manifestation of the statement, for the intent of the analysand, like the ego-driven surface level of the statement, is wholly a product of the Imaginary, and is thus of illegitimate origin.

5.1 The Theater of Cruelty Revisited

At this time, we may return to Artaud’s innovations in theatrical performance to understand them in the context of the Lacanian psyche. Although, as we will see, the two theorists are exploring strikingly similar terrain, they remained at odds with each other in both life and scholarship. For a brief period, Artaud was under Lacan’s psychiatric care, and this

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resulted in the incorrect diagnosis, “Artaud is obsessed, he will live for eighty years without writing a single sentence,” while Artaud railed against Lacan’s ostensible “erotomania.”

Artaud writes that “theater will not be given its specific powers of action until it is given its language,” which goes to show that language is just as important for Artaud’s theory of the theater as it is for Lacan’s theory of the psyche. When Artaud speaks of ending the “subjugation of the theater to the text,” he is, in Lacanian terms, saying that the theater must stop thinking at the level of the statement and strive to think and communicate at the level of the enunciation—the order of the Symbolic where the unconscious holds court with its coded messages, always arriving in an alienated formulation. Similarly, Artaud’s call for the theater to “create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and ‘human interest’,” is none other than a call for an enunciative performance that transcends the statement.

Artaud goes even further than this, however, as he looks not only to what can be communicated verbally from the unconscious, but what may also emanate from the Real as a message that remains unsymbolized, never being mediated by the Symbolic.

Abandoning Occidental usage of speech, [the theater] turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to

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413 Artaud sees sexuality as an ubiquitous form of thought, and thus a mental perversion found throughout society. Chiesa writes, “he identifies coitus as the supreme metaphysical device: coitus stands for an ideologically conformist apparatus imposed upon us in order to conceal the lack introduced by (symbolic) division.” Ibid., 337.

414 Artaud 1958, 89

415 Ibid., 89.

416 Ibid., 90.
exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitations or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms.  

The manner in which Artaud goes about this is rather astonishing, even if he was never able to stage a production in this style. There are two examples that will serve to explicate the move from theory to praxis: the first is a solo performance by Artaud, and the second is a radio broadcast tilted, *Pour finir avec le jugement de dieu* (or *To have done with the judgment of God*; hereafter “Judgment”). At this point, the connection between Lacan, Artaud, and Zorn should begin to emerge, as Zorn too endeavors to create a new mode of expression that will liberate music from conventional meaning and opera, specifically, from the determinism of the text.

5.2 A Poetry Reading at the Vieux Colombier

The first example was a reading of three of Artaud’s poems, an account of which is provided by Helga Finter:

As witnesses reported, the evening took place according to plan until Artaud, having read the poems, which had duly impressed everyone, began to read his life story from a manuscript, from which he soon deviated into free speech. Finally, after he could no longer find his place among the manuscript pages and began gathering the pages that were scattered across the stage, he broke off, and, confused, was gently escorted away by André Gide after the three-hour performance.

This was not, as some believed, the exploitation of a schizophrenic, but a perfect realization of the Theater of Cruelty, albeit on a small scale with no *mise-en-scène*, no scenario, and no

417 Artaud 1958, 91.


supporting players. Nevertheless, Artaud had accomplished a theatrical performance so utterly transcendent that it moved the spectators in such a way as to disguise the act of theater completely. They were able to observe a purity of performance that ceased to be mediated by the conventions of theater; a surprising appearance of the Real suddenly broke through the Symbolic creating all manner of emotions in an audience unprepared for such an experience. The shock, dismay, anger, sympathy, whatever was felt, was precisely the desired result of the performance—a performance with an efficaciousness rarely equaled.

Two things are evident: the boundary between spectator and actor was demolished in a manner that allowed a sort of unconscious communication between the two, bypassing any pretense of the Imaginary; and the utopian nature of the Theater of Cruelty became manifest, insofar as a repeat performance with the same audience would almost certainly fail to produce the same result. Regarding the former point, a significant amount of the power of performance surely resides in the actor transcending his or her role as character in a manner that opens a line of communication between the spectator-as-subject and the actor-as-subject. Artaud’s portrait of a tortured psyche was an intentional act, but it was not perceived as such, and therefore the audience identified with Artaud-as-subject in place of Artaud-as-performer. Of course, Artaud is placing himself in the line of the scopophilic gaze, but the spectator is deprived of the privilege and pleasure of the gaze once his or her psyche is penetrated by the Real, thereby fundamentally changing the operation of the spectator-performer relationship. Simply put, it is quite

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420 The intentionality of Artaud’s performance was a point of contention. André Breton, possibly for personal reasons, seemed to consider Artaud in need of intensive psychiatric help. Deleuze and Guattari consider Artaud to be schizophrenic, although it is not clear that this is a fault or a pejorative, insofar as there position is “a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 2.
uncomfortable to watch such phenomena because the artificially constructed intersubjective barriers are broken down.

Finter writes, “in the context of the symbolic contract implicit in a lecture on a theatre stage, the irruption of the Real in the form of sickness, suffering, and insanity was perceived as a sensational exhibitionism and histrionics,” implying that the performance had been a failure, or a realization of the impossibility of speaking through the Real and being understood as something other than insanity. She follows with a quote where Artaud appears defeated, claiming his audience had not heard his true message and that only bombs could achieve his intentions. I believe that Artaud misses the mark in his assessment of the performance. Artaud was suffering from the always-present delusion of intent originating in the Imaginary, while his message originated in the Symbolic and was manifest in the Real. If he was seeking a transcendent discourse, he succeeded the moment the Real appeared in the form of schizophasia, to the astonishment and bewilderment of the audience. As Lacan writes, “the actor lends his [limbs], his presence, not simply as a puppet, but with his unconscious which is well and truly real, namely the relationship of his [limbs] to a certain history which is his own.”[421] This is precisely the sort of radical theatrical experience Artaud sought from the Theater of Cruelty, but that he had not been able to understand that he had already accomplished the goal when his unconscious began to speak through him in an autochthonous manner. He incorrectly identified the locus of his meaning in the statement instead of the enunciation.

Regarding the latter point, Artaud’s performance here exposes the utopian construct of his theater. Firstly, and most obviously, the unconscious cannot be controlled; the Real emerges as a fracture in the Symbolic creating chaos in its wake. If the actor creates a psychical state

wherein the Real is apt to emerge, it will dominate any intent on the part of the performer, director, or any conscious agent of governance. As a loose analog, consider Gena Rowlands in Cassavetes’s *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) or *Opening Night* (1977), where her performance creates a psychical state that blurs the lines between what one might casually refer to as “acting” and “reality,” a state that actually allows the afflictions of her characters to penetrate through her own Imaginary.\(^{422}\) Although to convey a traditional narrative entirely from the Real stands as the great impossibility of the Theater of Cruelty, this does not preclude non-traditional artistic communication from allowing the Real to speak through performance in a manner that is both powerful and meaningful; it merely states that the messages will not be intelligible in the Symbolic to either the performer or the spectator. This necessitates an epistemology that values non-linguistic enunciations to which the spectator must agree, at least in part. The other issue is that the example of the poetry reading by Artaud can only happen once, because a repeat performance would see the psychical effect diminished to the extent that the performance would be mannered and predictable. A theater built out of this sort of psychical shock to the spectator is not sustainable because it quickly loses its power once it is understood; in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic begins to tame the Real in the form of creating a new language complete with expectations, rules, and standard interpretations. To continue in this path would necessitate a series of increasingly catastrophic spectacles until the performer has nothing left to present but his or her own death, hence Finter’s description of Artaud as a “theater of impossibility.”\(^{423}\) However, as I will show in my discussion of Zorn, there are possibilities for

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\(^{422}\) The ability to open herself up to such ontological states was undoubtedly aided by Cassavetes’s legendarily abusive directorial technique.

\(^{423}\) Finter 1997, 18.
introducing elements of the Real into artistic work that may not be as holistically spellbinding as Artaud’s performance, but are no less powerful.

5.3 Pour finir avec le jugement de dieu

Artaud’s radio work will also aid in interpreting Zorn’s use of the voice in Astronome, as it demonstrates a radical approach to language and performance. The project was created for broadcast through the Office de radiodiffusion télévision française (ORTF)—France’s official public radio and television agency from 1964 until 1974. Although it superseded the previous instantiation of French public broadcasting, the Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (RTF), with the idea of less governmental control, the French government would continue to intervene in special cases, as it did with the censorship of Judgment. Artaud was not necessarily convinced that radio was an ideal medium, but it would have given him an unprecedentedly large audience comprising a large cross-section of a public who still tuned in regularly as a source of entertainment and education.424

The specifics of the content are quite secondary to the large-scale themes and the performance, almost to the point that one can listen to the recording without a translation and take away the same feeling of pain, anger, defiance, and disease that are found in the text itself. Through the utterances of the Real of Artaud’s psyche, he communicates, as Lacan would say, avant la lettre. Of particular interest to the topic of Astronome are the techniques Artaud uses and their similarity to Patton’s vocal technique. I doubt that anyone can provide a cogent explanation of just how these performers create the actual acoustic phenomena of their performances—least of all the performers themselves acting on pure creative instinct—but we

can analyze the resulting phenomena to notice similarities and speculate that a component of the enunciations involves a surrendering of the conscious mind to an enunciation from within that will always remain unknown because to know the enunciation would be to process it through the Symbolic and thus lose its power of symbolic resistance.

In *Judgment*, Artaud smashes his words through glossalallic exclamations, he shrieks and howls, he intones nonsense words, he speaks in made-up languages, and he screams. Moreover, he creates a polyphony of enunciations, the ego diffracted, the dividing lines blurred. Unless one subjects these outbursts to rigorous analysis and forces them to be understood as Symbolic—as the analyst does to the psychotic’s speech, and as we are doing presently—the effect is unsettling in a manner that cannot be clearly articulated. There is the sense of intersubjective communication, but one would have a difficult time comprehending what exactly was communicated. The messages from the Real confront the auditor like a sucker punch—sudden, violent, unexpected, and disappearing before the action is even comprehended.

In a technique that Zorn borrows directly, Artaud uses sound in an aggressive manner, attacking the auditor’s ears with piercing, painful sounds. Through these means, Artaud creates conditions through which the Real may emerge, creating some of the symptoms of pain and anxiety within the auditor in the process. Granted, one is at liberty to simply attenuate the volume on the stereo, but what is this if not a willful resignation to the excess of the power of the performance, of the expressive noise? Diamanda Galás uses this same technique, as does Merzbow, as does Zorn. The intensity of volume is a technique for creating an actual phenomenological situation wherein one’s psyche comes under attack by the acute sense of danger triggered by pure instinct. As Salomé Voegelin describes noise as that which “deafens
we find that the power of Zorn’s use of expressive noise overwhelms the senses, making it nearly impossible to reflect on the work and the sonic experience from a distance during the act of perception.

Naturally, the effect will vary depending upon one’s own experiences with loud sounds. In certain extreme cases, an individual may have become so inured to loud, perceptibly formless sound that he or she has less of a reaction, and in these cases, the power of the work may be greatly diminished; however, the work will still be aesthetically transgressive, even if the aural intensity is enervated. The extent to which becoming accustomed to loud sound weakens the power of the work to affect the psyche of the listener is unclear. Perhaps the nature of the sound also plays a role in determining one’s perception of it. Perhaps a construction worker who uses a jackhammer all day becomes acclimated to the sound of the tool, but does this necessarily mean that he or she will be equally desensitized to the sounds of distorted bass and screaming? After all, numerous scholars have theorized the voice as having a special kind of power.

Carolyn Abbate writes, “[the voice] exists in present time, as physical and sensuous force, something beating upon us,” and considering that she is speaking of nineteenth-century opera—a traditional art music aspiring to an ideal of aesthetic beauty, as opposed to a music deliberately trying to wreck ideals of classical beauty—one can imagine how the effect is amplified when the physicality of the sound is ratcheted up to the extent of Artaud and Zorn. Artaud’s voice is high-pitched and grating; he makes his voice shrill and coarse so that even if

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425 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 44.

one ignores the words, the message remains potent at the level of the unconscious; he defies us to cover our ears to his theater of raw experience.

Finally we have the aural component that expresses in excess of language, or what Barthes calls the grain of the voice. In his essay, Barthes borrows Kristeva’s bivalent speech concept, the pheno-text and the geno-text, which correspond closely to what we have been denoting as statement and enunciation, respectively. For Barthes, the pheno-text encompasses the techné of music—the structure, the performance practice, the conscious and practiced expression—while the geno-text encompasses the ineffability of music, the beyond of ideation, the Real. A point of confusion that may arise in using the concept of the grain is that Barthes feels that certain vocalists have more of a grain than others, in his case, the comparison is between Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the technician, and Charles Panzéra, the artist who has the grain of the voice. For Lacan, every speech act contains both the statement and the enunciation, just as there is always a pheno- and geno-text for Kristeva. I do not think Barthes means to imply that one can ever have a voice sans grain, but that it may be more present in a given performer. I do, however, believe that an artist such as Artaud or Zorn can place more emphasis on the enunciative function of speech than on the statement, for if Judgment was merely the sum of its text with out the grain of its creator’s voice—the aural embodiment of his psyche—it would be fairly banal and tiresome antiestablishment rant indeed.

6.0 General Themes

By now, a constellation of themes emerge in Astronome: mysticism, alchemy, the occult, rituals, transcendence, all in search of the great arcana—the treasure of transcendence through a secret knowledge. But what is this arcanum that is the subject of Astronome? I propose that it is

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none other than the secret of artistic creation—Paracelsus’s seventh star. *Astronome* is Zorn expressing that which an artist can never truly express in language—the origin of the creative act. This is the unifying device that ties together Varèse, Crowley, and Artaud; that ties together their various theories of radical transcendence; that creates coherence and clarity out of an almost inscrutable work of art.

Let us begin by returning to Paracelsus, who urges us to follow him and discover “the tincture, the Arcanum, the quintessence, wherein lie hid the foundations of all mysteries and of all works.” We are, then, to understand that the Arcanum of alchemy is purified essence and potency, unadulterated, a pure phenomenological artifact that remains after all impurities have been burned away. Paracelsus continues, “through the agency of fire, the true is separated from the false. The light of Nature indeed is created in this way, that by means thereof the proof or trial of everything may appear, but only to those who walk in this light.” We return to Zorn’s maxim, “powerful secrets are revealed through intensity and extremes of experience,” in this context to see that it is through the blistering intensity of *Astronome* that he will share his knowledge of the Arcanum of creativity. Although the metaphor is broad and suggestive, one might take one facet and simplify that the requisite “agency of fire” may be the sheer act of enduring forty-five minutes of blindingly intense music, at high volume, almost without anything conventional to steady oneself.

Zorn already considers performance a ritual, as we have seen above, but perhaps the act of listening is as much a ritual as the performance itself. Perhaps there is a double ritual

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429 Ibid.
happening wherein the musicians invoke the arcanum through performance (and remember that Crowley finds a dramatic invocation to be the most effective) while the auditor undergoes a purification ritual in order to receive the secret knowledge. On ritual purification, Crowley writes, “the point is to seize every occasion of bringing every available force to bear upon the objective of the assault. It does not matter what the force is (by any standard of judgment) so long as it plays its proper part in securing the success of the general purpose.”430 Just as Varèse wanted to bring “every available force to bear” upon his audience during the climax of *L’Astronome*, so too did Artaud in the Theater of Cruelty and Zorn in *Astronome*. Crowley goes as far as to characterize the purification as an assault, and in the case of *Astronome*, the assault is clearly aural.

This is not, of course, the extent of Crowley’s contribution to *Astronome*, nor is it Paracelsus’s. The scene descriptions outline a general narrative in which “the initiate” is possessed by demonic spirits, undergoes a satanic baptism, conducts alchemical experiments, engages in a supernatural battle, and reaches a level of transvection and transcendence. The scene descriptions follow, and I am including time markers for scene breaks, as I interpreted them:

**ACT ONE**
- Scene 1 – A secluded clearing in the woods (00:00)
  - *A full moon illuminates a coven dancing around a large bonfire – an orgy*
- Scene 2 – A single bed in a small room (04:44)
  - *Midnight – the initiate, asleep, is haunted and possessed by demonic spirits*
- Scene 3 – The innermost chapel of a secret temple (10:35)
  - The summoning of demons by the coven – a satanic baptism – visitation of the lord of light

**ACT TWO**
- Scene 1 – A mediaeval laboratory (00:00)
  - *Divination by the tarot – alchemical experiments – elixirs of transformation*
- Scene 2 – In the magick circle (07:30)
  - *Spells and obeahs of possession – raising the dead – a sacred ceremony*

**ACT THREE**
- Scene 1 – A barren plain at midnight (00:00)

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- The battle of the wizards – a ritual of sacrifice
- Scene 2 – An unnamed location (05:21)
  - Transvection – readings from a sacred book – magick symbols and sigils – transcendence

As one can see, Zorn’s descriptions are vaguely suggestive, but not specific in a manner that allows one to necessarily detect these events in the music. The point is not to convey a narrative through programmatic elements in the music, but to suggest certain themes for the listener to stow in his or her mind, and to create an aura of mystery and discovery. The signifiers are not even exclusively Crowleyan (e.g., there is no Satan in Thelema, nor are there alchemical experiments), which furthers the idea that Zorn does not wish us to form specific conceptions of the music.

Moreover, no track breaks or time markers are present to divide the acts into their constituent scenes. The three acts are separated into three long tracks (each over ten minutes) and because of the timbral consistency of the music, the listener is easily disoriented and efforts to locate scenes are confounded. The time markers that correspond to the scene divisions presented above are based on a combination of an analysis of the waveform of each track and my own musical intuition. Examining each track visually as a waveform helped me to get a better sense of the acts as a whole because the amplitude contour corresponded to musical intensity. From there, it was possible to observe that dramatic breaks in intensity could correspond to sections of relative temporal equivalence, which would make sense musically. Figure 1 shows the scene distribution for Act 1.
Where one might normally create a makeshift score to examine structural issues like this, *Astronome* contains many sections that break out of time, and thus it becomes difficult to be sure of even simple issues like the number of measures in a section. Due to the sectional nature of the music, it is likely that various sections may use either a musical metrical scale or a time scale.

### 6.1 Meaning in *Astronome*

Finally, we arrive at the difficult question of how *Astronome* has the power to mean anything through musical sound alone. In the above section I have sorted through the textual clues that Zorn provides, which inform my interpretation on a literary level; but this is where many analyses are content to end, having explained the thematic content without addressing a number of questions relating specifically to the sound of the music. The most pressing of these questions is how the musical materials have the ability to create meaning apart from the textual clues that superimpose concepts on abstract sounds.

At the literary level, music acts as a metaphor. In this particular case, I could argue that *Astronome* is a metaphor for artistic creativity and leave it at that. If we look to Lacan’s definition, it fits:

Metaphor’s creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images, that is, of two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other’s place in the
signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain.\textsuperscript{431}

The music acts as a signifier that can stand for an actual concept while the friction between the concept and its transposition into musical signification create the musical interest of the work. One could even say that Zorn’s use of “noise” is symbolic insofar as the loudness and dissonance of \textit{Astronome} could symbolically represent the mysterious, threatening supernatural forces suggested by the scene descriptions. A great deal of music uses sound as a signifier for an actual concept, especially when the music uses a culturally established corpus of signifiers. In the case of \textit{Astronome}, it is uncertain that one could make the claim that it uses a sufficient amount of existing musical signifiers to constitute an effective and meaningful metaphor. Again, I return to the voice and, specifically, the screaming. Screaming in music almost always connotes terror, fear, or anger, as we find in Wagner or Berg’s \textit{Lulu}—at minimum, it represents a state of intense emotion—but in \textit{Astronome}, this is much too limiting. Surely Zorn has not devoted all this time to a work about an angry or terrified subject, too moved by a simplistic base emotion to create a linguistically coherent utterance. What originates in the Real is typically filtered through the Symbolic and reaches us as metaphor or metonymy, which is to say that it becomes encoded in language (whether verbal or artistic); however, certain instances of the Real remain unsymbolized and create disruptions in the expectations created by a lifetime in the Symbolic.

\textit{Astronome} is a particularly potent example of the Real in music, and this is the point at which music of extreme and unusual character has the power to reach us as artistic communication. We often speak in metaphors to attribute a concept to a musical sound, but in \textit{Astronome}, it’s not that the music is a metaphor for the ritual of the secret of artistic creativity.

The work is the ritual itself. The music is Zorn attempting to baptize the listener (the initiate) in the purifying fires of raw, unrestrained expression to show us the mysteries of creativity. In A.E. Waite’s lexicon of alchemy, he describes Paracelsus’s Arcanum as “an incorporeal, immortal substance which in its nature is far above the understanding and experience of man.” If we replace the word “substance” with “psychical order,” we have a wonderfully succinct definition of the Real. Astronome is both in the Real and of the Real. If this secret were such that Zorn could divulge it through conventional language, he probably would; but words can only take us so far, and accordingly, Zorn has written a work of music about musical creativity. He creates conditions conducive to an emergence of the Real and allows them to remain unSymbolized because to subject it to the Symbolic would render it impotent and ineffectual. In the case of Astronome, Zorn uses multiple dimensions of expressive noise—the acoustic, the communicative, and the phenomenological—to transcend the potentially symbolic function of noise. By engulfing the spectator’s psyche through the expressive noise of Astronome, Zorn enacts the purification ritual of the arcanum of creativity.

I believe the secret to the communication of this idea rests in Patton’s vocalise extravaganza. One has but to listen to the portions of Artaud’s Judgment designated “sound effects” to see the connection to the vocals in Astronome. Just as Artaud wails and screams and speaks in nonsense languages and creates pained, tortured utterances, so too does Patton. The difficulty arises when we compare Artaud and Patton in their respective capacities as enunciating subjects. Artaud is clearly the enunciating subject of Judgment, but Patton’s position is more elusive. In both cases, the vocal utterances create an altogether different effect than one would

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have listening to a language that one does not understand. Although the sounds may not correspond to linguistic units in the mind of the auditor, the majority of language involves a certain amount of regularity of tone, cadence, inflection, and rhythm. The sort of non-sense vocalizations that Artaud and Patton practice involve no such features.

The answer lies in Zorn’s compositional methodology. Although Zorn does not specifically refer to anything but the second act as a file card piece, his working method as described in section 3.2 is identical to his approach for previous file card compositions. Zorn states that, “bit by bit we’d build it up. An additive process, with the musicians concentrating on the details of one section at a time, but relatively blind, as far as where the piece is going. Like a director in film, only I would have the overall perspective.” In a sense, Patton is surrendering part of his agency as a performer. He is creating the phenomenological instantiations of the utterance—the enunciations from the Real that remain unsymbolized in the music—but he is doing so at the direction of Zorn, the actual subject of enunciation, and he is doing so also in a relatively blind fashion. While Zorn is not directly in control of the psyche of his performers, he is acting almost as an analyst directing an analysand, creating conditions conducive to the unconscious, gently directly the psychical state of his performers to a state of revelation. That said, the voice is an important part of the music’s ability to convey the Real and thus I will explore it in this section.

Like Artaud, Zorn seems to acknowledge the inefficaciousness of communication at the level of the statement. This is, perhaps, why most music communicates through metaphor, while certain strains of experimental music (Astronome included) may not have recourse to the

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433 Here, Zorn is referencing the creation of Spillane, but as he has stated elsewhere, the method of constructing these file card studio works tends to be the same process of segmented construction, wherein the performers are only ever aware of the micro-scale, leaving Zorn the sole proprietor of the macro-scale. Gagne 1993, 519.
Symbolic. For Lacan, the tropes of metaphor and metonymy are the primary vehicles of the unconscious when it appears in language, and to use literal words in a musical work is to subjugate it to the Symbolic; but when the Real appears, it is unknown, unexpected, and unexplained. In Žižek’s thought, “the Real is an entity which must be constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure.” In a sense, this is exactly what I am doing here: I am accounting for disruptions and distortions in the Symbolic of music by attributing them to the Real. Of course, Lacan writes that one cannot attain, strictly speaking, the Real, but at the same time, one cannot avoid it. Zorn simply creates a space for it to emerge in performance and allows it to travel to the auditor.

This claim may be difficult to entertain in a poststructuralist context, which claims, as Žižek writes, “that a text is always ‘framed’ by its own commentary: the interpretation of a literary text resides on the same plane as the ‘object.’” To suggest that a text communicates above the level of metonymy is to run aground on Derrida’s argument against the metaphysics of presence—the idea that a concept can be transmitted unproblematically between the speaker and the auditor. However, Žižek argues, “the position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that ‘there is no metalanguage,’ that no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say, that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance, is the position of metalanguage in its purest, most radical form.”

I do not argue the metaphysics of presence in Astronome—the distorted bass, for instance, has a much different function for a heavy metal listener than for a baroque music

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435 Ibid., 171.
436 Ibid., 173
aficionado, to say nothing of non-Western nations that do not have electronically amplified instruments—but I do wish to highlight certain extraordinary characteristics in the work. An example would be the terrific sound pressure resulting in a correct (i.e., high volume) listening. When Richard Foreman staged Zorn’s work, he issued a warning in the program indicating potential sonic discomfort and provided earplugs to any spectators who were not up to the challenge. The psychical destabilization created by loud noises is something that Zorn understands and uses to create a receptive state of being, such that one can experience the Real in a meaningful way. In this way, the physical damage of the body is a mark of the Real—we cannot understand its presence, but we can understand where it has been after the fact. We might draw a parallel between this experience and Crowley’s definition of a spiritual invocation where “the macrocosm floods the consciousness,” but of course, in our case, it is the unconscious that gets flooded. The ototoxic anxiety of aural pain and potential hearing loss smashes through our spectatorial walls, and the expected display of concepts mediated through musical performance becomes a sense of actual danger—the ritual purification by fire. Beyond this, however, is another level wherein the amplitude of the sound creates an atavistic terror that reaches the auditor at a level beyond the Symbolic—a level of pure instinct. I would argue that phenomena concerning the Real has a metaphysical existence that is at least partially immune from Derridian presence, inasmuch as certain instinctual drives (the fear of loud sounds, for example) are not socially specific constructs. If the pain of audition has anything whatsoever to do with sociocultural conditioning, it must be in a highly limited capacity.

6.2 Lacan, the Voice-Object, and Astronome

Finally, we must discuss the power of the voice—the dramatic centerpiece of Astronome.

One might say that Zorn has eradicated the pheno-text entirely, leaving only the geno-text—the

\[437\] Crowley, 2006, 72.
grain of the voice. Where the grain of the voice is typically what a vocalist communicates in excess of the text, Patton’s vocal performance is all excess—actualized jouissance.

Let us take a step back and see what Lacan has to say about the power of the voice. Recall the discussion of object (a) in chapter one (section 4.1.3). Object (a) is the pure, abstract cause of desire, but it can manifest as a number of part-objects that in various combinations excite the drives of a given subject. Object (a) and its constituent part-objects are forever lost to the subject, and thus the subject will continue to seek them out again and again in the metonymic slide of desire. Freud proposed a number of part-objects (e.g., the breast, feces, the penis) with which a subject might take as the object of a drive in lieu of a whole person. A common example is the infant who, in a state of undifferentiated being with the mother, experiences the breast as an entity unto itself—an isolated source of total fulfillment. To Freud’s list of part-objects, Lacan adds the voice and the gaze—two part-objects with libidinal investments equal in strength to the more commonly sexualized part-objects of Freud.

Just as the mythic “first satisfaction” of the infant receiving the mother’s breast creates a cathected mnemonic trace of the primordial jouissance that must be surrendered upon entering the Symbolic, a mnemonic trace is also created in response to the power of the infant’s mythic “first cry” to summon a source of satisfaction. Michel Poizat writes that “this cry is a pure manifestation of vocal resonance linked to a state of internal displeasure, and that this cry is answered by the Other.” However, when the infant repeats this cry, he or she is making a more specific demand for satisfaction and thus, the infant enters into a Symbolic exchange. The primordial jouissance experienced during the total satiation resulting from the first cry is forever lost because after the initial experience of pure need and pure fulfillment, the infant’s expression

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of need now encompasses both demand (which can be sated) and desire (which cannot be fully sated). Thus, as part of object (a), the voice-object is subjected to a constant metonymic slide between various potential pleasure sources that the subject believes will satisfy his or her desire. The voice-object is from the Real; it is impossible to render through image or symbol, and because no metonymic substitution can ever take its place, the subject must seek it out again and again.439

Poizat interprets the loss of the voice-object (and the resultant loss of jouissance) in a way that involves a search for the return of the first satisfaction, and thus, he explains our fascination with the beauty of the operatic voice as an attempt to regain this first satisfaction.440 In this way, the voice-object is aligned with jouissance qua pleasure—something to bring about ecstasy if only one could regain it; however, as we saw in chapter one, a more orthodox understanding of jouissance involves a unique sort of pleasure, or enjoyment, that is so excessive that it is terrifying and painful. To experience this sort of jouissance is to go beyond the Law, to excise oneself from the Symbolic, to become psychotic.

Žižek explains the voice-object as an “empty a priori”—a condition from which all speech is possible.441 The voice-object is a void—all-consuming silence—that we must mask by speech and music in order to avoid the madness of confronting the infinite. He asks the rhetorical question, “why do we listen to music?": in order to avoid the horror of the encounter of the voice qua object. […] When the intricate musical tapestry disintegrates or collapses into a pure

439 Fink, 1995, 92.
unarticulated scream, we approach voice *qua* object.\textsuperscript{442} The creation of intelligible sounds of a musical or linguistic nature uses the Symbolic to shield us from a traumatic encounter with the voice-object. By excluding the voice-object, we submit to the Law and are able to participate in normal reality. If one were to transgress the Law, the result would be unrestrained jouissance—a traumatic encounter with the voice-object in the Real. The vocals in *Astronome* demonstrate this sort of jouissance beyond the Law; they encompass the painful ecstasy of a subject unchecked by the Law.

Abbate writes that “the sound of the singing voice becomes, as it were, a ‘voice-object’ and the sole center for the listener’s attention. That attention is thus drawn away from words, plot, character, and even from music.”\textsuperscript{443} So powerful is the voice-object that, when it appears, it pulls the spectator out of complacent, distanced observation and demands attention. As Poizat notes, this voice-object often emerges in a most unwelcome fashion, often in the form of mistakes on the part of the performer—errors that force the audience to regard a character in an opera as a performer, as a fellow human being.\textsuperscript{444} This is not to say that performance errors are the only way to bring forth the voice-object, but simply to say that when the voice-object appears, it jars the spectator out of passive reception.

In *Astronome*, this is all part of the plan. Patton’s “pre-linguistic” vocal utterances exist before the instantiation of the Law and before the threat of Symbolic castration. They inhabit the Real in a state of primordial jouissance, and in their capacity as voice-object, we find them terribly fascinating and horrifying. They affect us psychically in a way that is uncomfortable (we

\textsuperscript{442} *Ibid.*, 93.

\textsuperscript{443} Abbate, 1991, 10.

\textsuperscript{444} Poizat, 1992, 98-100.
might interpret it as frightening, or grating, or even frustrating) because they threaten to engulf us in our lost jouissance—they threaten to give us all, thereby killing our ability to desire. Of course we cannot actually experience the homeostasis at the heart of the desire of the voice-object because to reclaim the lost maternal voice, to re-experience the primordial cry, is to die—the only escape route from the Symbolic.

In an evocative, if somewhat unbelievable formulation, Mladen Dolar writes that “music, in particular the voice, shouldn’t stray away from words, which endow it with sense; as soon as it departs from its textual anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening, all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers.”

Granted, there are plenty of occasions where the untexted voice is not threatening at all, but in the context of the style of vocalise that Patton performs on Astronome, Dolar’s assessment seems plausible. What Zorn does is give us a taste of the Real, of jouissance, in a manner only slightly mediated by an aesthetic filter, to create a transcendent experience; and he does this using the techniques of Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. It is precisely through this abjuration of the Law in Astronome that I can make the claim that the music transcends the level of metaphor and affects the auditor directly at the level of the unconscious. Poizat and Žižek present the voice-object in different ways, but they both avow its importance for creating desire. Although the extreme sonics of Astronome are plenty powerful, the way that Zorn uses the voice compounds the traumatic psychical impact on the listening subject.

7.0 Conclusion

Upon one’s initial encounter with Astronome, the expressive language is so far removed from any sort of musical convention that meaning immanent to the sound seems impossible.

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Even if one agrees that, at times, un-texted music may possess some sort of referential power, *Astronome* does not use enough of the common musical signifiers to constitute a comprehensible communication of anything. Therefore, what is the thematic content other than a strictly extra-musical notion placed on top of the musical sound without any legitimate cohesion between the sonics and the concepts? Through cultural convention, a descending melodic line in the minor mode can connote sadness, but what part of *Astronome* could be said to represent an alchemical ritual of transcendence in this same way?

Through a thick interpretation, we can make sense of Zorn’s radical expressive language in *Astronome* by reading it through the thought of his dedicatees, and through some Lacanian concepts, we can understand how the musical material actually accomplishes this goal sonically through expressive noise. Varèse, Crowley, and Artaud each approached their work as an attempt to break through conventional expression so as to offer the respective listener, initiate, or spectator an experience that transcended the linguistically communicable. In each of their respective projects, they sought to deliberately transgress convention in such an extreme fashion that the perceiver’s Symbolic would be overwhelmed with an appearance of the Real.

With these same ends in mind, Zorn blends Varèse’s music with Artaud’s theatrics and Crowley’s ritual magick to create a powerful and traumatic experience—Paracelsus’s “agency of fire” that separates the true from the false. By “[bringing] every available force to bear” on the perceiver through the use of expressive noise in the way that *Astronome* does, Zorn creates the conditions for an encounter with the Real. Just as the Initiate of the libretto conducts rituals, undergoes an alchemical transformation, and experiences transcendence, so too does the listener endure the ritual of listening leading to a transformative and transcendent experience. Through the daring act of listening, Zorn invites us to discover the arcanum of creativity.
Chapter 4: Diamanda Galás: Écriture Féminine, Abjection, and Feminine Jouissance

Now I-woman am going to blow up the Law; let it be done, right now, in language.

Hélène Cixous

1.0 Introduction

Diamanda Galás cannot fail to make an impression. Whether it is due to her enormous vocal range and array of extended techniques, or her dramatic, threatening persona, or her elaborate theatrical stagings, or her confrontational topics, or the sheer ferocity of her music, it is impossible to confront her work with passive detachment. Her music is thematically radical in a straightforward sociopolitical sense, but it is equally radical in a musical/aural sense; she offers a radical message in a radical expressive language.

In this chapter, I will construct a thick interpretation of Galás’s *Wild Women with Steak Knives* (1982), showing how her radical expressive language creates an intersection between gender construction, Greek lamentation practice, abjection, and feminine empowerment. In this work for solo voice, Galás stages a psychodrama of femininity becoming empowered as a source of extra-Symbolic creativity. By reading *Wild Women* through a network of Lacanian theory along with the poststructuralist French feminine philosophies of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, an exhortation of feminine creativity and feminine jouissance becomes apparent in an otherwise inscrutable work of art. What appears to be an alienating exploration of extreme vocal techniques against a grisly (if vague) thematic backdrop becomes an uplifting (if terrifying) vision of the birth of a feminine expressive language that reaches beyond the strictures of dominant phallogocentric discourse.

After providing some background on Galás, her distinctive compositional and performance style, and the unique biographical factors that are inextricable from her thematic
interests and activism, I will situate *Wild Women* within the discourse of feminine expression as proposed by Cixous and Kristeva. I will further explain how elements of her Greek, Maniat heritage and the Maniat lamentation style factor into Galás’s composition and performance style, and how through the use of pain and suffering, she is able to create powerful works of art that affect an aural collision with the Real. Finally, I will provide a close reading of *Wild Women* to show how all of these elements come into play within her work of radical music.

2.0 Diamanda Galás

Diamanda Galás was, at first, discouraged from using her voice for music. Greek men tended to think of singing as something that prostitutes do to advertise themselves and attract customers, and thus her father forbid her to sing in her home and especially in public. For Galás, the very act of using her voice in public was, in essence, an act of rebellion against a dominant masculine discourse. Her first experiences with vocal music were very private, ritualistic affairs involving LSD and an anechoic chamber as the University of California San Diego Medical School—a time of intimate discovery where she was finding her voice in both a literal and figurative sense.

Of all the elements that make Diamanda Galás a unique artist—her radical activism, her dedication to the dispossessed, her ferocious piano style—it is her voice that is the sine qua non of her expressive power. The topics of her works vary, she writes in a range of styles from modern to postmodern, and she performs anything from blues standards with a piano to theatrical

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446 He did, however, encourage her piano studies from an early age, providing Galás’s initial musical training and giving her invaluable experience through steady gigging in a range of styles. By the age of 14, she had performed Beethoven’s “Piano Concerto No. 1 in C major, op. 15” with the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Will Oldham, “Diamanda Galas,” 1999, Index Magazine, accessed October 15, 2013, http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/diamanda_galas.shtml.

works with electronic music accompaniment, but the defining element across all of her work is her voice and the way in which she uses it as a force of power, or as she says, “an instrument of inspiration for my friends, and a tool of torture and destruction to my enemies.”

Virtually every article and interview mentions her legendary three and a half octave vocal range, but Galás dismisses these statements as hyperbole. “I think I would be considered a lyric spinto soprano,” she states, “but the projection of my voice has a very hard edge to it that cuts like a knife. I like thinking of it as a mezzo with a higher and lower extension.” She was trained in the bel canto style, which she describes as being crucially important in achieving powerful projection, in helping her realize what was in her head, and in helping her perform her range of extended vocal techniques in a safe and sustainable manner. Beyond her natural, extended range, she also uses multiple microphones and digital signal processing equipment to modify her voice and to create spatial effects within the concert hall.

2.1 Compositional Style

Galás’s compositional style is difficult to pin down because some works, like *Wild Women*, could be read as modernist, while other likes, like *Defixiones: Will and Testament* (2004), use more postmodern techniques. Moreover, a number of her works rely on her

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450 This quote appears in an interview in Goblin Magazine. Unfortunately, Goblin Magazine’s Internet presence seems to have dwindled and it is no longer possible to provide a citation for the original source. A reprint of the interview text is available at the follow location: Jon Randall and Wesley Joost, “Diamanda Galás,” Musivine, accessed October 15, 2013, http://www.musivine.com/blogs/26?mv=true.

451 I was trained in bel canto, which ultimately was the technique that Wagner wanted his singers to use because it was the only technique that would cut through that huge orchestral sound. He wanted singers to project the sound through the skull with all the facial bone resonances you need to sustain a line in bel canto. I studied that in my twenties because I had to continue to be equal to what I heard as an improviser; otherwise I'd either be a liar on stage or I'd stop performing. In order to make a career, just like an opera singer, I can't just perform once a month and lose my voice. I had to build up a lot of stamina, a lot of power, a lot of physical wisdom about where the sound is placed. So I never hurt my voice singing. *Ibid.*
collaboration with a sound designer, which problematizes the idea of Galás qua sole author of the work. I propose we read her work collectively as that of a radical composer. At times she may be closer to the language of modernism with its inherent abstraction, its concentration on extremes of performance practice, and novel compositional systems. At other times, she may be closer to the language of postmodernism with complex, intertextual webs of meaning along with a mixture of so-called high art and low art styles and genres working in tandem.

This is not to say that she exists exclusively within the realm of radical music, as Galás inhabits two roles interchangeably: radical composer/performer and idiosyncratic performer of popular songs from a number of styles including blues, soul, spirituals, and jazz. Her renditions of popular songs are at once raucous and haunting, violent and emotional.452 Even when she is singing music by other composers while accompanying herself on piano, all of the work is both thematically related to her overall interest in avenging victims of dominant power structures and filtered through her unique aesthetic. When she sings “My World Is Empty Without You,” a song popularized by The Supremes, the song becomes dissonant, lugubrious, and bitterly sarcastic—nearly unrecognizable from the popular, upbeat Motown version. It is as if Galás plays a vengeful woman standing over the body of an unfaithful lover that she has just killed, sarcastically lamenting his demise. Ultimately, these borrowed songs end up contributing to her larger project of lamentation and vengeance for victims who can no longer speak for themselves.

Where one might wish to present a survey of a composer’s compositional training, for Galás, it seems more appropriate to examine the way that she developed her distinctive vocal technique. After all, she appears to have had little formal training and is, rather, an intuitive

452 For example, see The Singer (1992), Malediction and Prayer (1998) or Guilty Guilty Guilty (2008).
composer whose voice is the way that she can express musical ideas.\footnote{Joe Brown, “With Songs of Rage,” Washington Post, April 7, 1991, G1.} The way in which she conceives the music is inextricable from the power of her voice, and while she could theoretically devise a notational system to fit her style, she is not concerned with others performing her music.\footnote{“[Lukas Foss] expressed a real worry that when I die the music is going to die because I didn’t notate it. All I can say is yes, probably, because I don’t know how to notate it. I never studied composition. I just performed many piano works up from five years old into graduate school. I know what kind of devices I’m using structurally just as any artist is aware of them—but I don’t know how to write the work so that another singer could do it.” Randall and Joost.} It is a personal expression that cannot exist apart from its creator. One might be able to mimic Galás’s vocal style with enough practice (and the requisite vocal range), but without the intense personal connection to the subject matter, this would result in mere parody.

Galás made her vocal debut in 1979 at the Festival d’Avignon in France playing the lead in Vinko Globokar’s opera, \textit{Un Jour Comme un Autre} (1979), which details the torture of a Turkish woman accused of treason. Galás’s unique vocal abilities made her a perfect fit for a role that required a singer who could “begin every evening singing like a lyric soprano and finish screaming like an animal.”\footnote{Charles Neal, \textit{Tape Delay} (Wembley: SAF Publishing, 1992), 199.} Although this is technically part of her performance history, I mention it in this discussion compositional style because the vocal training regimen that she designed to prepare for this role was a crucial stage in the development of her own performance style, which therefore opened up new compositional possibilities to her.\footnote{John Payne, “Vengeance is Hers: A Conversation with Diamanda Galás,” \textit{Arthur} 28 (2008).}

Following that, she toured throughout Europe performing the works of Globokar and Xenakis, a fellow composer of Greek heritage who shared a similar outsider position with respect to the cosmopolitan avant-garde. Undoubtedly, Xenakis influenced her early
compositional style; if one compares her treatment of the voice—the distinctive glossolalia, the extreme range of pitch, the sheer virtuosity—in early works such as *Wild Women*, *Litanies of Satan*, or *Panoptikon* (1984) to Xenakis works such as *Nuits* (1967-68), which feature similar treatments of the voice, one can see the marked influence of the composer she calls a “personal hero.” Ultimately, she decided to stop performing the work of other composers because she found it unrewarding to put so much creative energy into the interpretation and realization of these very difficult avant-garde works only to see the composer get most of the credit.

As mentioned above, Galás tends to compose alternately in a modernist and postmodernist style. Her modernist tendencies are heard most clearly on albums like *The Litanies of Satan* (1982), *Diamanda Galás* (1984), *Vena Cava* (1993), and *Schrei X* (1996). In these predominantly electronic works (which include “Wild Women with Steak Knives”), Galás creates abstract, unconventional music that does not conform to any standards of form, harmony, melody, or rhythm. While one can make the case that the majority of her work fits under the banner of radical music, these works are the most radical insofar as they eschew convention most rigorously. Even with a work like “The Litanies of Satan,” which is a sort of setting of a poem by Baudelaire, her expressive language is so far removed from any conventional practice that not even the use of a borrowed text can ground the music (i.e., the non-lingual portion of the sound) with any sort of familiarity.

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457 Ibid.

458 I stopped singing for other composers because what I realized is that—1) the performer had to spend an immense amount of time in what often turns out to be a very anal activity—this indulging of the "composer's" every "musical" whim, and 2) the performer most often has to do a lot of musical improvisation in order to make any sense of the work. Having done that enough times and not being credited for it, I decided if I'm going to be experimenting with my voice I might as well write my own music. The career of Cathy Berberian bears testament to this. She was never credited as the co-composer of works such as "Sequenza" and "Visage," for example, which were collaborations between Berberian and Luciano Berio. She was a great improviser....” Randall and Joost.
Her postmodernist tendencies are most evident on the *Masque of the Red Death* trilogy (1986-88), *Plague Mass* (1991), and *Defixiones, Will and Testament* (2003). All of her work could be described as dealing with the afflictions of a certain people, but in these more postmodern works, her topics are quite specific: the victims of AIDS (and the subsequent hatred inflicted upon them by mainstream society) and the victims of genocides, including the Assyrians, the Greeks, and the Armenians. The specificity of her topic lends itself to textual borrowing, and indeed Galás compiles heterogeneous texts for each of these works including Biblical passages, poetry by Armenian, Assyrian, and Turkish poets, news articles, propaganda, popular songs, folk tunes, and potentially any other relevant media. Amongst these various texts borrowed from, and sung in, Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, Turkish, and English, she constructs a dense, intertextual web in which the plurality of her vision, along with radical juxtaposition and recontextualization, lead to fascinating and unexpected connections. For example, during “Holokaftoma” in *Defixiones*, Galás throws Pasolini’s “A Desperate Vitality” into stark relief by layering it over the top of a taped recitation of another poem, *Hatred*, published by a Turkish newspaper, *Hurriyet*, two days prior to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. On the one hand, we have Pasolini’s ambiguously melancholic poem, and on the other, we have a sickeningly intolerant call for the deaths of Greek *giavouri*, or infidels.459 Other than the intertextuality of these works, they could also be described as postmodern in the way that Galás fuses disparate genres together. In *Defixiones*, Galás combines elements of her studio compositions with songs,

459 On the one hand, we have Pasolini’s beautiful, philosophical reflections on his so-called “desperate vitality” (i.e., his inner artistic drive), and his desire to affect social change through art; and on the other, we have an anonymous, simplistic call to war stated in the most pedestrian language: “As long as the vulgar Greek exists in this world / By Allah, my hatred won’t leave me / As long as I see him there like a dog / By Allah, this hatred won’t leave me / A thousand heads of infidel Giaours cannot wash away this hatred.” See http://www.diamandagalas.com/defixiones/hatred_e.htm.
lullabies, and folk tunes thereby leading to a mixture of so-called “high art” and “low art” sources within the same work.

In terms of the actual creation of her work, Galás appears to spend a great deal of time researching her topics, compiling documents, finding extant artwork that has a relevant connection, and carefully considering what she would like to say through the music. Following that, she creates an overall plan in prose notes including how she wants to treat elements like timbre and texts. She then enters the recording studio with a sound designer who helps her realize her ideas from a technical standpoint. Her major work is thus conceived and created in a recording studio, and although it is created in such a way that she can perform it live (with recorded accompaniment and live effects), her main compositional tools end up being her voice and the recording studio itself. In terms of authorship, it is impossible to know the exact extent of the contributions from her producer and engineer. Galás describes herself as an auteur in the vein of Hitchcock—an auteur who conceives of the entire work before various others step in and assist with technical matters. Whatever the scope of their contributions, it seems clear that Galás is solely responsible for the themes and tone of the work, and for any particulars relating to her voice and other instruments. Any technical matters attended to by a producer are likely to be less creatively involved even than, say, a musician realizing a musical work from a composer’s notation.

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461 Oldham, 1999.

2.2 Performance Style

Galás’s performance style is legendary and has, at times, seemed to overshadow the music for certain reviewers who consider her to be more of a performance artist than a musician and composer—a position Galás vigorously protests. Her work as a performer involves dramatic staging, which uses traditional mise-en-scène elements (e.g., lighting, costumes, set design), carefully selected performance spaces (such as her infamous performance of Plague Mass in The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City), and an enactment of her art upon the body, such as the aforementioned Plague Mass performance where she appears bare-breasted, covered in stage blood. Even when she is performing at the piano in a more humble singer-songwriter context, she presents herself very precisely as a striking, somewhat threatening figure dressed all in black with dramatic stage makeup, all shrouded in darkness.

Unfortunately, casual, musically unsophisticated critics have had a difficult time distinguishing between performance art with a musical component and a musical performance with a dramatic component. This difference in emphasis is actually a crucial distinction, for Galás expects her music to stand on its own apart from its live performance. Because performance art so frequently involves a prominent conceptual component, this designation also serves to downplay the importance of the sonic experience of the music. For example, In Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975), the artist stands naked on a table and reads from a scroll that she slowly extracts from her vagina. A mere description of the act accompanied by the text of the scroll is sufficient to appreciate (at least partially, if not fully) the transgressive power of the work along with its attempt to reclaim the power of the female body for women. To describe a work like Plague Mass in conceptual terms reduces the musical work to the point that one

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463 This performance is documented on the following: Diamanda Galás, Plague Mass (1984—End of the Epidemic), 1991 by Mute Records Ltd. 9 61043-2, Compact Disc.
might read a description—“a hysterical woman covered in fake blood screams about AIDS for an hour”—and mistakenly believe that he or she understands the work in any substantive capacity. One can understand the theme and fundamental message through a conceptual description, but the way that the aural actuality conveys this message in a regulation of sonic intensity over time cannot be reduced to a prose description. Undoubtedly, it is always more powerful to experience a work realized before one’s eyes, but when the emphasis of the work is more musical than conceptual, the label of performance art is inappropriate.

Performance art is hardly a women’s genre, but due to the abundance of powerful feminist works in the 1960s and 70s by artists like Carolee Schneemann, Maria Abramović, and Yoko Ono, it appears that there is already a handy critical rubric in place for any female artist whose work includes an important performance element. Galás vigorously refuses this label, stating,

I would never use that word [performance artist] for myself. I use the word auteur, as Hitchcock would. Yes, I compose the music and I perform the music and I compose the libretto and I design the lights until I turn it over to a professional lighting designer. But Wagner did that, too! People who call this performance art do it out of sexism—any woman who organizes a Gesamtkunstwerk is condemned to this territory.

The application of the label “performance art” is shortsighted at best; it completely discounts the musical components—the essence—of the work, for there is no necessary implication of music within the field of performance art. I believe the frequent usage of the label “performance art” has more to do with her special presence on stage, which makes a performance of her work by another artist unthinkable; one may be able to copy her style and delivery to a greater or lesser extent, but we lose the essence of her voice—the voice that lost her brother to AIDS, that is descended from a persecuted band of exiles, that was told never to prostitute her voice in public.

464 Interestingly, Galás invokes two decidedly misogynist figures in this statement. Perhaps she is drawing a distinction between what is acceptable for dictatorial male archetypes and what is acceptable for women. Gracie and Zarkow, 1990.
2.3 Experiencing Tragedy

For Galás, her biography is intricately tied to her work; she creates what she knows, what she has experienced; she spills her blood on her work. Of *Plague Mass*, she remarks, “half my friends are HIV-positive; this is my life.”

This leads to two important insights: first, she seeks not to merely describe the subjects of her art, but to reproduce them aesthetically through an artistic medium; and second, she seeks more than a passive reception of the work, for she intentionally transgresses upon the listener with the extremity of both her work and her presentation.

For her audience, there is no escape, no comfortable distance between themselves and the substance of her work, no excessive aestheticization to mask the raw brutality of her message and her style. Galás’s music seeks to bring the audience into direct confrontation with difficult ideas (e.g., AIDS, genocide) communicated in a transgressive style. She expresses scorn for artists who choose to present difficult topics within an accessible aesthetic model because while they claim to use conventional expressive practices to reach a wider audience, she feels that it trivializes the topic and ends up lacking the substance of a proper critique.

Galás’s texts are explicit and aggressive in the way that they deny the listener any comfort in ambiguity or distance. She does not allude to the horror of AIDS; she describes it in vivid detail. Similarly, Galás’s music is sonically aggressive, especially when listened to at the painful volume levels that she recommends, and it invades and overpowers the psyche of the listener.

Her textually and sonically confrontational style is notable for many reasons, not least of which concerns the substantial amount of music in which composers portray death either

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abstractly (thereby allowing audiences a false representation of death to shield them from the immediacy and horror of a violent death) or simplistically using musical signifiers that are so common that they have lost much of their metaphorical power. In the case of John Adams’s *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2001), the music is not only highly abstract in nature, but does not even engage the events of the September 11th terrorist attacks directly, instead concentrating on the aftermath and those who were left behind in a cloud of uncertainty. Granted, this is a perfectly legitimate approach—certainly not every 9/11 tribute needs to shock us with a terrible reminder of the horror experienced—but it is not an approach Galás would take. Similarly, John Williams, in his score for *Schindler’s List* (1993), represents the Holocaust in a very straightforward manner by playing on common musical signifiers of sadness and Judaism. This approach is easy to decode, but the music uses what Ricoeur would call a dead metaphor; the semantic impertinence of musical tones standing in for a concrete concept fails to surprise the listener by opening up a new horizon of experience because the metaphor has been used so frequently that it has entered the canon of common meaning. Although Williams’s score could potentially be moving, it could also easily sound like a musical cliché—a straightforward message stated in a straightforward manner, to the surprise of no one.

Rather than using abstraction or musical signifiers of sadness common to the Western ear, Galás forces the listener into a traumatic encounter with the Real. Her music goes well beyond mere representation and puts the listener in a vulnerable position of ototoxic anxiety where actual fear is induced. Her works can be read as a transgression on the audience, as she remarks, “I have speakers in four different locations, the audience is *in my cage*…the high frequencies really fuck people up!”  

Nicholas Chares notes, “Galás’s singing does not secure the body’s boundaries but instead impinges upon them. Her performances frequently act not to comfort but  

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to discomfort." Although I will spend considerable time examining how she creates this sonic and psychical confrontation through her music in due time, we cannot underestimate the power of the urgency of her work, which is undoubtedly related to the fact that Galás has lived these tragedies. As her brother developed full-blown AIDS and wasted away before her eyes, she witnessed how his pain was met with scorn and hate, especially from the leaders of the Catholic Church insofar as they were the most outspoken on the issue at the time. When howls of despair punctuate her music in *Plague Mass*, it is a literal outpouring of personally experienced grief. As she puts it, “most pop music is descriptive, it’s about the thing, not the thing itself. Whereas my work is the thing itself, it is the sound of the plague, the sound of the emotions involved.”

### 2.4 Galás as Radical Composer

Having examined Galás’s work in the common terms of modernism, postmodernism, and performance art, I would like to propose that we view Galás’s work collectively as radical music. First, her music is inherently transgressive on numerous fronts: works such as *Wild Women* eschew so many musical conventions that it is difficult to relate it to any existing musical practice other than some of the most extreme works by twentieth-century avant-gardists like Xenakis or Globokar. Her entire oeuvre is also transgressive along sociopolitical lines as it aggressively attacks hegemonies of politics, race, ethics, and sexuality.

Second, Galás’s music is extreme: extremely loud, extremely intense, and extreme in terms of her aesthetic deviation from conventional modes of artistic expression. Just as Galás describes her voice as a weapon against her enemies, her music is often a violent display of defiance and aggression toward the perpetrators of the injustices she confronts. Works like *Wild Women* and *Panoptikon* are loud, abrasive assaults on the senses and they force the listener into a

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traumatic encounter with the Real—a mode of expression so foreign that one can scarcely understand it in any sort of comparative terms.

Third, Galás’s music involves an important conceptual component, as all of her works require the listener to consider social, cultural, and political issues. Although I have already given examples of her work in support of humane treatment of AIDS victims and Assyrian, Greek, and Armenian victims of genocide, she has also composed works like Insekta, which is dedicated to the horror of medical testing conducted on mental health patients in institutions like Willowbrook State School in New York. As interesting as the sonics of her music are, they are never abstract experiments in sound for the sake of sound; they are heavily cathected expressions of definite topics.

Fourth, Galás largely avoids institutional support. With respect to commercial institutions, she does release albums through a record label—Mute—but far from being a major label offering large recording budgets, Mute functions more as a niche label akin to Nonesuch. In lieu of financial support, Mute offers very minimal artistic intervention, which is critical for a sociopolitical dissident like Galás. Concerning academic institutions, Galás sometimes takes an anti-intellectualism stance, finding it to be a lot of posturing with too much emphasis on issues that do not matter. She finds the academic preoccupation with the analysis of musical scores to be much less important than the actual creation and dissemination of the work through recordings and performances.\footnote{Flinn, 1996.} At the same time, Galás takes on a more intellectual role when given the opportunity to answer substantive interview questions.\footnote{Galás even mentions Adorno in one of her most formal interviews. Chare, 2007, 65.} Perhaps the issue is that Galás is quite satisfied with her working method and feels no need to explain how it functions on a technical level, and thus, she sees nothing to be gained from getting involved personally with
any sort of academic investigation into her music. Ultimately, she avoids conventional commercial institutions and she avoids academic institutional support, choosing instead to support her work through performances and the sale of art objects and recordings through her website.

Fifth, timbre is an important element of Galás’s music, especially where the voice is concerned. The extended vocal techniques that she employs are crucial for her mode of expression. On the one hand, works like *The Litanies of Satan* and *Vena Cava* offer so few conventional musical elements that timbre is one of the few remaining features that one can discuss easily. On the other hand, however important timbre is to her expressive style, it is less central to her work than that of, say, Merzbow, for Galás does use some conventional song structures at times and she often uses a text. In those cases, her unusual use of timbre enhances the meaning of the texts, but does not necessarily steal the focus from them.

Sixth, the material objects of Galás’s music are recordings instead of scores. This is not to say that the recording is necessarily the ultimate version of the work, but it is the most permanent representation of the work. When asked if she considered her albums to be “pieces, or documentations of pieces,” Galás replied “both, really.”472 When we take the improvisatory component of her work into consideration, we find that despite the fact that she offers elaborately constructed studio recordings as albums, she still maintains the importance of a dynamic conception of the “work.” A composer like John Zorn seems to place more emphasis on the recorded document that is perfect with subsequent performances being, in essence, live representations of works created in the studio. Galás is a composer who emphasizes the opposite; the recordings are specific instances of works that are most vital and flexible when experienced.

472 Oldham, 1999.
live. Ultimately, however, even if the recordings are more like frozen versions of her works, they are the lasting documents that will allow the music to persist beyond Galás’s lifetime.

Seventh, Galás’s work is often culturally hybridized musically, textually, and occasionally thematically. In the case of *Wild Women*, there are considerable affinities between her vocal style and the Maniat lamentation practices of her mother’s homeland. Other works from *Plague Mass* to *Defixiones* combine literary and poetic sources from diverse cultures. *Defixiones* concentrates on the genocides of Asia Minor circa 1914-23, and accordingly, she borrows texts and songs from Armenian, Assyrian, and Anatolian and Pontic Greek sources.

Eighth, Galás uses non-acoustic means to amplify the expressive content of her work. This encompasses her dramatic staging of her performances as discussed above, but it also involves the cultivation of her persona. Visually speaking, virtually every article on Galás is accompanied by theatrical portraits of the composer in costume with dramatic makeup that makes her appear threatening and evil. In fact, it is so difficult to find photographs of Galás without heavy stage makeup that she has virtually become the image found in magazines and in her performances. Her own visual self-presentation is an important part of her expressive practice. Much like Zorn, she fosters a bad-girl attitude with a penchant for profanity-laced rants in interviews about anything from the unrecognized vocal brilliance of Doris Day to the dumbing down of jazz classics by “shit-ass alternative bands.”

### 3.0 Feminism

Anytime one approaches the work of a female artist who makes any attempt to occupy a position of discursive power, it is tempting to read the work as feminist. Indeed, the way that Galás aggressively performs femininity points toward themes of female empowerment, and to an

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extent, this is apt; however, I believe that it is a mistake to view all of her works from a feminist perspective insofar as many of her topics are not strictly feminist, but humanist. AIDS, genocide, medical experimentation on mental patients—these are all afflictions on humanity. That said, in the case of *Wild Women with Steak Knives*, I believe a feminist reading is warranted, especially because her topic deals directly with feminine empowerment.

As I will show, I believe a Lacanian approach can lead to a compelling interpretation, especially when paired with the feminine theories (if not feminist theories) of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva; however, before examining *Wild Women* as a feminist expression, three things are necessary: first, I will present Lacan’s concept of gender and femininity to show how it can be used productively with postmodern theories of gender; second, I will pick up a few useful concepts from Cixous and Kristeva that will factor into my thick interpretation; and third, I will explain Galás’s own relationship to feminism. Along the way, I will survey the discursive maze of psychoanalysis, feminism (generally), French poststructuralist feminism (specifically), and Butlerian postmodern gender studies.

### 3.1 Lacan, Feminism, and Femininity

Lacan, Cixous, and Kristeva have all faced criticism from Anglophone feminists, but the entire discourse is marked by a great deafness to Lacan’s late teaching, which involved a significant reconceptualization of gender and femininity. Even when the basic Lacanian framework contributes productively to feminist studies, as is the case with Cixous and Kristeva, the work is largely based on an earlier Lacanian paradigm. The pervasive feminist conception of Lacan from Cixous to Butler to any number of secondary commentaries can be traced back to a single article—“The Signification of the Phallus”—that dates from the early part of Lacan’s career and is thus unrepresentative of where he would end up during the latter part of his
This makes a great deal of the commentary largely irrelevant, for Lacan and many feminist scholars are actually more in agreement than disagreement when we consider Lacan’s late work.

Feminist discourse that confronts Lacan tends to fall into two camps: those that borrow and extend his conception of subjectivity and those that are predicated on a gross misrepresentation of Lacan due to a lack of understanding of certain ideas and statements that, when removed from an original context that the author may not have understood to begin with, appear to be misogynistic. At times, it has been sufficient to quote some of Lacan’s most striking statements—“woman does not exist,” or “there is no sexual relationship”—without the burden of understanding what they mean beyond a simplistic, literal interpretation. Thus, amongst the feminists who use Lacan productively, he contributes a useful way of understanding the psyche and its regulation of drives and desires, despite what they claim to be an essentialist, phallocentric concept of sexuality and gender. Amongst the feminists who know Lacan only through his aphoristic formulations, he appears to be a masculinist misogynist who is the very antithesis of feminism. This situation is exacerbated by three things: first, “The Signification of the Phallus” has been widely anthologized, despite the fact that Lacan would completely reconceive his concept of gender within fourteen years of its creation; second, the article was one of the few translated into English until nearer the end of the twentieth century and was the only one to deal extensively with gender; and third, even though Lacan’s reformulation of gender was first presented in 1972 with an authoritative English translation following in 1999, twenty-first-century accounts of Lacan and his role in the history of feminism continue to reference the early

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Lacan only. In feminist and gender scholarship today, Lacan has become inextricable from his early thought.

Initially, in “The Signification of the Phallus,” Lacan is still using a largely Freudian model based around the Oedipus complex and the phallocentric unconscious. The subject cannot form a sexual identity except through language, and thus the subject undergoes Symbolic castration prior to developing a sexual identity. Symbolic castration implies a loss of jouissance that is required when a subject submits to the Law and becomes a speaking being, and accordingly, the Name-of-the-Father replaces the infantile desire of the mother with a new signifier of desire—the phallus. Even though Lacan begins to see the phallus as a signifier (not an organ) and begins to disassociate gender from biological sex, both sexes still have recourse to the phallus as signifier. The man sees the woman as the phallus he lacks, and the woman believes the man possesses the phallus she desires. Both sexes are marked by a lack created upon entering the Symbolic, and both are beholden to the phallus in different ways.

Lacan’s views on gender in the late 1950s would end up provoking a great deal of counter-theorizing within poststructuralist French feminist scholars who looked for ways to oppose or transcend the power and primacy of the phallus, and by extension, the Symbolic. The general Lacanian system is still evident in their work, and they use his terminology, but there is a marked emphasis on subverting the functioning on the Symbolic. For Kristeva, she proposes an extra-Symbolic psychical register called the “semiotic,” which allows the subject to connect to a pre-Oedipal state of maternal intimacy—a point prior to the institution of repressive sociopolitical structures that channel the sexes into a hierarchical gender binary—as a way

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475 Here, the “father” functions as a symbol of prohibition. He fulfills the paternal function, but in actuality, the paternal function can be fulfilled by any dominant influence (male or female) during a child’s development.

around the repressive nature of the Symbolic. For Cixous, the answer lies in transcending the Symbolic through a similarly extra-Symbolic, radical mode of writing that she calls *écriture féminine*—a writing that does not serve the Symbolic, which is governed by the phallic function. If we are confronting early Lacan, Kristeva and Cixous are justified in their critiques, writing as they did in the 1970s and 80s, and one cannot blame them for continuing to reference what was an undeniably important article on gender and sexuality. It is, however, disappointing that feminist discourse continues to enjoy beating up on the phallocentric straw man of early Lacan instead of confronting his later work.

Let us turn now to Lacan’s later ideas about the gender process, or as he calls it, “sexuation.” Recall from chapter one the importance of lack as a means for spurring desire in every subject. A subject can make a demand of the Other, but the subject’s demand will always outstrip the Other’s ability to fulfill it, thereby leaving a remainder of that which has not been satisfied—i.e., desire. The lack in the subject—the need for the Other—compels the subject to enter the Symbolic. If the infantile subject were to remain in a state of non-differentiation with the mOther and have every need satisfied fully, there would be no need to speak at all.

This fundamental lack in all subjects brings us to the phallic function. The phallus in the latter stages of Lacan’s teaching is the signifier of desire created by lack. It is an abstraction that has nothing to do with the bodily organ, and the lack that is established by the phallic function affects all subjects irrespective of actual biology. Its use here, then, is somewhat different from its use in “The Signification of the Phallus,” and there is no sense of “having” or “being” the

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phallus to the opposite sex, and in fact, the idea of an “opposite” sex is no longer even applicable.

According to Lacan, “There’s no such thing as a sexual relationship.”479 That is to say, there is no comparative relationship between the genders; they do not complement each other as parallels or opposites; a male and a female do not combine to form a complete biological unit. As Bruce Fink notes, “the sexes are defined separately and differently, and…their ‘partners’ are neither symmetrical nor overlapping.”480 Moreover, masculinity and femininity are considered to be structures placed on top of a subject’s biological reality. It is only after a subject becomes enmeshed in the Symbolic that he or she can become a gendered being, and the gender of a subject need not match the subject’s biology. The concept is remarkably similar to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance, although she implies that gender is a more conscious choice, whereas Lacan sees gender operating at two levels: the Imaginary level where the subject consciously identifies as a man or woman, and the Symbolic level where masculine and feminine structure come into play.481 These two levels need not be in alignment, for a woman may self-identify as a woman, and yet she may exhibit a masculine psychical structure, or vice versa.

We will look first to men, mostly because they are easier to understand at this stage. Men are simple because they are defined entirely by the phallic function. They have undergone Symbolic castration and are thus wholly subject to the Law. Men’s access to pleasure is contained within what is allowed by the phallic function; they experience only phallic jouissance,


480 Fink, 1995, 105.

481 It is unfortunate that Butler’s entire engagement with Lacanian theory appears to derive exclusively from “The Signification of the Phallus,” especially insofar as Lacan was already proposing a separation of sex and gender some 18 years before the publication of Butler’s landmark Gender Trouble. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990), 55-72.
which is a jouissance limited by the Symbolic that is intrinsically insufficient. Phallic jouissance cannot ever offer the man full satisfaction. Man’s desire circles continually around object (a), and although he finds a promise of it in his partner (who can be biologically male or female), his relationship is with his object (a). This implies that men’s desire transcends the specific individuality of their partners and that men, in essence, have a relationship with themselves, thereby making their jouissance masturbatory.482

In contrast, women are not wholly subject to the Symbolic, and while the phallic function remains in effect, it does not affect women in the same absolute sense as men. Again, this does not mean that women are defined by, or have a necessary relation to, the penis. The phallic function only describes the fact that women too experience alienation and loss upon entering the Symbolic. Because women, like men, are subjects within the Symbolic, they too can experience phallic jouissance, but crucially, Lacan proposes that there is another kind of jouissance available to women known alternately as “Other jouissance” or “feminine jouissance.” This feminine jouissance is remarkable insofar as it exists beyond the Symbolic. Where man’s jouissance is wholly Symbolic in nature and completely delimited by the Law, woman’s jouissance can exist within the Symbolic or beyond the Symbolic. Lacan’s theory of feminine sexuation is, therefore, compatible with Cixous’s concept of écriture féminine for what Cixous proposes as a radical mode of feminine writing beyond the Symbolic, Lacan had already proposed a few years earlier under the name “feminine jouissance.”

Finally, let us consider what Lacan means when he states, “woman does not exist.”483 This means that there is no definable class of all women; there is no single signifier that can stand for the fundamental substance of woman, as a whole. Man can be defined by one

482 Lacan, Seminar XX, 80.
483 Lacan, Seminar XX, 81.
signifier—the phallus—because he can be defined by his limitations imposed by the phallic function. Because woman is not limited under the power of the phallic function necessarily, one signifier cannot define her. Something that cannot be defined by a signifier cannot “exist,” which is to say it cannot be spoken. Instead, woman *ex-sists*. That is, woman comes from a place beyond the Symbolic. Woman can participate in the Symbolic order, but because she transcends it, she cannot be captured within a single, defining signifier, and thus she remains ineffable, at least to the extent that Lacan was able to theorize her.

3.2 Cixous With Lacan

A conventional reading of Cixous and Kristeva with Lacan sets up an opposition between Cixous’s and Kristeva’s subversive feminist powers and Lacan’s ostensible phallocentric hegemony. Their feminine philosophies work in opposition to the tacit assumptions of Freud and early Lacan, even if they adopt some of Freud and Lacan’s fundamental concepts about the psyche and the unconscious. But what happens if we consider Cixous and Kristeva in the context of Lacan’s late teaching? Here, the woman has access to a beyond-the-Symbolic, a special mode of feminine jouissance that cannot be represented by the Symbolic. Lacan situates woman as unknowable and unsignifiable, but what if we read the Symbolic subversions that Cixous and Kristeva propose not as subversions, but as answers to Lacan’s feminine aporia? Perhaps woman cannot be written in the Symbolic—by Lacan—but perhaps Cixous and Kristeva have found ways to speak about the unspeakable—to describe the way that woman can transcend the signifier through feminine jouissance.

Turning first to Cixous, we find her encouraging women to find their voices—to speak not from a position of Otherness within a masculinist discourse, but to speak from a position of fundamental difference outside of the discourse. After all, any discursive battles won are of
limited value when they occur within the system of binary oppositions imposed by a structuralist, phallocentric hegemony. Cixous asks us to “image that difference or inequality—if one understands by that noncoincidence, asymmetry—lead to desire without negativity, without one of the partner’s succumbing: we would recognize each other in a type of exchange in which each one would keep the other alive and different.”484 Here, Cixous forestalls objections that écriture féminine is merely a tactic to address an imbalanced binary opposition. If it is to have any real power, écriture féminine cannot be defined in oppositional terms; it cannot be the other of phallocentric discourse. Although its relationship to the Symbolic is subversive, does this necessarily mean that écriture féminine must be defined exclusively by this subversion? Could it not be subversive with respect to the Symbolic, while having another simultaneous mode of existence that is more non-coincident than confrontational?

From this position of difference, Cixous proposes écriture féminine—a mode of femininity in writing. Before explaining exactly how écriture féminine can possibly function beyond the Symbolic, it is important to note a few things. Écriture féminine, as a concept, has almost always been translated and understood as “feminine writing,” but Cixous cautions that her ideas should be properly understood as “femininity in writing” because it is a practice that is not limited by biology.485 Men, she claims, can also access this mode of writing.486 In this way, Cixous conceptualizes gender along the same lines as Lacanian sexuation where a biological male may nevertheless have a feminine psychical structure. Cixous has faced criticism for gender essentialism probably due to the way in which the female body and the mother enter into her

484 Ibid., 79.


486 Jean Genêt is one of her favorite examples of this possibility. Cixous, 1986, 92.
discourse. In one of her most famous passages, she writes, “there is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink.”\textsuperscript{487} When considering passages like this in the context of the gender theory that she lays out in the same article, I believe these statements are best understood in a poetic, metaphorical sense. The maternal body can represent a great deal of things beyond the biological reality of childbirth. The mother can represent a wellspring, an entity of creation, a nurturing figure, and it seems that Cixous is playing on these ideas when she references the mother. Moreover, even her theoretical texts move freely between poetic and discursive registers, and to read Cixous in an exclusively literalist manner is to read her as “écriture masculin.”

Écriture féminine is an alternative discourse—a radical alterity. From this space, it is possible to construct a new discourse that is defined not in opposition to the dominant discourse, but in radical difference to the dominant discourse. Just as Lacan states that “there is no sexual relationship,” Cixous seeks to break the male/female binary and to consider both genders not as competitive, hierarchically organized halves of the same whole, but as unique constructs defined on their own terms. To bring this to fruition, Cixous argues:

\begin{quote}
It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.\textsuperscript{488}
\end{quote}

As the Symbolic castrates its subjects by forcing them to surrender the full potential of their jouissance in exchange for participation in language, Cixous wants to break free of its strictures. She wants to violate the prohibitions of the Law to reclaim something of the lost jouissance.

\textsuperscript{487} Ibid., 94.

How, then, might *écriture féminine* be possible? Like Lacan’s feminine jouissance, we cannot speak it because it exceeds the signifier. Lacan argues that we can deduce the presence of phenomena in the Real by their effects in the Symbolic, even if they cannot be contained within a signifier. Cixous writes, “this practice [of feminine writing] will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist.” Lacan would agree, but he would claim that Cixous practice ex-sists, which is to say it does not exist entirely in the Symbolic, and thus cannot be reduced to the sum of its signification.

As described above, men are wholly subject to the phallic function, but because women have access to feminine jouissance, they are only partially beholden to the phallic function. Thus, it is possible, as Cixous argues, that there remains a trace of the archaic, a trace of the unassimilable. Obviously an *écriture féminine* must exist partially within the Symbolic, for without the use of any basic language, any feminine utterance would be incomprehensible to anyone without this access to an extra-Symbolic register. *Écriture féminine*, thus seems to be a way of using and exceeding language that accesses something transcendent to create novel meaning, much in the way that Ricoeur’s concept of metaphor involves the creation of a semantic impertinence so strong that it requires an illuminative mental operation to translate into a meaningful utterance.

3.3 **Kristeva With Lacan**

Where Cixous’s approach involves transcending the Symbolic through some subversive act—i.e., blowing up the law, as she colorfully puts it—Kristeva’s approach involves focusing on the pre-Oedipal phase prior to Lacan’s mirror stage where the infantile subject experiences a special closeness with the mother. According to Lacan, this relationship between mother and child must be surrendered so that the child can form an independent subjectivity. The mother

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489 Cixous, 1986, 92.
must become the mOther once the child enters the Symbolic. Kristeva argues that these pre-Symbolic experiences continue to have a presence within our subjectivity, and even if we are given mostly to the Symbolic, there is still a remainder that cannot be discarded.

Kristeva refers to the pre-Symbolic psychical state as the *chora*—a realm of disorder and non-differentiation prior to the acquisition of language and the formation of the subject in the Symbolic. During this developmental phase, Kristeva speaks of drive-energies directed toward the mother in her capacity as caregiver. Because the infantile subject has not yet been castrated by the Symbolic, he or she is not subject to the Law, and thus he or she may experience the primordial jouissance that must be surrendered upon entering the Symbolic. This is essentially the same concept that Lacan proposes for the creation of desire within the subject. Recall from chapter one that the experience of the mythical first (and total) satisfaction given by the mother creates a cathected mnemic trace that drives desire in the subject who will continually try to reclaim this lost jouissance, always without succeeding.

While in the *chora*, the subject begins to develop a semblance of a symbolic system (in general, not the Lacanian Symbolic) based on the rhythms, sensations, and pulsations of the maternal body. Kristeva’s semiotic is not the same as Lacan’s Symbolic, but it helps prepare the infant for his or her eventual entry into the Symbolic. When the subject does enter the Symbolic, the semiotic, like primordial jouissance, must be repressed, but never entirely abandoned or forgotten. The Symbolic instills a linguistic structure ensuring that intersubjective communication is possible, but Kristeva argues that a trace of the semiotic remains and comes into play in the form of new and creative uses of language. Without the Symbolic maintaining a sense of order, semiotic statements would appear incomprehensible and psychotic, insofar as
they would exist outside of the Symbolic; however, when it enters a dialectical relationship with the Symbolic, the semiotic can emerge in the form of particularly surprising metaphors (understood in the full Ricoeurian sense). Like écriture féminine, the semiotic is not limited by biological sex and could apply just as easily to a poet like Stéphane Mallarmé whose work Kristeva analyzes in detail in Revolution in Poetic Language. Thus, the semiotic is a token of the archaic that occasionally disrupts the functioning of the Symbolic in an unusual, but meaningful manner.

The semiotic can appear because, according to Kristeva, the power of the Symbolic is only ever partial. The body may be structured and ordered by the Symbolic, but an array of bodily phenomena either exceeds or defies the structuring power of the Symbolic. Here, Kristeva proposes the concept of abjection—an irreconcilable reminder that one cannot ever be completely within the Symbolic. At some level, the body is not subject to the Symbolic—death and decay are inexorable—and to face the materiality of our humanity (e.g. bodily fluids, waste, rotting flesh), is to confront this fact head-on. As Kristeva writes, “the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed I,” or to put it in more straightforwardly Lacanian terms, the abject is what is rejected as Other in order to form a discrete subjectivity. Through this process of rejection, the subject circumscribes his or her Ego, or individual subjectivity. Kristeva continues, “what is abject…is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning

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491 Ibid., 50-51.


493 In this usage, Kristeva means I to represent the Ego, as Lacan uses the term. Ibid., 1.
collapses." It is that anti-object that resists signification and reminds us of the incommensurate. In an aesthetic capacity, the abject encompasses sensations that are at once horrifying and fascinating: curdling milk, vomit, excrement—all a latent threat to one’s “clean and proper self.” The abject knows no prohibitions, “but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them…it lives at the behest of death.”

The corpse is the ne plus ultra of abjection. Kristeva writes, “if dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled.” The corpse has a special property in that it doesn’t represent death symbolically, but rather is death—an “infection” of living—and in this sense, it has the power of attraction, of human curiosity and interest, but it also has the power to engulf life itself. It is for this reason that abjection, especially when related to death, can create ruptures in the fabric of the Symbolic—a yonic opening through which we confront the Real.

Ultimately, Cixous and Kristeva propose useful extra-Symbolic possibilities. The ecstatic energy of Cixous’s écriture féminine aligns most closely with feminine jouissance, and the horrific nature of Kristeva’s abjection aligns with a traumatic encounter with the Real. Both involve different ways of exceeding and dehiscing the Symbolic, and thus both exceed the phallic function in meaningful ways. Once we arrive at Galás’s Wild Women in section 5.0, we can begin to understand their interpretive relevance more fully.

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494 Ibid., 2.

495 Ibid., 15.

496 Ibid., 4-5.
3.4 Critiques of French Feminism

Before continuing on with the relationship of Cixous and Kristeva’s feminine theories to Galás’s work, it is important to address a few critiques of the discourse. One of the chief criticisms leveled at French feminists is that of essentialism. When Cixous proposes a certain feminine essence that is accessible through writing, this can be read as an attempt to tie biology to traits that may be psychological or social in nature. Similarly, because some of Kristeva’s concepts (e.g., the *chora*, the semiotic) deal with the maternal body, her work has been read as biologically determinist and essentialist. Some of these critiques can be interpreted as a misunderstanding of the metaphysical nature of the claims that French feminists are making through a Lacanian framework. Nancy Fraser takes a more sociological stance and vigorously attacks Lacan and the French feminists for presenting a monolithic, ahistorical, asocial concept of gender identity; instead, she argues, feminists should concentrate on historicized, culturally contingent concepts of gender, inasmuch as there are important sociocultural differences that are relative to one’s position in history and in the world. Naturally, historical and cultural relativism are both legitimate concerns, but this presents a false binary between the metaphysical and the material. Lacanian theory is intrinsically metaphysical, but why can we not consider

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497 Some of the most strongly stated critiques of the movement can be found in the collection, *Revaluing French Feminism*, which might be more accurately titled *DE-valuing French Feminism*. The essays within are nothing if not polemical in their attempts to virtually discredit the work of scholars like Cixous and Kristeva. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*, eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky (Bloomingdon: Indiana University Press, 1992).

498 Significantly, Fraser’s summary of Lacanian theory is often factually incorrect. For instance, her entire conception of Lacan involves his alleged usage of Saussurian linguistic models. While it is true that Lacan claims to have derived his linguistic model from Saussure, it is widely known that this is more of an homage than a fact. In Lacan’s actual teaching, he makes such radical changes to Saussure’s structuralist model that the two are scarcely relatable. Fraser’s cursory assessment of Lacan leads her to a false equivalence that demonstrates a fundamental non-understanding of important Lacanian concepts. Nancy Fraser, “The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,” in *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*, eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky (Bloomingdon: Indiana University Press, 1992), 177-194.
sociocultural contingency as a secondary layer of inquiry? This is, after all, precisely what I propose to do with a thick interpretation.

Fraser frames Lacan and Kristeva as structuralists and argues instead for a pragmatic approach to feminism that “studies language as social practice in social context.”\(^{499}\) She continues, “This model takes discourses, not structures, as its object. Discourses are historically specific, socially situated, signifying practices. They are communicative frames in which speakers interact by exchanging speech acts. Yet discourses are themselves set within social institutions and action contexts.”\(^{500}\) I wonder what these social institutions are, if not structures. Moreover, to view discourses (in the Foucauldian sense) as anything other than structural formations themselves is to see structuralism as a necessarily universalist venture.

Fraser seems to view Kristeva as operating within a phallocentric structure, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical binary that places man ahead of woman, but Fraser’s recommendation is to abandon this level entirely and focus on higher-level discursive change. Kristeva, on the other hand, finds these to be superficial investigations when fundamental issues of the formation of subjectivity are left unexplored. Evidently for Fraser, one cannot have both metaphysical and material concerns. On Kristeva, she writes, “having fallen under Lacan’s sway along the way, she has not managed to maintain a consistently pragmatic orientation. Instead, she has ended up producing a strange, hybrid theory, one that oscillates between structuralism and pragmatics.”\(^{501}\) By critiquing the structure itself (in this case, the Symbolic), Kristeva is attempting to open up a new pathway that does not rely on a hierarchical masculine/feminine binary, and it is from that point that Fraser’s culturally contingent pragmatics can truly make a difference.

\(^{499}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{500}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{501}\) Ibid., 186.
3.5 Galás and Feminism

Galás has an odd relationship with feminism and indicates that she is acutely aware of feminism and the significance of the battles early feminists won for her and other female artists, but she also adds that it’s not something she feels compelled to address through her music.\textsuperscript{502} Rather than not addressing feminism specifically, it seems more appropriate to say that feminist struggles are one of many that she addresses. Within her general interest in speaking for the outcasts, the wretched, and the Other, victims of gender prejudice constitute one of many groups that include victims of AIDS, intolerance, medical experimentation, madness, and genocide. Moreover, Galás’s antiauthoritarian sentiments make it unlikely that she would align herself with an explicit social movement.

Susan McClary notes that while Galás “can be read as simply reaffirming the worst stereotypes available,”—the hysterical madwoman full of rage and barely contained violence—“she can also be read as extremely courageous as she confronts these stereotypes head-on, appropriates them, and rechannels their violent energies in other directions.”\textsuperscript{503} The hysterical woman has been a familiar trope, but she has traditionally been a construction of men, and thus, she does not control her own rage. It is mere madness without meaning. When Galás appropriates this trope, she embodies all of the intrinsic violence and rage, but with the addition of intent and control. Galás’s madwoman is not mad at all; rather, she is so radically Other that her utterances cannot be contained by the Symbolic. So long as her actions are judged according


\textsuperscript{503} Susan McClary, \textit{Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 111.
to their resistance to the phallic function, they will be seen as exclusively subversive and psychotic, but if her actions are considered as pure difference defined independently of masculine discourse, they can create meaning independent of any subversive, oppositional effects they might have or be perceived as having.

Despite Galás’s hesitancy to get involved with gender discourse, Cixous and Kristeva offer ideas that lead to a compelling reading of her work. The way that Cixous emphasizes the empowering act of a uniquely feminine expression through *écriture féminine* fits nicely with Galás’s own expressive style, and Kristeva’s avowal of the power of the abject works well with Galás’s predilection for the macabre and the transgressive.

4.0 Lament

Considering both Galás’s cultural heritage and the themes of unjust death that run throughout her oeuvre, it is unsurprising that lament practice figures prominently in her work. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this is intentional borrowing or an unintentional consequence of her Greek heritage, as Galás has at times claimed that she became aware of the connection only after some of her early compositions were recorded. It is likely that the similarities between her vocal performance and Maniat lament in *Wild Women* are more coincidental than intentional, insofar as she appears not to have experienced an actual lamentation at that point in her life; however, it is unclear if she has since experienced one firsthand and has used this experience in subsequent works. Intentional or not, an understanding of the lamentation practices of her Greek, Maniat heritage will help us create a richer

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504 For example, Galás claims to have adopted this lament style without being aware of the tradition behind it. Randall and Joost.
understanding of the work at hand.\footnote{Galás’s heritage is also somewhat ambiguous, as she tends to describe it differently in different interviews. For example, in an interview with Khatchig Mouradian for Aztag Daily, she describes her father’s heritage as Pontic Greek, while in a later interview with Wesley Joost for Goblin Magazine, she describes her mother’s heritage as Maniatic Greek, never mentioning the two together. This is strange because it is highly unusual for a Pontic to marry a Maniate, as the Maniates are a very isolated, rural people, while the Pontics are much more cosmopolitan and integrated into mainstream Greek society. It would appear that her parents who met in the United States raised her with knowledge of both cultures, but without the common social prejudices between Pontics and Maniates endemic to Greece. Irrespective of these differences, the key points are that she was raised hearing stories about her father’s people being forced to flee Turkey under threat of death, and was also raised with knowledge of her mother’s Maniat cultural heritage. Galás speaks extensively about her cultural heritage in “Interviews with famous Greeks – Diamanda Galás,” accessed October 26, 2013, Hellenism.net/interview_diamanda_galas.html.}

Generally speaking, laments are an important part of the traditional death rituals of rural Greece and are, significantly, the domain of women. Loring Danforth describes the Greek idea of death as a tripartite process: separation, which encompasses all the events between the actual physical death—the cleaning of the body, the period of mourning in the presence of the corpse, the funeral procession—and the burial; liminality, where the body—considered not completely dead, nor completely alive—is buried for five years, during which time the women in the family will visit the grave often to lament the deceased in hopes of bringing peace to the deceased and aiding in the transition between life and death; and incorporation, which involves the disinterment of the corpse, an inspection of the cleanliness of the bones to determine the success of the liminal stage based on the completion of decomposition, and the replacement of the bones in the village ossuary.\footnote{Loring M. Danforth, “Death as Passage,” in The Death Rituals of Rural Greece (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 35-69.} Women lament the deceased during each of these stages and are thought to wield considerable power over life and death, inasmuch as a properly lamented individual will pass on to the afterlife in peace, while an improperly lamented individual may return to haunt the living. This lamentation is actually thought to commune with the spirit world in a way that is both threatening and unnerving to the men of the community.
The laments themselves are musico-poetic forms that fulfill the aforementioned private and communal functions of not only helping the deceased to make the transition between this life and the afterlife smoothly, but also to help members of the family and the community to grieve and feel a particular type of pain called ponos. Ponos is a Greek word that implies a feeling of profound sorrow and loss, and the experience of ponos is often described as a burning sensation within the body.\textsuperscript{507} When the women are able to channel ponos in their laments, the laments become naked outpourings of raw, abject emotion that combine song with deep sighs and weeping, with punctuated breaks of wailing and screaming. Ponos, in this sense, can be understood as a rupture in the fabric of the Symbolic—a tear through which one has a traumatic encounter with the Real.

One can find many examples of this style of vocal expression in Galás’s work, but there is a particularly clear example in “There Are No More Tickets to the Funeral” from \textit{Plague Mass}, where a series of wails and shrieks explode through the texture. Although they are part of the composition, they give the listener the feeling of a spontaneous overflow of emotion, as if to suggest that when the subject matter becomes too terrible, Galás must abandon not only vocal technique, but also language itself—there are literally \textit{no words} that can describe the pain. This is not to suggest that her wails are unintentional musical expressions, nor is it to suggest that her wails do not come from a place of authenticity, of personally-experienced tragedy; they are both intentionally executed bouts of sophisticated vocal gymnastics and genuine expressions of grief. Galás herself claims, “one almost has to have had a firsthand experience with death in order to start taking it very seriously.”\textsuperscript{508} Ponos is a crucial part of lament, and therefore a lamentation

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without the experience of death has little of the emotional power, little of the unmediated truth that emanates from a source beyond the self.

4.1  Maniat Lament

Looking specifically at Galás’s Maniat heritage, we find important differences between Greek lament practices in general. David Schwarz notes that Maniat laments are unique amongst Greek laments in a number of respects: rather than focusing mainly on mourning the dead, Maniat laments often involve a strong juridical drive towards avenging an unjust death; they also feature a great deal of detail concerning the specifics of the particular death within long narrative laments.\footnote{David Schwarz, \textit{Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 136.} The jural component of Maniat lament is important because, as Nadia Seremetakis has shown, it is one of the only opportunities for Mani women to participate in sociopolitical critique. Witnessing is an important element of Galás’s music and, just as Maniat laments are most powerful when they are the truthful outpourings of grief of the deceased’s closest female family members, Galás’s work is inextricable from her life experiences. As she attests, “this is the real truth. When I go onstage, I have to speak honestly about what I know about the world, what I’ve seen in this epidemic, how I’ve felt about it all these years.”\footnote{Brown, 1991.} Like the Mani women who use these rare occasions to critique the social establishment, so too does Galás use her own work to critique Western society from a place of intensity and personal experience, and one of the key components to the communicational efficacy of her work is her use of pain through music.

The use of pain in a public discourse like Maniat lament is an important technique, especially for those out of line with the social establishment, to create culturally constructed
truths.\textsuperscript{511} Seremetakis writes, “the personal signification of pain, synthesizing emotional force and body symbolism, can vividly dramatize the dissonance between self and society.”\textsuperscript{512} She states further that this signification of pain can be extended to an entire social group, in this case, women, offering them a rare chance to be heard in a masculinist society. In Maniat lament, “the antiphonal vocalization and physical display of ‘pains’ construct an affective enclave where alternative codifications of women’s relation to the social order achieve a formal status as biographical testimony and oral history.”\textsuperscript{513} Thus, pain is an important force in vitalizing the construction of cultural truths.

Within Western society, Galás occupies a minority position both in terms of being female, and in terms of speaking for outsiders on the wrong side of dominant social constructs. Her use of pain empowers her and animates her cultural truth claims, and she does this using the same technique as the women of her ethnic heritage. With respect to the jural and socially critical components of her work, we find plenty of examples. Take, for instance, Galás’s vivid, detailed descriptions of the atrocities visited upon the Armenian people in “Orders from the Dead” from \textit{Defixiones: Will and Testament}:

Our dead watched their daughters
Butchered
Raped and beaten
in the still-burning of those flames

Our dead watched an ax remove their
mother’s skull
and crown a wooden spit
in the continuous burning of those flames

Our dead watched while Chrysostomos


\textsuperscript{512} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{513} Ibid., 485.
eyes and tongue were pulled out,
teeth and fingers broken, one by one,
in the laughing and the cheering
of those flames.  

During the course of the nearly twelve-minute movement, Galás describes in historically informed detail a great number of unspeakable acts of violation derived from the numerous first-hand accounts of the genocide. She holds nothing back in her descriptions; she wants to record and lament the specifics to bear witness to the tragedy, to judge the perpetrators, and to critique the political entities that continue to allow this genocide to go unrecognized; and she bolsters the urgency and import of these claims by creating ponus within the listener.

Interestingly, Galás seems to embody epanastasi—a “revolution” of strong emotions described by Maniat women—in her performances, even when she isn’t engaging in the more specific act of lamenting. Seremetakis provides accounts of Maniat mourners who “‘melt,’ ‘burn,’ and ‘liquefy’ because of their pain.”  

Similarly, Galás describes the conditions of her performances: “My sound monitors would deafen anybody else…I have to feel it—I fry under that sound,” thus showing that she too needs to experience the “transgression of bodily integrity” that Seremetakis refers to.

Beyond this, Galás also mirrors the Maniat expressions of pain through a revolution of the social norm by ripping her costume (as in Plague Mass), physical violence (Insekta), and

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515 Seremetakis, 1990, 491.


generally with what Seremetakis calls a “heightening of feminine presence.” In Galás’s performance of *Plague Mass*, she appears in a dress pulled down to her waist, thereby exposing her breasts; however, far from being a simplistic display of confrontational feminism, this display of nudity has its precedent in her Maniat heritage. Seremetakis describes the significance of the black scarf of women in mourning: “the woman who pulls her scarf off her head and down to her shoulders displays one level of intensity, while the woman who pulls it completely off her head signifies a deeper level of mourning. A woman who rids herself of the scarf, pulling her hair out, scratching her face and beating her chest, exhibits the deepest signs of *pónos*.” While a black scarf doesn’t necessarily hold the same symbolic significance to a cosmopolitan audience, Galás’s costuming in *Plague Mass* certainly does.

Finally, there is a strong connection between Maniat lament and abjection, both of them representing a quiescent threat lurking on the periphery, always with the explosive potential to burst into the center, to create disruptions in the Maniat patriarchy and Symbolic, respectively. Let us first take up lament: Seremetakis describes the array of Mani women’s cultural practices as an “empowering poetics of the periphery,” a phrase capturing the creative expression of Mani women, the idea of *poesis* (both making and imagining), and the spatial social practices of the Mani women who keep away from the most central public spaces, walking on back roads, close to the walls. Indeed, women are largely invisible to Mani society save for an important exception: in death rituals, the women come to the center, empowered, charged with the task of helping the recently deceased pass safely into the afterlife. During this small cluster of days, women not only have a voice and a public presence, but they are *the* central voice of society, the priests’ brief Christian rituals notwithstanding. The meta-commentaries and juridicism that

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518 Seremetakis, 1990, 491.
Seremetakis speaks of are terrifying to the men, as they are threatening to masculine dominance. Through abject displays of intense emotion, the fabric of the patriarchy begins to fray, as the women appear not only to rip apart cultural establishments, but also to commune with the utterly transcendent forces of God and death.

Analogously, the abject is what one excludes from oneself in order to become a discrete subject, but the exclusion is never completely successful and the abject lies in wait on the periphery of the subject’s existence. Much like the women of Mani, the abject can, at times, come to the fore with a grisly reminder of the pre-Symbolic, striking a dagger in the fragile envelope of the subject. Whereas abjection is instrumental in the constitutive process of inchoate subjectivity, we find that Maniat men also issue a form of rejection—a rejection of the feminine in public discourse—so as to allow their masculine hegemony to exist; the lamentation and death rituals of Maniat women are, thus, an abject force that encroaches on the reigning patriarchy. Each are forces on the periphery that threaten the dominance of the Symbolic/patriarchal order, and this is precisely why we can consider Maniat lament practices to be a particularly pure form of social abjection.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Maniat lament in its original social context and Galás’s adoption of it for a Western audience: when Maniat women lament, they are engaging in a social custom, and as threatening as it is for the men, there is a precedent for this activity; when Galás borrows from the lament tradition in a performance for a Western, cosmopolitan audience, the effect is amplified, and the social norms that are uprooted in Mani become a wrecking ball of aesthetic expectations as the music approaches the limits of what certain audiences can comprehend as art. But this wrecking ball is absolutely necessary, as Cixous writes, “a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic…it’s in
order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth.’” Whether we are considering Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, Kristeva’s semiotic, or Galás’s use of Maniat lamentation customs, the fundamental principle is the same: To speak as an outsider, one must transcend the dominant discourse, and this involves moving to the beyond—to the emotional, the mystical, the primordial.

Finally, *Wild Women* is not, strictly speaking, a lament in the same way that *Plague Mass* or *Defixiones* can be read as laments. There is no real mourning component to the work; however, the concepts are very relevant in three respects: first, Galás’s vocal style uses similar techniques that go beyond conventional expression such as the way her occasional verbal outbursts are smashed into non-sense sounds, thereby pointing to a linguistically transcendent level of meaning; second, Galás’s juridical and vengeful drives carry a similar sentiment to Maniat laments, although in this case her vengeance is carried out in the space of the psyche rather than in physical reality; and third, she uses extreme displays of emotion to create *ponos* within the listener so as to overwhelm his or her psyche in a powerful manner.

### 5.0 *Wild Women with Steak Knives (A Homicidal Love Song for Solo Scream)*

Let us now turn to Galás’s *Wild Women with Steak Knives* to see how feminine expression, the semiotic, abjection, Maniat lament practices, *ponos*, and death all come together in her work of radical music. Although the work was created in 1982, there are still strong connections to the 1970s avant-garde movement with which Galás was involved, and one can hear traces of the influence of Globokar, Penderecki, and Xenakis in the extreme and unusual treatment of the voice. As a sort of program note, Galás writes, “*Wild Women with Steakknives* [sic] is a kind of bloodless and unmerciful brain surgery, a kinesthetic representation of the mind.

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520 Hélène Cixous, 1976, 888.
521 Galás names each of these composers in Brown, 1991.
diffracted into an infinity of crystals...the subtractive synthesis of mental entropy into various bands of absolute and mere schizophrenia.”⁵²² Ostensibly, *Wild Women* is the brutal, homicidal, and schizophrenic love song of a madwoman,⁵²³ but we can also read it as an act of defiance—an angry rebuke of the masculine oppressors of femininity: oppression of language, oppression of the social order, oppression through violence, both actual and mythological. These oppressive forces, the Wild Woman is a force of abjection rendered musically.

Galás includes an alternate program note in the original vinyl release: “*Wild Women with Steak-Knives* (from the tragedy-grotesque by D. Galas—*Eyes Without Blood*) is a cold examination of unrepentant monomania, the devoration instinct, for which the naïve notion of filial mercy will only cock a vestigial grin.”⁵²⁴ Between the two program notes, there is a common theme of cold-blooded, draconian brutality of a decidedly obsessive nature. We understand that the work will use a violent expressive language, but we do not yet understand the significance of this brutality.

Before looking at the non-lingual sonic elements, a close reading of the text is needed. The text occupies only about three minutes of the twelve-minute work: it is barely intelligible, there are additional performed verbal fragments not included in the written text, and Galás does not even utter all the words that she includes in the “libretto.”⁵²⁵ Although the extent to which one can separate the text from the musical work as a whole is debatable, the fact that a dedicated text was included, and the fact that the text appears to differ substantially from what one can perceive aurally in the work, justifies examining it first in isolation. Irrespective of how the text

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aligns with the aural actuality of the work, the text at least serves to put a distinctive picture in the listener’s mind and helps one understand the work in a richer capacity.

5.1 The Text

The first stanza begins:

I commend myself to a death of no importance,  
to the amputation of all seeking hands,  
pulling, grasping, with the might of nations,  
of Sirens, in a never ending bloody bliss  
to the death of mere savagery  
and the birth of pearly, white terror.

From the outset, the speaker pledges herself to death—the ultimate act of retribution, the ultimate exertion of power. “The might of nations” suggests that this pledge is of universal import, speaking for the oppression of women from all walks of life. The mention of Sirens indicates a link to Greek mythology, which is rich with the tales of vengeful women who were able to use a distinctly feminine facet of their being to achieve victories over men. The Sirens had little physical power, but their song of seduction was invested with a particular type of libidinal energy that was irresistible to men and could lure them to their death. Significantly, the song of the Sirens is spoken around, but never spoken directly. Renata Salecl describes their song as a kernel of the Real that must be omitted in order for the Odyssey’s narrative to maintain comprehensibility. Their song is “not simply something prior to symbolization; it is also what remains: the leftover, or better, the failure of symbolization.”\textsuperscript{526} This remainder must be abjected in order to maintain Symbolic clarity. In this capacity, we could see the Siren song as a sort of \textit{écriture féminine}—a semiotic expression that is so profound in its otherness that the Symbolic of those who encounter it is traumatically affected. Here, Galás’s description of a “never ending

bloody bliss” points toward a similar mode of radical expression that confronts the listener with the Real.

The final two lines speak of the “death of mere savagery” and the “birth of pearly, white terror.” Here, Galás invokes a sort of binary between birth and death, but the second half of the binary is skewed, as savagery and terror are not in opposition to each other. It would appear that “mere savagery,” in this instance, is the product of men and their brutal, indiscriminate violence, while “pearly, white terror,” is a violence of greater purity—a violence with intellectual intent behind it in contradistinction to a violence born of animal instinct. Recalling the madwoman trope that Galás ostensibly appropriates, we find that indeed her violence, her madness is not the indiscriminate hysteria of the male-constructed madwoman, but is in fact an empowered, intentional figure who merely appears mad. The idea of “white terror” is also reminiscent of Cixous’s proclamation that women write in white ink.527

The second stanza continues:

Wild women with veins slashed and wombs spread,
singing songs of the death instinct
in voices yet unheard,
praising nothing but the promise of Death on earth,
laughing seas of grinning red, red eyes,
all washed ashore and devoured
by hard and unseeing spiders.

The second stanza has strong psychoanalytic tones with abjection, the Freudian death drive, and generally, a concern with the Real. The slashed veins and spread wombs of the first line certainly evoke the horror of abjection; the breakdown of the body reflects the breakdown of meaning in the Symbolic. The “wild women with veins slashed and wombs spread” destroy themselves to destroy meaning, to cut a hole in the fabric of the Symbolic.

527 Cixous, 1976, 881.
The second line refers to the “death instinct,” thus furthering the idea of destruction of the Symbolic order. Freud’s concept of the death drive describes an unconscious desire to return to the pre-natal, the pre-Symbolic, the Real. Bataille goes so far as to describe this drive towards death as erotic, insofar as he posits that we live in a state of discontinuity, constantly striving to return to the pre-birth continuity that we share with the whole of the universe, achievable in small measure through the “little death” of the sex act, and in sum through bodily death. Again, Galás is invoking that which transcends the Symbolic, that which is untouched by the patriarchal discourse, that which is available to begin a new discourse of femininity defined independently from—not in opposition to—masculinity.

The third line brings this mode of thinking to its conclusion: the “voices yet unheard” are the voices of écriture féminine. The previous two lines were instrumental in getting us to a point where écriture féminine is even possible: first, Galás invokes the abject to pose an oppositional threat to the Law, thereby doing violence to the protective cocoon of the Symbolic. Second, she invokes the Real. Just as the song of the Sirens was powerful enough to attract men even under the threat of death, the breakdown of the Symbolic horrifies us, but the promise of reclaiming our lost jouissance is too powerful to resist. Once these tasks are completed, women can have a voice independent of any phallocentric discourse because it is not built from within a system where a dominant force is always already in effect.

In the fourth line, she is already celebrating the “promise of death,” which will bring about the new continuity—the fulfillment of the death drive, Bataille’s erotic conclusion. While anthropology tends to consider death as a disruption of the social fabric that requires mending through the myriad funeral rites of various societies to bring us back into integrated homeostasis,

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528 This is actually sometimes translated as “death instinct.”

death, as Galás frames it, isn’t really a disruption of anything but an oppressive discourse; rather, it brings about continuity, insofar as the feminine subject gains access to a pre-Symbolic state, a state where she can access her semiotic power, where she can enter into a state of undifferentiated being with her semiotic creativity and originary life force. Where Bataille contends that we can only achieve true continuity through death, Cixous argues that we can achieve it by denying the power of signifier. This wave of feminine destruction brings the speaker to a crazed laughter—the “laugh of the Medusa.”

The final stanza concludes:

I commend myself to a death beyond all hope of Redemption,
beyond the desire for forgetfulness,
beyond the desire to feel all things at every moment,
But to never forget,
to kill for the sake of killing,
and with a pure and most happy heart,
extol and redeem Disease.

The first three lines of the final stanza return to themes of the first stanza, thereby exposing a basic ABA structure. “But to never forget / to kill for the sake of killing,” returns to the idea of killing as an act of purity, an act of intentional disruption, an act with a higher purpose than the typically mundane motives of murder (e.g., jealousy, greed, lust). Finally, to “extol and redeem disease” is to face the abject head-on, to face this terrifying place where signification begins to fray and embrace it for its disruptive efficacy.

5.2 The Music

Having examined the textual manifestation of the work, let us now turn our attention to what is actually sonically present in the recording. There is a measure of overlap between the libretto and the text that one can discern on the recording, but a fair amount of the text in the recording is not represented in the libretto. *Wild Women with Steak Knives* begins with an
explosion of glossolaliaic utterances with wild panning around the stereo soundstage; the voice isn’t immediately identifiable as human, and when we do begin to recognize the timbre of the voice, we struggle to determine if the utterances are a foreign tongue, or if they’re nonsense; we are taken aback at the shrill, piercing timbre and we attempt to discern the temperament of the sounds—are they angry, are they sad, are they simply manic? All this within the first few seconds of listening, and yet we are no closer to any answers, for very little can prepare us for the barrage of vocal calisthenics that Galás has in store for us. This disorienting, disconcerting effect will last long into the work—our ears simply do not allow us to adjust to the aural peculiarities of *Wild Women* easily—and that is a major part of the efficacy of the music. It seems to be the sound of death itself.

As much attention as I have given to the composed text, the non-verbal portions of the work outweigh it considerably; and even though the text gives us a number of interpretive clues and suggests a number of thematic elements, ultimately, it is Galás’s glossolalia that is the key to interpreting the work fully, for that is where she most fully embodies the Wild Woman, a modern day maenad, wielding her thyrsus (or in this case, a steak knife), radically shredding musical and Symbolic convention.

At many points in the work, Galás uses extended vocal techniques to achieve a wide array of non-traditional vocal sounds—e.g., hisses, wails, sighs, unvoiced breath, screams—and thus we face a hermeneutic problem: how to deal these vocal sounds that are non-lingual and musically unconventional (i.e., singing not grounded in a stable sense of pitch). One might argue that the proximity of Galás’s non-lingual sounds to the texted portions actually brings the non-lingual sounds into the Symbolic, and one might further argue that by describing the functions of these sounds I am turning them into Symbolic expressions. If we believe that the proximity of
the sensible to the non-sensible tends to turn everything into a sensible (i.e., Symbolic) expression, then it follows that my interpretation tames the expressions and makes them into Symbolic (if strange) utterances, and essentially ruins the transgressive power of the work. I believe the opposite is a much more interesting and rewarding way to approach the problem. Through the proximity of lingual to non-lingual utterances, the words are transformed from linguistic units into cathected units pulverized by their encounter with a Symbolically transcendent utterance. Rather than being tamed, the non-lingual sounds that make up the majority of the work fragment and problematize the meaning of the words leading more toward the obfuscation of their linguistic meaning than to the elevation of their influence. Finally, I hold that speaking about the functioning of an extra-Symbolic utterance is not the same as changing it into a Symbolically comprehensible utterance. If we were dealing simply with words and sounds, perhaps this argument would be convincing. We are, however, dealing with words and musical sounds, and when the music is sufficiently transgressive (as is the case with radical music), its thoroughgoing difference tends to make it resistant to verbal substitution. Simply put, when the sonic expression is alien enough, words can describe it, but they can never replace the phenomenological impact created. When I offer interpretations based on the meaning of the words presented, I attempt to account for the effect of the non-lingual sounds surrounding them. In a sense, I am treating them like appearances of the Symbolic within a sea of semiotic mystery.

Finally, a word about structure: When confronting radical music, discernible, logical structure is rarely a central focus, if it is present at all. In the case of *Wild Women*, there is an actual score, although its validity and usefulness are questionable. According to Galás, the score postdates the actual creation and recording of the work and had more to do with the fulfillment
of a grant requirement than any desire to produce a performable, accurate score. In an interview, she has the following to say:

[Groans] They [the granting institution] wanted me to notate all my music—note ‘Wild Women with Steak Knives.’ The only way for me to do that was to take a massive amount of drugs and listen back to it and come up with these ridiculous art drawings—all these squiggles and all this crap. And I was like, ‘you know? I would never sing this score. I would never be bothered. But if that’s what you want, you got it.’

The score was accompanied by a short article in Perspectives of New Music, and even though Galás routinely dismisses the importance or meaningfulness of both the article and the score, she nevertheless includes both in her collection of librettos, The Shit of God. The score uses graphic notation, but even from the first few seconds, it is impossible to see enough of a connection between what is heard and what is notated to hold any hope of creating a subsequent performance based on the score alone. It is particularly useless in determining where the text of the libretto should be placed, inasmuch as there is no mention of the text at all. It is, however, useful in two respects: first, there are some technical directions for setting up the microphones and effects (including the proper reverb and delay settings), and second, she indicates that there should be “multiple declamations” of approximately three minutes. Based on this evidence, I consider the work to be through-composed with four three-minute sections along with a brief coda which functions more as a closing malediction than a musical resolution.

5.3 Section One

The first section breaks down into three episodes, the first of which is an introductory outburst of glossolalia that runs from 00:00 to 00:45. Many of the extended vocal techniques that


531 Galás, 1996, 6-7.
Galás employs make an appearance here in rapid succession. This immediately grabs the listener due to its utterly alien character. This flurry of ideas gives way to eight seconds of silence, just enough for the echo of her voice to die away. From 00:53 to 02:14 Galás sings multiphonics of a particularly screeching variety—a ghastly sound—intermixed with some high-register bel canto singing, reminiscent of the distinctive keening of lamentation, albeit in a more aestheticized manner. From 02:14 until 02:46 there are preverbal vocalizations that seem to move increasingly towards intelligible speech—Kristeva’s semiotic moving toward Lacan’s Symbolic. Galás’s delivery suggests one who has thoughts, but is unable to form words, struggling against her own tongue to communicate an idea. Much like the way Freud describes infants as fantasizing their desires (e.g., food, attention) in an attempt to communicate with their parents before they develop the power of speech, the Wild Woman has similar fantasies of communication (in this case, much more complex than the aforementioned infantile desires), but she has not yet acquired language.

The fragmented sounds of the introductory outburst set up the dissociative state of the Wild Woman, her subjectivity diffracted into the “infinity of crystals” mentioned in the program note. During this opening section, Galás introduces at least four distinctive sounds, which will be developed in more detail in subsequent parts of the work. This polyvocality becomes synchronic as Galás refracts her voice into multiple simultaneous bands of sound through multiphonics. Here, the sound is somewhere between a wretch and a scream, which becomes the first instance of abjection; how is one to reconcile the ugliness of expression with the humanity of the voice? It points to that raw, instinctive, animalistic drive that is latent within the subject lurking under the surface—that unassimilable kernel that threatens to dehisce the Symbolic. Indeed, Salecl writes,
“it is in the tonality of the voice…where we encounter jouissance […] This excessive jouissance that pertains to the voice is what makes the voice both fascinating and deadly.”

The third part of the first section is most interesting, as there are multiple possible readings, all of which are potentially present. First of all, the preverbal utterances could be considered parapraxical sounds indicating the unconscious speaking independently of the conscious mind. We could also hear this as a sort of Kristevian semiotic communication. It resembles the patterns and sounds of speech, but has no meaning, at least within the Symbolic. As the music continues, the garbled speech-sounds become increasingly intelligible—we are on the threshold of language. As stated above, desire—the unsatisfied excess of need—plays a crucial role in bringing the subject into the Symbolic, and this moment is no exception; Galás’s first words are “what I want,” repeated with struggles and gasps in between, the tension building and building, both due to the emergence of intelligible speech and vocal register, until finally she breaks through, thus leading us into section two. We can read this first section as a sort of formation of the subjectivity of the Wild Woman whose psyche is still reverberating from the semiotic rhythms of the chora. She is discovering her desire, but she is struggling against the phallic function because she refuses to surrender her jouissance.

5.3.1 Section Two

At 02:46, the Wild Woman’s inchoate subjectivity is becoming split between language and jouissance. As she begins to acquire language, the semiotic impulses are increasingly forced out by the rigidity of the Symbolic. She is being alienated from her pre-Symbolic experiences and her jouissance. The music reflects her resistance through antiphony: “I want you to get down on your knees and I want you to ask me, what is my name,” spoken in a breathy, intense whisper, but with markedly masculine undertones; it is not a request, but a demand. This masculine voice

is demanding that she submit to castration, that she become a speaking being, and that she ask the question, “what is my name?” The Wild Woman is compelled to discover her name and thus be defined according to the Symbolic. Again we hear, “what is my name,” repeated with increasing intensity, but we begin to hear an antiphonal response of wretches and gasps as the Wild Woman fights Symbolic assimilation. She fights using the unintelligible language of the semiotic to resist the phallic function of the Symbolic.

Finally, in a declamation, we hear “Your – Name – Is,” and at this point, something very interesting happens: the name, twice repeated, is unintelligible; it sounds something like “all man” or “oh man,” but it could also be the Turkish word “aman,” which is an exclamation akin to “oh my” or “mercy!” In Greece, the word aman is itself rich with meaning: it sounds like the reverse of the Greek word for mother, mana—thus anchoring it with the concept of the chora, or a mystical feminine energy—and is used as an exclamation, especially when one is in pain; it also functions as a song word, often used in the Greek genre, amanes, as a sort of nonsense word used at the end of verses in an improvisatory, melismatic fashion. It is possible that this utterance is triple-coded, suggesting to the listener all of the following, each potentially present in the Derridean sense: “all man” could be a reference to the phallocratic, the primordial oppressor of the feminine; “aman” could be an exclamation of grief, shock, disbelief—a word she may have inherited from her parent’s vernacular; or it may be nothing at all—empty syllables by intent—to totally obscure all linguistic meaning (however, in this case, one could still argue that Galás’s unconscious deliberately, parapraxically chose syllables resembling the previous two possibilities.) Whatever the intent, the key idea is that the word is intentionally obfuscated to rob it of its power in the Symbolic.
What is this name that the Wild Woman refuses to speak? I believe it is none other than the Name-of-the-Father—the master signifier that traps the subject in the Symbolic. The Wild Woman begins to enter the Symbolic, but she refuses to submit fully to the Law. In Lacanian terms, this foreclosure leads directly to psychosis. Lacan describes this “imaginary cataclysm” as follows:

No longer can anything in the mortal relation…be held on lease. Then there is the separate deployment and bringing into play of the entire signifying apparatus—dissociation, fragmentation, mobilization of the signifier as speech, ejaculatory speech that is insignificant or too significant, laden with non-meaningfulness, the decomposition of internal discourse, which marks the entire structure of psychosis.533

The importance of this denial is almost impossible to overstate, for the Wild Woman qua psychotic is missing a fundamental element of psychical prohibition. Where Symbolic castration requires a relinquishment of jouissance, the psychotic subject refuses to let go. Without the Name-of-the-Father to anchor the subject’s Symbolic, his or her language cannot become tied to meaning and thus the structure of language is not acquired.534 Lacan describes this phenomenon as a “fault concerning the permanent discourse that supports the everyday, the miscellany, of human experience. Something detaches itself from the permanent monologue and appears as some kind of music for several voices.”535 Thus, Lacan describes the psychotic’s inability to create normal relationships between language and meaning as a sort of linguistic polyphony—a simile that has an obvious affinity with the monomaniac polyphony of Galás’s Wild Woman.

It is important to note that, under normal circumstances, psychosis is a great affliction, and it is neither something to aspire to, nor something that one can choose. In the present

534 Fink, 1995, 94.
context, the concept of psychosis functions as a metaphor for a radical mode of expression that exists by transgressing the boundaries of the Symbolic. In this sense, I am taking some expressive license to create a novel interpretation. However, when Cixous speaks about the phallocratic transcendence of *écriture féminine* or Kristeva describes the function of the semiotic in artistic expression, they are essentially describing a mode of expression that is not completely beholden to the Symbolic. Cixous writes, “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.” Just as the Medusa is considered a dangerous and deadly force within patriarchal society, perhaps we could figuratively describe the psychotic’s discourse with all of its inherent language “disturbances” and irregularities as being similarly misunderstood expressions of otherness. From a place in the Symbolic where the phallic function limits language and jouissance, a psychotic hole in the Symbolic and its inherent aberrations may seem terrifying and awful, but perhaps it is merely an opportunity to construct a new discourse infused with extra-Symbolic feminine jouissance.

Fink describes the psychotic as “prone to immediate action, and plagued by little if any guilt after putting someone in the hospital [or] killing someone…” and indeed, at 03:10, Galás begins a new declamation, “I have been looking for a *killer*, and I’m not talkin’ about *meatballs*—I am talkin’ about *steak.*” Now we begin to see something of the “bloodless and unmerciful brain surgery” mentioned in the program note. This line is delivered in a forceful, masculine manner—the Wild Woman is becoming dominant as she becomes renegade, unencumbered by the phallic function. She can use the codes of masculinity in her speech because she has transcended them; the masculine oppressors have become like steak—hunks of flesh, powerless—ready to be cut with her steak knife in a Bacchic frenzy. The word “steak” is

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536 Cixous, 1976, 885.

537 Fink, 1995, 98.
immediately repeated and morphs back into the style of glossolalia that we heard in the opening
seconds of the work—a sort of maniacal, pathological jouissance, gleeful and crazed.

03:44 marks the beginning of a bel canto section, where Galás’s soaring, wailing lines are
punctuated by outbursts of guttural sounds. The coherence of the bel canto line is continually
broken by a barking sound, as if the semiotic impulses cannot be silenced by a more tamed,
conventional use of the voice. At 04:47, this gives way to a rapid-fire array of voiceless sibilants
that become punctuated with voiced sibilants. Finally, at 05:25, Galás unleashes a series of
lengthy blood-curdling, multiphonic screams to transition us into the most complete statement by
the Wild Woman, thus marking the beginning of section three.

By this point, the Wild Woman has entered in a psychotic, Dionysian state where her
expression has been overtaken by feminine jouissance. She has entered language, but not the
language of the Symbolic; she speaks in the language that Lacanian theory can only call
psychotic, dissociative, fragmentary, ejaculatory; she has begun to construct her own her
discourse—her écriture féminine. Figuratively speaking, she has used her steak knife to castrate
the Lacanian phallus, insofar as it tries and fails to shape her into an obedient subject.

5.3.2 Section Three

This section contains the entirety of the written text discussed in section 5.1 and at this
time, we will revisit it to examine how the music enhances the text. Leading into the text is a
section between 05:45 and 06:10 where Galás once again returns to language, but in a sort of
antiphony between a dominant voice and a subordinate voice. We can understand this antiphony
as an exchange between the empowered Wild Woman (the dominant voice) and the submissive
woman (the subordinate voice). The exchange follows:

Erection to terror
[is it, was it]
erection to nightmares
This leads directly into the penultimate line of the first stanza (the first five lines are never articulated outside of the written text): “to the death of mere savagery….” The word “lead” is implied, but Galás only pronounces the first portion of the word before rocketing into her highest register. In these last two lines, the text is rendered in at least two different voices—two distinct personalities.

During the vocalization of the text, Galás uses an array of voices, moving between them effortlessly in a dazzling display of vocal virtuosity and subjective schizophrenia. There are at least four different voices: a forceful, declamatory voice; a high, shrill, quavering voice; a smooth, feminine voice; and a low, demonic, and masculine voice. Mapping the occurrences of these voices onto their respective words does not yield a pattern or formula and since they are not notated in the score, it seems that Galás uses them in an improvisatory style during each performance. What we can take away from this section is the psychosis evident in the Wild Woman’s expression. The “music for several voices” that Lacan mentions in his description of the psychotic’s discourse appears now as the Wild Woman’s discourse becomes complex and polyvocal—she speaks in multiple registers of meaning and signification. The final line is particularly evocative: “extol and redeem disease.” The words “extol and redeem” are rendered seductively, while the word “disease” is whispered as a sorceress intoning the final word of a
curse. The end of the word “disease” morphs into a maniacal, non-voiced laugh, and thus marks the beginning of section four.

5.3.3 Section Four and Coda

By section four, the maenadic Wild Woman has pledged her allegiance to death (or to the resistance of the phallic function) and issued a malediction against the oppressors of femininity. Now she can explore her voice and begin to develop her écriture féminine, or as Cixous might say, she can “come to writing.” I believe this section is best read as the process by which the Wild Woman explores the edge of her expressive abilities: we have a non-voiced exploration of different formants (07:39), high-pitched multiphonics of varying pitch combinations (07:57), bel canto singing with microtonal pitch variations (09:17), as well as middle-register glossolalia (10:09). Seremetakis shows that heavy, rapid breathing sounds, much like we hear at 07:39, are used in Maniat lament as corporeal signifiers of death—of bodily disruption—as they bear an indexical acoustic resemblance to death throes; thus, it is quite possible that Galás is playing on this signification in her non-voiced passages.

Finally, we arrive at the coda—a malediction that demonstrates that the Wild Woman has come into her own. The glossolalic utterances now blend seamlessly with her regular speech, suggesting that a reconciliation of the split subject has indeed occurred; she moves in and out of recognizable language not with the antiphonal effects of section two, but now in one voice—a unification of her subjectivity:

...(unintelligible)...
She was hanging on the...
(unintelligible)
with the rats at her feet
and I asked you, ‘Well? Well? Well? Well?’
and I asked you, ‘Well? Well?’
and I asked you, (unintelligible)...

What would you do?
Would you...(unintelligible)...
Would you...(unintelligible)...

Galás’s voice grows more distorted and more horrific throughout this last portion before she arrives, gasping, screaming, clawing at the words, “ARE. THERE. ANY. ANGELS. IN – THE – HOUSE. TONIGHT?!”

5.4 Concluding Remarks on *Wild Women*

　To summarize my reading of *Wild Women with Steak Knives*, I would like to return to the progression of events as I see them: We begin with the subject, the Wild Woman, who is in a pre-Symbolic, *chora* state. She begins to discover and experiment with language, and she reaches a point where she must speak the Name-of-the-Father, surrender her jouissance, and undergo Symbolic castration if she wishes to become a fully fledged speaking subject structured by language; however, she refuses to speak the Name-of-the-Father and experiences foreclosure, thereby creating a tear in the Symbolic and becoming psychotic. From this opening, she is flooded with feminine jouissance and semiotic impulses that constitute the subversive power of her *écriture féminine*. She is now able to explore her feminine voice—that voice that has been alien to her, that voice that is powerfully transgressive, that voice denied by the phallic function. Finally, she reconciles her conscious with her unconscious and ventures off into a new territory of *écriture féminine*.

　As mentioned above, Galás does not consider herself to be a “feminist” artist (in general), but the title and text do situate *Wild Women* within a feminist context. Even the central thesis of her oeuvre is not exclusively concerned with feminist topics, *Wild Women* explicitly seems to be an exhortation of feminine creativity and power. Considering the violence and aggression of the work, one might ask whether this display of apparent psychosis qua feminine jouissance is the only available option to a woman in a subordinate power position. I do not think this is the case.
The occasional violent metaphor notwithstanding, Cixous’s work can be read broadly as attempting to do something similar—to create a space for feminine expression that exceeds the Symbolic. I believe it is more accurate, in this case, to attribute the brutal, ferocity of *Wild Women* to Galás herself. There is a confrontational, transgressive spirit that runs throughout her oeuvre, as well as a strong juridical drive irrespective of the topic of a given work. Whether she is calling justice for the Armenian genocide or critiquing the Catholic Church’s handling of the AIDS epidemic, Galás is a fighter who pulls no punches.

It seems to be a question of emphasis. For example, there are plenty of damning critiques one could level at the sex industry, and yet feminists like Annie Sprinkle and Camille Paglia choose to approach feminine sexuality and even pornography with gleeful irreverence. Similarly, Galás could chose to celebrate the work of female artists, or the indomitable spirit of the Armenian people, or the perseverance and humanity of AIDS victims, but she chooses instead to document, lament, and avenge the victims of the atrocities that she represents, and she is empowered by *ponos*. Just as the Maniat lamentation practice involves the use of semi-aestheticized pain to create a transcendent discourse, Galás too taps into this wellspring of emotional power to create cultural truth claims. Even though the gravity of her subject matter virtually demands solemn treatment, her Greek roots are perhaps more important than anything in her drive toward witnessing, judgment, and vengeance. Thus, it is misguided to place too much emphasis on the ostensible battle between the sexes in the particular case of *Wild Women*. Galás’s natural state is one of confrontation, but this is not something necessarily intrinsic to the feminist plight in general, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century.

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6.0 Conclusion

In *Wild Women with Steak Knives*, Diamanda Galás engages in a radical discourse of femininity that is also about a radical discourse of femininity. Like many works of radical music, her mode of expression is extremely unconventional, but unlike certain other radical works, there are also linguistic utterances. The rarity of vocal sounds within *Wild Women* that constitute comprehensible lingual expressions is belied by the importance one might place upon them, especially insofar as they are the only concrete elements to grasp in this otherwise abstract and alien work. I believe that in the interest of constructing the fullest, most rigorous thick interpretation possible, it is necessary to reflect not only on the words, but also on their relationship to the non-texted vocal sounds that constitute the bulk of the work. To this end, I have called upon Lacanian theory, as well as the traditions of Maniat lamentation to aid my interpretation because both help to explain the import of vocal expressions that exceed language. I have also called upon Lacan thematically because his concept of sexuation provides a way of understanding how Cixous and Kristeva can argue for a Symbolically transcendent mode of feminine discourse. Through these means, I conclude that *Wild Women* is a statement of feminine creative power and a musical realization of feminine jouissance. In *Wild Women*, Galás exemplifies the very Symbolic transcendence that she advocates in the work itself.

Ultimately, Galás has constructed and uses an *écriture féminine* to speak the unspeakable, to say what men cannot say; to paraphrase Cixous, “her body knows unheard-of songs.” She answers Cixous’s call for women to write themselves, to write their bodies, to write their souls; and in doing so she creates a radical, subversive message to the dominant masculine discourse: she intends to blow up the law, right now, with music.
Chapter 5 – Merzbow: The Jouissance of Expressive Noise

1.0 Introduction

In many ways, Merzbow (b. Masami Akita) is the ne plus ultra of radical music. His work eschews melody, harmony, rhythm, discernible form, and virtually other definable musical trait with the exception of timbre (or the presence of a sound at all) and musical intent. For decades, his work has been easily defined as “noise music” without much thought as to what those two terms mean either in isolation or in conjunction. Furthermore, his work has been viewed as an exercise in the experience of pure sound—depthless presence of changing timbres with no meaning beyond the sounds themselves. Simply put, Merzbow’s music has been difficult to speak about and interpret because so many of our analytical tools require some semblance of musical convention in order to function.

This is where my thick interpretation hermeneutic is crucially important in breaking through existing hermeneutic blockages. Merzbow’s web of influences are very diverse, from the philosophy of George Bataille to Viennese Actionism to sadomasochistic pornography, and by reading his work through these influences, we can gain a better understanding not only of the thematic content of his work, but also of the way that the aural actuality of the work supports these extra-sonic concepts.

In this chapter, I will discuss Masami Akita and his work as Merzbow, taking care to examine his musical and artistic background and the role of his Japanese ethnicity in his work. After discussing Akita’s place within the broader discourse of so-called “noise music” and exploring what this over-used and under-defined genre label might mean, I will explore Akita’s compositional and sonic style, as well as his concepts of noise and music. Here, I will situate Akita as a radical composer using an especially potent form of expressive noise. Through an
analysis of his interest in certain strains of transgressive art and philosophy, I will show how these influences can serve our hermeneutic ends and reveal meaning hidden within the cacophony that is Merzbow. Finally, I will examine three works from various points in his career, showing how the use of a thick description hermeneutic can unveil layers of meaning within a sonic practice that appears impenetrable.

Discourse on Merzbow tends to occupy three positions: first, there are those who spend most of the time discussing the fact that it is impossible to discuss Merzbow’s work; second, there are studies that are content to talk around Merzbow, describing aspects of the cultural formation of noise music without actually saying much about the aural actuality of his work; and third, there are phenomenological descriptions of the work that set aside any possibility of meaning within the music or greater cultural issues. In this study, I hope to present a new way forward that will allow scholars to speak substantively about Merzbow and his philosophy of noise and music without talking around the music and without denying the possibility of greater meaning within the work.

2.0 Masami Akita

Masami Akita (b. 1953) has been performing under the name Merzbow since 1979, and in that time, he has created a massive oeuvre exploring an expressive sonic art at the absolute fringes of general musical practice. With more than 320 solo releases and another couple hundred collaborative, split, and compilation releases, he is the most visible figure in the noise music genre, and he has influenced countless other composers and bands. As the de facto father of “noise music,” Merzbow’s reputation is remarkably expansive, especially considering the intentional obscurity of the noise milieu. Thanks to his lengthy list of collaborations, he has found a diverse audience, which is even rarer for a composer working on such a radical project.
Akita’s formative teen years began in the late sixties, and he points to classic British and American rock as his earliest sources of inspiration; however, he gravitated toward the stranger albums such as the Rolling Stones’s *Their Satanic Majesties’ Request*, George Harrison’s *Wonderwall*, and John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s *Unfinished Music No. 1—Two Virgins*. From there, Akita recalls switching to progressive rock while playing drums in bands covering tunes by Frank Zappa, King Crimson, and Captain Beefheart. Subsequent high school bands became freer and freer, eventually moving to totally improvised rock music. After high school Akita studied painting and graduated from Tamagawa University with a degree in fine arts. It was there that he discovered many of the interests that would directly inform his work as Merzbow including Dadaism, Surrealism, Viennese Actionism, aesthetic theory, and postmodern philosophy.\footnote{Brett Woodward, *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise* (Melbourne: Extreme Records, 1999), 10-11.}

Akita first recorded as Merzbow in 1979, releasing improvised music on cassette tape along with collage art made with a Xerox machine. By the early 1980s, punk rock from the West arrived in Japan and influenced an entire generation of Japanese musicians. Akita recalls,

> When punk rock happened, we moved away from the usual rock improvisation and became more pure and conceptual under the influence of free music like Derek Bailey and Han Bennink. In the early 80s, cassette media seemed very new and revolutionary. I thought I should have my own independent media so I could make everything with no censorship, interference or the interpretation of others.\footnote{Ibid, 10.}

From here, Merzbow’s first label, Lowest Music & Arts, was born, adopting certain elements of punk ideology along the way, albeit without the guitars. Significantly, the vast majority of Akita’s cited influences are Western. In various interviews, the names he returns to again and


> When it comes to music, Japan is full of information about American and European music, so of course, it is a big influence. Bigger cities like Tokyo and Osaka are the most sensitive and quick to catch on to anything that is new and fashionable in the rest of the world. You could even say it is a kind of sickness we suffer from.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 46.}

Later in the same collection of interviews, De Lauretis asks musicians to locate any sense of absolute diversity from the Western tradition that they see in Japanese music. Dan Oshima responds: “I think that Japanese indie music is based on an absolutely absurd spirit. I mean it’s
built on nothing, it contains no culture. In Europe, music is based on history, a very long one.”

If the musicians interviewed saw any distinction at all between their music and Western music, it tended to be a variation on this “absolutely absurd spirit.” Most of the musicians convey the idea that their culture is a melting pot where Western culture is mixed together and loses its referentiality, thereby making the Japanese result devoid of meaning. David Novak’s recent ethnography of Japanese noise music affirms this same musical lineage, as noise practitioners continue to cite Western progressive rock and punk rock as important influences. Akita himself states that the important distinction between Western noise music from bands like Throbbing Gristle or Whitehouse and Japanese noise music is that the Western bands have a thoroughgoing sociopolitical message while Japanese noise is intrinsically meaningless. Naturally, I find this position to be somewhat disingenuous and completely unacceptable for reasons that will become apparent. After all, it is apparent that Merzbow does in fact attribute different types of meaning to his expressive noise, even if the meaning is extremely abstract and conceptual. This idea of non-referential sound does, however, align these Japanese composers with the majority of experimental composers/sound artists in the West who subscribe to the fantasy of acousmology.

Beyond this, we find that Merzbow’s Western influences were not limited to music and if we look to his many books, we find an emphasis on Western culture. Noizu wō: Noizu myūjikku to sono tenkai (Noise War: Noise Music and Its Development) examines industrial, noise, and power electronics bands from the late 1970s to mid 1980s, including Throbbing Gristle, SPK,

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547 *Ibid*, 49.


and Whitehouse; *Sukkusu shinboru no tanjō* (Birth of the Sex Symbol) traces the development of the sex symbol from Jane Russell and Jane Mansfield to burlesque shows, beach movies of the 1950s, and fetishistic and sadomasochistic magazines of the 1960s, all centered in the United States;\(^5^5\) *Sutorenji nūdo karuto: Fushigi no ratai tengoku* (Nūdo wārudo vol. 2) (Strange Nude Cult: Mystery of Nude Paradise (Nude World Vol. 2)) examines the profusion of nudist magazines from 1950-70 that were popular in the United States because their ostensibly edifying study of lifestyle and culture allowed publishers to skirt anti-obscenity laws;\(^5^5\) and *Tōsaku no anaguramu: Shūenteki porunogurafi no gekijō* (Anagram of Perversion: Theatre of Fringe Pornography) is a collection of articles on Western pornography and “[catalogues] fetish items as signifiers of capitalistic production-reproduction.”\(^5^5\)

As one can see, Merzbow displays a documentarian fascination with aberrant threads of Western culture.

How then might we come to terms with an artist such as Merzbow who exhibits such cultural hybridity? Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the postmodern obsession with multiculturalism has led to a dead end for aesthetic criticism. In an effort to avoid imposing the cultural values of a dominant nation onto the work of an Other, we end up defining and delimiting the space from which this Other can speak.\(^5^5\) For example, in place of a nuanced understanding of Merzbow, the line of critical questioning is shackled to a sense of ethnic place: how does Merzbow perform Japanese-ness through his music? Perfunctory multiculturalism ends


up exposing its facile attempts at political correctness once we realize that it only reinforces otherness; it accepts the Other—true—but it only accepts the Other *qua* Other. Looking to the post-postmodern future, Bourriaud proposes a new approach suitable for the twenty-first-century artist who is a product of inevitable cosmopolitanism. He proposes the term altermodernity which he describes as “a construction plan that would allow new intercultural connections, the construction of a space of negotiation going beyond postmodern multiculturalism, which is attached to the origin of discourses and forms rather than to their dynamics. It is a matter of replacing the question of origin with that of destination.”\textsuperscript{554} He describes the altermodern work as an “emulsion: the social and cultural liquid is stirred up by movement, producing an alloy that combines, without dissolving them, the separate ingredients that enter into its composition.”\textsuperscript{555}

To read Merzbow as an essentially Japanese composer is a mistake and a survey of his artistic interests and obsessions will make this clear. Despite the fact that Bourriaud theorizes the altermodern in the twenty-first-century, I find it to be a useful concept for cultural polyglots such as Merzbow, and in section 3.5, I will make a case for applying the concept retroactively.

2.1 Noise Music and Sound Art as Genre

Before continuing on with Merzbow’s music, let us take a moment to understand the fraught concepts of “noise music” and “sound art” as genre labels and attempt to understand how the practitioners define their work in relation to the concept of noise, music, and art. Although I have developed the concept that I call expressive noise in chapter two to account for the paradoxical relationship of various conceptions of noise to music, Merzbow’s recordings also exist within this discursive formation known as “noise music.” I describe it as a discursive formation because if noise music is in fact a genre, it is quite amorphous (although perhaps not

\textsuperscript{554} Ibid, 40.

\textsuperscript{555} Ibid, 40.
as amorphous as some would claim). When speaking about, say, rock music, there are many variations (e.g. rock and roll, hard rock, psychedelic rock, progressive rock, indie rock), but there are also a collection of fundamental traits such as instrumentation, song structures, themes of youthful rebellion, and a lineage that many of rock music’s practitioners acknowledge. Novak’s ethnography shows how virtually everyone involved in the noise scene tends to either feel deeply ambivalent about the term “noise,” or reject it completely.\textsuperscript{556} Throughout the book, Novak shares the wide range of explanations on just what noise, or noise music, might be with answers ranging from very personal definitions of the term to total rejections of the term, and anything in between.

In an interview that Novak conducted with Jojo Hiroshige of the legendary band Hijokaidan, Hiroshige had this to say on the topic of noise:

\begin{quote}
Noise is not just serious, not just a joke, not just shocking—it includes many things…but almost no one can know and understand Noise. That’s a very good and important thing. Because—there’s hardly anything we don’t know any more, is there? But there \textit{are} still mysterious things, right? Noise is like a ghost, like a ghost story. We know this, too, that there are still some mysterious, but unmistakable, things; Noise must be this kind of mysterious thing.\textsuperscript{557}
\end{quote}

This nicely encapsulates the paradoxical nature of noise; it is a powerful phenomenon, and we may experience and even create it, but it exists at the fringe of concepts of music and structure, intent and order, the knowable and the unknowable. For every comment like this, however, there are plenty more that dismiss the idea of the existence of a noise music entirely, or at least allege that if a scene had existed, then it is surely dead now. Of this latter position, Masonna’s

\textsuperscript{556} Novak, 118.

\textsuperscript{557} \textit{Ibid.}, 137.
And yet, the term persists. When music journalists casually use the term, we know what they mean, just as when we flip through the records in the “noise” bin, we have an idea of what we will find. Noise music is a very poorly defined category, but it has also solidified into a genre that allows listeners to form expectations about instrumentation (often guitar effects pedals and a mixer), sonics (feedback and distortion), and performance practice (short, incredibly loud concerts, often with manic performances). In some ways, noise music is amorphous by virtue of its thoroughgoing anti-structural sentiments, but in other ways, this also serves to unify the composers and listeners. In creating the concept of expressive noise, my intent is not to generate a new term to describe what it is that Merzbow, or Masonna, or Emil Beaulieau does as a musical practice. My hope is that it explains the relation of their aural expression to the category of music and that it also explains the transgressive power inherent in this type of aural expression and relation to conventional conceptions of art. The present discussion of noise as a genre is simply to frame the musical category of which Merzbow is the ostensible king.

In my hermeneutic study of Merzbow, I consider him as a radical composer, which carries an implicit connection to so-called “art music,” whereas writers such as Novak and Paul Hegarty explicitly examine composers like Merzbow in line with popular music. I am not convinced that the genealogy that the music historian creates is critically important in this case, as each approach highlights different facets of the composer and work. In the specific case of Merzbow, I find his intellectualism and his connection to modernist movements in art and music to be more compelling than the influence of the progressive rock records that he enjoyed as a teenager. If I was examining a wide range of composers, as Novak does, I could understand the

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558 Ibid., 118.
merit of approaching the work as popular music since other noise artists like Hijokaidan have a stronger connection to extreme forms of popular music.

The term “sound art” is sometimes thrown around when discussing creative individuals who work in the medium of sound, but do not create expressive sonic work that shares much with the conventions of music. Often, these individuals refer to themselves as “artists” rather than “composers” and trace their artistic lineage through modernist movements of the twentieth-century rather than through the European art music tradition. The term sound art is a point of contention itself, and without commenting on the issue of whether “music” is a term for any expressive sonic act, or if it should remain tied to the conventions as established by the European art music tradition, I will offer the following: Merzbow’s music does flout the conventions of Western art music in general, and he does borrow a number of aesthetic principles from non-musical modernist movements; however, he also cites numerous musical influences and even refers to his work using the word “music.” Most of all, his work is robbed of its transgressive power if we define it in terms of essential difference. Following Merzbow’s metaphor, noise can only be nomadic if it exists within the structural field of music. His work exists at the fringe of music and points toward a place where the conceptual core of music collapses; it behaves radically cutting across structural lines as it refuses conventional understanding and definition. If Merzbow’s work is simply sound art, then it becomes simplified and nullified.

Even if I consider Merzbow as a radical composer and describe his work as expressive noise, the journalistic label of “noise music” remains important inasmuch as Merzbow is considered to be its leading practitioner, at least by his Western audience. Despite the problematics of the label, it has served composers like Merzbow in creating the perception of a movement (even if the movement does not exist, as such) and the perception of an aesthetic
(even if the aesthetic goals of the practitioners is very different), all of which has helped to create the niche market for extreme forms of aberrant music that allowed composers like Merzbow to release loads of recordings and perform live concerts around the world. The label is both a journalistic convenience and a marketing tool, but it remains in use and must be reevaluated in the context of this study if it is to have productive use. I am not convinced that the term sound art has the same practical benefits, insofar as its function appears mainly to benefit either scholars who want to claim Merzbow for their discursive construction or critics who casually see the term as being a more dignified label than “noise music.” It is not clear what is gained by describing Merzbow’s sonic practice in terms that contradict his own descriptions of his work. In section 2.3, I will examine Merzbow’s very idiosyncratic conception of noise, which will lead us on an exploration of his chief influences. Before that, however, it is important to get a sense of Merzbow’s sound and compositional style.

2.2 Merzbow’s Sound and Style

The typical Merzbow album begins with a blast of sonic energy that continues, usually unabated, through the duration of the track, if not the entire CD. The first thing that one notices is the loudness. Digital CD mastering techniques have allowed the average loudness of a recording to rise by at least 10 decibels between the 1990 and the 2000s through a combination of advanced compression and peak limiting, but in the early 1990s, Akita was already mastering his CDs to use as much of the Permitted Maximum Level (PML) as possible.\footnote{The Permitted Maximum Level refers to the highest possible volume permitted in a given system before distortion is present.} Thus, even before the systematic expansion of audio mastering levels, Merzbow CDs were objectively louder as recordings; however, even after mainstream mastering levels have risen to match, his albums still sound subjectively louder (i.e., a Merzbow recording may not exceed a given decibel
range as compared to a conventional album, but one will nevertheless perceive it as sounding louder). A typical rock album might be mastered within a razor thin margin of the PML, but the sound is marked by many individual attacks—drum hits, guitar strums, vocal sibilants—and thus the sound is not a constant stream of maximum loudness. Merzbow’s work is different because he uses many sounds that, although not necessarily continuous in frequency, are continuous in amplitude. The result is a steady stream of acoustical energy similar to the effect of finding the loudest instant on a contemporary rock album and stretching it to the length of an entire track. The result is also one of subjective shock, for even the seasoned Merzbow listener continues to underestimate just how loud the music is compared to conventional recordings. Where one might become accustomed to the sound of feedback instead of guitar after a given period, the effect of the loudness continues to surprise much longer. In my own experience, having listened to Merzbow for more than ten years, I almost always instinctively reach for the volume control within the first second of a track because even though I know that my ears and speakers are not really at risk, the abundance of sonic energy exceeds my expectations again and again.

After the opening loudness shock as been absorbed, one is lost amid a seemingly formless swarm of acoustical noise, distorted tones, and piercing feedback. All sense of musical time is absent, and the listener must struggle to move beyond ingrained musical expectations, for they will never be met. Even if one has prior experience with drone music or minimalist music and has come to terms with a non-teleological mode of listening, the aggressive sonic character of Merzbow’s work presents a whole new challenge. Where one might find Steve Reich’s *Drumming* or Alvin Lucier’s *Music on a Long Thin Wire* to be peaceful or meditative, Merzbow eschews the pulsing regularity of Reich’s work and the serenity of Lucier’s drone; the work is both disconcerting and aggressively alienating. A varying array of sounds assume the focus of a
given track, but insofar as a typical listener is not used to hearing music constructed mostly out of inharmonic sounds, any analogies one could create between these centrally focused sounds and the prominence of melody in conventional Western music is more intellectual than experiential.

The quintessential Merzbow sound is a monolithic mass composed of a handful of sound sources. Most of the timbres are inharmonic and bristle with harsh distortion. The exception is the relatively pure tone of feedback that cuts through the cacophony, although its purity is no less grating. All of the sounds are strident, raucous, shrill; they are irritating and intentionally ugly by most culturally subjective standards. Where Western instruments are thought to be pleasing if they can mimic the human voice, Merzbow’s timbral pallet occupies the opposite pole. The overall effect is one of timbral unity, but from moment to moment, the sound is in a state of constant flux. The continuously shifting sounds hook the listener’s attention as Merzbow dazzles him or her with an incomprehensible sonic stream.

A great deal of electronic music might be described as inhuman and mechanical both due to the particular timbres used—few of which bear a mimetic relationship to the voice or the acoustic instruments—and due to the structural precision of music. When a computer is involved, all musical events can be calculated and controlled with exceptional precision. Interestingly, Merzbow’s music contains traces of humanity thanks to the performance component of his work. Rather than constructing songs methodically using a MIDI controller and a digital audio workstation like Pro Tools, Merzbow performs long takes by hand without any sort of keyboard controller locking him into any artificial octaval division. This is noticeable in the way that pitches, filters, and amplitude levels shift in imperfect, non-linear motions. Conventional recording procedure involves a great deal of control over parameters like
amplitude changes, often using some sort of parametric curve so that the amplitude shift is steady and even without sudden motions or pauses. Merzbow manipulates these parameters by hand using equipment controlled by knobs.\textsuperscript{560} When a new sound emerges from silence, the shift in amplitude is only as steady as is possible when twisting a knob. The same goes for the central frequency of a bandpass filter or a sine wave generator. When changes occur, we can often discern Merzbow’s physical motions in creating the sound, which adds an interesting sort of humanity to his work that is ostensibly devoid of any humanity.

On a few rare occasions there is a quiet moment where one might detect the faint sound of a short sample looping continuously. From here, Merzbow will gradually increase the amplitude of the sample past the point of distortion until it because unrecognizable as anything but acoustical noise. The track “Takemitsu” on Merzbow’s \textit{Amlux} (2002) is a rare extended example of this technique where the amplitude of a looping sample is gradually increased until it becomes obliterated with distortion to the point of unrecognizability. Ostensibly, a large amount of Merzbow’s work involves the manipulation of samples, but it is rare that they function as anything other than noise sources, as they are distorted until they have no resemblance to their original sonic content. If anything, Merzbow uses these looping samples to add a sense of movement to sounds that would otherwise remain immobile.

Merzbow’s music flows seamlessly from section to section, moment to moment, rarely landing to rest long enough for one to reflect on the trajectory of the work. The listener loses any sense of musical past or anticipation as everything collapses into a perpetual present; however, there is a sense of continuity, as if the current timbral configuration has grown out of the last.

\textsuperscript{560} This performance style has changed somewhat since the 2000s when Akita adopted a laptop for Merzbow performances. This move to a computer-based setup has lessened part of the physical traces that I describe, but the way he uses the computer does not involve the same sort of rigid programming that one finds in lots of electronic dance music.
Even if one would be hard pressed to explain how the music has arrived at any given point, there is never a sense of discontinuity or segmentation. The combination of foreign sounds, loudness, and an apparent lack of any conventional musical grounding overwhelm the senses, making in-the-moment reflection virtually impossible.

In terms of the compositional logic that Merzbow employs, we typically find some sort of baseline sound against which other more active sounds occur. This may take the form of a looping sample, a synthesized ostinato figure, a drone, or simply a bed of crackling distortion. This baseline sound may occupy any register, but it tends to be either in the bass or in the midrange. Much like gamelan music, the lower sounds tend to move slower, while the higher sounds more increasingly quickly. Merzbow typically spends between one and five minutes on any given baseline sound before gradually phasing it out as the new baseline begins. Occasionally he will suddenly abandon a sonic configuration and move to something different, but it is far more common for Merzbow to slip imperceptibly between drones or ostinatos.

This is often extremely difficult to hear because even though most of his music breaks down into low, middle, and high sounds, he tends to use multiple sound sources with a similar timbral makeup. Because we tend to perceive sounds made of filtered acoustical noise as similar, it is difficult to distinguish between them, and thus it is easy to become disoriented in the midst of a track. It is even more difficult to determine if any of the baseline sounds recur in a motivic fashion because Merzbow overwhelms the listener with so many varieties of inharmonic sounds that one loses track easily. In the course of my research, I diagrammed a number of tracks, putting time markers anywhere that the sonic makeup changed significantly. Other than noticing that Merzbow tends to move between sections within a span of five minutes or less, I did not find any patterns or discernible method as to how long a given section will play out.
Merzbow blurs the lines between composition and improvisation, which undoubtedly contributes to the fluidity of his work. As he puts it, “my pieces are not composed as ordinary music, but are rather like an abstract rendezvous of various sounds happening and/or prepared.” Merzbow typically experiments with the creation of various sounds from an array of sources (e.g., synthesizers, samplers, mixers, other electronic devices) until he finds the perfect mixture of timbres. Incidentally, when Merzbow plays live, there is actually a more structured plan in place than when he creates the music for his albums. When preparing for a live performance, Merzbow states, “I…prepare the structure, what to do with rhythms, etc. Improvisation plays a very, very small part in my solo shows.” It appears that the compositional process is more somewhat intuitive, but with enough planning and structure to be repeatable in a live setting.

2.3 Merzbow as Radical Composer

Returning to the question of Merzbow’s work as “noise music,” we find that the label has served him in a practical manner insofar as it created a label that could commodify what he did. The use of this label was artistically limiting, possibly inaccurate, and very beneficial in the way that it helped him disseminate his work and find a wide audience around the world. My framing of Merzbow as a radical composer does not supplant this label, and so long as we acknowledge the artificiality and unsanctioned use of the term “noise music,” as well as its conceptual limitations, it can continue to function as a convenience and a marketing tool. For our present purposes, the more clearly defined term “radical music,” will allow us to gain a more nuanced understanding of Merzbow as composer.


First, Merzbow’s music is inherently transgressive. It defies the basic criteria of virtually all Western music with its absence of melody, harmony, rhythm, and discernible form. At least on the surface, timbre is all that remains. Pierre Schaeffer constructed music out of sound that was not initially created with musical intent, and John Cage encouraged us to hear naturally occurring acoustical phenomena as music. Both transgressed musical boundaries at the time, but Merzbow’s musical transgressions are somewhat different. His sounds are not always naturally occurring, nor are they unintentionally musical. Rather, he very carefully creates the sound with explicit musical intent. Part of his work does involve the use of found sounds, but their sonic character is almost always obliterated after they are driven to extreme distortion. Unlike Schaeffer, who attempted to merely disguise the origin of the sounds and Cage who let the sounds be themselves, Merzbow intentionally crafts the sounds that will contribute to his music. Merzbow’s music is fundamentally transgressive because it categorically refuses any of the conventional features that constitute musical expression in both Japanese and Western music, except for artistic intent.

Second, Merzbow’s music is extreme in its many facets from its aesthetic deviance to its thematic content to its sheer loudness and intensity. As described above, the music is both objectively and subjectively louder than most conventional music due both to the recording techniques used and to the nature of acoustic phenomena like feedback and white noise. If listened to a proper volume level (i.e., painfully loud), the experience is one of extreme endurance and borderline masochism, but also excitement and vitality. The lack of conventional sounds and form only exacerbates this extreme experience of listening to Merzbow.

Third, there are important conceptual components to certain streams of Merzbow’s music. He has a longstanding interest in eroticism that influences the music on an abstract,
metaphorical level, as will be discussed in section 3.0. In 2002, Merzbow began a new phase of his career dedicating his work to animal rights and veganism. This has affected his work in a number of ways, the most obvious being explicitly textual with album titles such as *24 Hours – A Day of Seals*, *Merzbear*, and *Bloody Sea*. The treatment of these animal themes varies, as *Merzbear* does not appear to have any political agenda, while *Bloody Sea* has the message, “Stop Whaling” in Japanese and English on its cover. The animal rights concept has also contributed to Merzbow’s work in a material fashion, as he creates works out of sampled animal sounds (although, again, the samples are unrecognizably distorted).

Fourth, Akita does not have conventional institutional affiliations. He has avoided standard commercial institutions and has instead taken on a punk-inspired do-it-yourself attitude that dates back to the establishment of his Lowest Music & Arts label. During that period, he was handling every component of his releases from the recording and duplication to the collage cover art made from old pornographic mailing advertisements and the distribution of his tapes. Since that time, Merzbow has released music on dozens of tiny, ephemeral, boutique labels catering to the so-called noise scene with very limited edition releases. He has even released two albums on John Zorn’s Tzadik label. The use of boutique record labels allows Merzbow a great deal of artistic freedom, both sonically and visually. These labels cannot offer any significant financial compensation, but they can offer uninhibited creative freedom.

Almost since the dawn of electronic music in the 1950s there have been academic institutions devoted to electronic music research and composition, and Japan is no exception. The Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) studio was an active hub for electronic music exploration with

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564 See Chapter Two for a fuller discussion of early electronic music studios.
an active roster of Western composer residencies including Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, and John Cage. Merzbow could have conceivably worked within this environment, but he chose to avoid the milieu of Japanese academically affiliated electronic music, possibly due to the fact that he seems to have come to music primarily through his rock, jazz, and punk influences. If his role models were musician/composers like Frank Zappa, it is plausible that an academic career path in music was never even a real consideration for Merzbow.

Fifth, Merzbow does not just emphasize the importance of timbre over intervallic relationships; he does away with intervals (and even specific pitches) entirely. Timbre is the defining feature of Merzbow’s work, but attributing the influences that led him to this style of music is difficult. One could point to the general prominence of timbre in traditional Japanese music prior to the adoption of Western instruments. The shakuhachi repertoire, for example, typically consists of simple melodies played with very finely nuanced timbral subtleties. In place of the complex pitch relationships of a Bach partita, the emphasis is on the skilled coloration of tones. There are two main problems with this view: first, traditional Japanese music and instruments were considered inferior in the wake of post-World War II Westernization where nationally recognized Japanese composers like Akio Yashiro studied in Europe and aligned themselves exclusively with the European canon; second, when Akita speaks of his formative years, he tends to emphasize American and British rock music. Moreover, he mentions composers such as Schaeffer, Stockhausen, and Xenakis as important influences, and insofar as the actual timbral makeup of their music is more similar to Merzbow’s sound than any traditional

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Japanese instrument, it seems that, at very least, Merzbow’s valuation of timbre over interval is due both to Japanese and Western influences.

In a sense, the timbres that Merzbow uses constitute his musical voice. Just as one can instantly identify Tom Waits by his gravely voice or Bill Frisell by his plaintive guitar tone and phrasing, the way that Merzbow creates his distortion is one of his most important techniques—his sonic signature. A jazz pianist might play “Straight, No Chaser”—a standard on a conventional instrument—but if the musician is a true artist, he or she contributes something in excess of the standardized particulars. In the case of Merzbow, I believe that this artistic essence is found in the way that he constructs acoustic phenomena and, to a lesser extent, how he combines these sounds in an expressive fashion. In fact, Novak shares an anecdote about a novice noise musician who copied Merzbow’s equipment setup and began performing with a counterfeit version of Merzbow’s sound. Astute observers, however, recognized both the physical architecture of Merzbow’s setup and the sonic architecture of his sound, and the novice was judged to be an inferior imitator.567

Sixth, the material objects of Merzbow’s work are always recordings instead of scores. As mentioned above, Merzbow’s compositional method involves collecting an array of sound sources and then performing a semi-structured improvisation with them that is recorded directly. Suffice it to say the original recording is the essence of the work. Even if Merzbow worked out a notational scheme for his music, the sound is crucially dependent upon signal processing methods and electronic instruments used on the recording, which, unlike a piano or guitar, is more of a proprietary configuration. One would need both the equipment (e.g., the synthesizer, the samples, the signal processing effects) and the schematic for how the equipment was used to

567 Novak, 144.
recreate even the correct sounds, to say nothing of how the sounds function in relation to one another.

Seventh, Merzbow’s music is intrinsically culturally hybridized. As we will see, his conception of music and art blends certain Japanese elements with a great deal of Western aesthetic theory, and one of his central themes—erotic transgression—is both Japanese and Western. Even the prominent role of timbre—a feature typically associated with Asian musics—is at least as Western as it is Japanese. A fuller discussion will continue in below, especially in relation to cultural concepts of eroticism.

Eighth and finally, Merzbow sometimes uses extra-sonic means to amplify the content of his music. His album covers are one such example, and their focus changes over time. In the early phases of his career, the musical assemblages were reflected in the collage art that accompanied his limited release cassette tapes. A number of albums such as the “Pornoise” series and both volumes of *Music for Bondage Performance* use sexual and/or pornographic imagery to intensify the transgressive aspect of the music. Once his focus shifted toward animal rights, Merzbow began to use mostly animal imagery to convey his ethically grounded message, often featuring photography and paintings by his wife, Jenny Akita. In certain instances, Merzbow may not have been closely involved in the creation of his album covers, but in most cases, they are crucial components of the works. With respect to the animal rights albums, Merzbow occasionally includes slogans (e.g., “Don't send animals to war”) or short reports on the culturally accepted crimes against animals. For instance, in the liner notes to *Minazo Vol. 1*, Merzbow describes, in Japanese and English, the famous elephant seal of Japan’s Enoshima.

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Aquarium who lived to be only 11 years old instead of the average 20. He speculates that Minazo’s daily performances may have exhausted the seal and led to his early death. Akita also promotes the idea of a cruelty free life frequently in interviews and articles. Because of the abstract, un-texted nature of his music, these extra-sonic means become crucial pieces to the interpretive puzzle of his work.

2.4 What is Noise to Merzbow?

Akita’s explanations of noise vary from interview to interview, but it is not evident that there are any large-scale conceptual shifts over time with regard to the essence and purpose of noise; he merely creates different metaphors and explanations, different ways of conceptualizing something that resists conceptualization.

My opinion of the term ‘noise’ has different aspects and meanings when I explain it in regards to the strategy of Merzbow—it’s a positive meaning. If I use it for society, it’s against the stupid music scene. Otherwise, of course, noise is just used in the context of information theory. […] People misunderstand that noise is something other than music.

In the above, we see Akita accepting the sundry concepts of noise explored in chapter two (e.g., acoustic, communicative, subjective), and he thereby agrees to a context-specific usage of the overburdened word. The important points are that a) “noise” is not a pejorative so long as the noise is subjectively accepted, b) it has a practical meaning in fields such as information theory and science, and c) that noise fits within the purview of music. The last point is notable because where many similar artists prefer to avoid the term “music” in favor of the less overdetermined “sound art,” Akita does not need to hide from the concept of music.

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569 Liner notes to Merzbow, Minazo Volume One, Important Records imprec097, 2006.
570 Akita quoted in Woodward, 15.
Elsewhere Akita has said, “the most crucial thing is to regard noise as the nomadic producer of difference.” Akita’s use of Deleuze’s concept of nomadicism requires a bit of explanation before we can understand how this idea of noise starts to bring the polyphonic conceptual strands together. In Deleuze, the politics of nomadicism deal with the difference between transcendent and immanent principles, which organize being in space. He creates a distinction between what he calls *logos*—space structured externally, divided and predetermined by an external, transcendent law—and *nomos*—space structured from within, constituting itself immanently in time, always in flux. In nomadic space, there are no transcendent governing principles, but “only a milieu of exteriority, or extrinsic relations with nebulae or constellations.” Hierarchies are present within nomadicism, but they are determined extrinsically unlike the predetermined principles of *logos*. Deleuze and Guattari compare the *nomos/logos* distinction with the “smooth” space of the Go board versus the “striated” space of the chess board; where the chess pieces carry an intrinsic hierarchy and move only according to prescribed patterns, the Go pieces have no prescribed pattern of movement or intrinsic hierarchy and thus exhibit a freedom of movement, a smoothing of space that does not recognize externally instituted boundaries. Thus, we have one of Akita’s two powerful metaphors for the function of noise in the field of musical expression. As a nomadic producer of differences, noise transgresses traditional structural boundaries of music such as genre or form. The nomadic behavior of noise creates a smooth space within the field of music, crossing boundaries and deterritorializing them justified by the internal logic of its gravitational center. This transgressive spirit is a fundamental trait in radical music, and indeed, any composers that we could arguably

571 Ibid., 39.
573 Ibid, 352-3.
describe as “radical” share this drive to not only dismiss boundaries, but to actively work against them.

3.0 Noise, Eroticism, and Transgression

Akita’s second major noise metaphor creates a connection between noise and eroticism, derived in large part from Georges Bataille’s philosophy. Eroticism is the connecting thread for many of the various obsessions that inform Merzbow’s music, including Kinbaku (Japanese rope bondage), pornography (both Japanese and American), Wilhlem Reich, Georges Bataille, Otto Mühl and the Vienna Actionists, Kurt Schwitters, Dadaism, and Surrealist art. Some background is necessary before we can fully appreciate the symbolic web created by these influences, and beginning with the philosophy of Bataille will help us to understand the importance of eroticism and transgression in the subsequent areas.

There are two common themes in philosophy and social theory that seem particularly advantageous when discussing radical music: first is the idea of a beyond-of-structure—a space outside of common perception and structuration, the beyond, the unknown—because it speaks to the legendary ineffability of music, especially as encapsulated in the hackneyed (and cherished) saying, “music expresses the inexpressible;” and second is the related idea of transcendence from structure to freedom—the act of musical liberation from the mundane.

Regarding the former, we find examples in the sublime of Kant and Schopenhauer, where we are confronted with the awe, terror, and enormous unknowability of the universe. Lyotard re-envisioned the sublime in a postmodern context, defining the sublime as a non-representable

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phenomenon that exceeds our ability to incorporate and understand it. In Bataille, we find a concept that he refers to first as the general economy—a way of explaining the ebb and flow of phenomena prior to a more rigid structuring system—and later as continuity—a connectedness with the whole of the universe from which we are alienated by life. For Lacan, the concept of the Real represents a beyond of signification—a place beyond the structure imposed on subjects through the acquisition and usage of language. Because art lives across the boundary of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary, issues of taboo and transgression are of keen interest, which brings us to the foremost proponent of transgression: Georges Bataille. There is, perhaps, no other theorist who placed such importance on exploring the boundaries of sociocultural order and propriety; it is absolutely central to Bataille’s destructive philosophy.

3.1  Bataille

Let us begin by examining some of the affinities between Lacanian theory and Bataille’s philosophy. Much as the Lacanian subject is alienated by the Symbolic, Bataille’s subject is also defined by a lack. Existence is saturated by a transcendent negativity, which includes anything that is not self-contained or self-similar, and it serves to define the subject not by any qualities intrinsic to the subject, but by the existence of a negativity that is external to the subject. Bataille writes, “Me, I exist—suspended in a realized void—suspended from my own dread—different from all other being and such that the various events that can reach all other being and not me cruelly throw this me out of a total existence.” The subject is a product of the existence of


577 The translator notes that Moi, which he translates as “me,” should carry the psychoanalytic implication of ego, or subjectivity. Georges Bataille, “Sacrifices,” in Visions of Excess (1985), 130.
something that is not the subject. In life, the subject exists in a state that Bataille calls discontinuity—essential difference from other subjects—and in death, the subject re-enters a state of undifferentiated being that Bataille calls continuity.578 We could easily refer to the Lacanian subject, separated from primordial jouissance, as a discontinuous subject who longs to reclaim this lost jouissance through continuity.

We have a discontinuous subject divided between what Bataille calls the “general economy” and the “restricted economy,”579 a division which functions much in the way that Lacan’s subject exists in the Symbolic, but finds traces of the Real. The general economy encompasses the aforementioned negativity while the restricted economy exists within the general economy and imposes structure, regulation, normativity, and individuality. The general economy corresponds closely with continuity, while the restricted economy corresponds to discontinuity.580 This divide is similar to the Symbolic with two important differences: the lack of the Imaginary and the presence of multiple restricted economies. Because there is no Imaginary register, the Bataillian subject is fully cognizant of his or her command of language—at least in theory—because there is no unconscious force obscuring meaning or slipping in unintentional meaning through linguistic figuration. Lacan would consider Bataille to be under the delusion of the Ego, but the Bataillian subject is not really the master of his or her domain. The subject remains unaware of the general economy and the realm of continuity and can only sense them indirectly through certain modes of being achievable most effectively through erotic


580 The terminology is somewhat confusing because Bataille created multiple conceptual clusters over the course of his career, often with considerable, but not exact, overlap. The nuances between continuity/general economy and discontinuity/restricted economy will become clear as I proceed. For now we may conceive of the two pairs as exhibiting a binary relationship and leave it at that.
and excessive activity, much like the Real. Although the restricted economy serves to delimit possibility through systematization, it is not a monolithic singularity in the way that there is only one Symbolic. Rather, there are a series of restricted economies, each fulfilling different structural functions, and in this sense, they behave like a Foucauldian discourse. Because Bataille is more interested in the division between general and restricted economies than the functioning of these discursive formations, he typically refers to the restricted economy in the singular letting it stand for the multiple instantiations it might present.

Where the restricted economy is a homogenous entity rejecting anything that interrupts its ability to function according to the rules and regulation that define it, Bataille describes the general economy according to the principles of heterology. Heterology encompasses that which the homogenous world must reject—e.g., eroticism, violence, drunkenness, excrement—because it suggests a loss of control and the inevitability of death, and in this way, it is an almost perfect analogue to Kristeva’s concept of abjection. Truth and knowledge—both myths of the restricted economy that serve to inhibit and control—have no place in the irrational general economy, a realm of vast continuity of being where the individual ceases to have meaning independent from the heterogeneous collective. During life, a subject is in a state of discontinuity insofar as he or she is fundamentally separate from other living beings; however, the subject reenters a state of continuity in death. In this way, Bataille’s idea of discontinuous beings searching for lost continuity shares much with the subject’s desire to regain the jouissance surrendered upon entering the Symbolic.

We arrive now at a critical difference between Lacan and Bataille: Lacan’s ultimate goal is to help subjects exist harmoniously within a world governed by the Signifier (the Signifier being a symbol of the ultimate structuring power of language), while Bataille’s ultimate goal is

the exactly opposite; he theorizes a system of being and then spends most of his energy on the importance of transgressing these very boundaries. This desire to transgress upon a structuring system is precisely why Bataille is an excellent choice to pair with Lacan when examining the interaction of radical music and expressive noise with conventional modes of musical expression. Let us turn to Bataille’s robust theory of transgression to see how it might benefit the exegetical task at hand.

3.1.1 Expenditure and Eroticism

We might begin by asking why Bataille sees such value in transgression. The answer has two dimensions, one economic and the other transcendent.

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically. The fundamental premise is that the system of production is imperfect because, where every participant should be contributing toward an end beyond themselves, Bataille finds that there is always a non-productive sector of society; production flows upwards to a ruling class that must determine how to release the excess energy of production back into the general economy so that the process may continue. The key concept here is that of expenditure, which Bataille specifies as inherently wasteful, but necessary, much in the way that desire causes the Lacanian subject to devote considerable energy toward orbiting object (a) without ever reaching it. Bataille writes, “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity…constitute a group characterized by the fact that in each case the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its

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true meaning." The possibility of great reward is only possible through the possibility of great sacrifice.

Writing from an anthropological perspective, Bataille notes many instances of indigenous societies with special rituals for such unproductive expenditures, often taking the form of a festival where taboos and prohibitions are set aside temporarily so that pure, unproductive indulgence may release the excess energy of production. It was the responsibility of the non-productive rulers to make these expenditures possible, but as the restricted economy became increasingly binding, modernized societies refused to set aside social strictures and thus a new form of expenditure was necessary: large-scale warfare. The tremendous loss of life and wealth during a world war would make it a Bataillian expenditure par excellence, but Bataille stops just short of actually saying this. Seeing two world wars in his lifetime, Bataille felt strongly that modern societies needed sufficiently wasteful expenditures so that the expenditure of warfare could be avoided.

One manner of addressing this problem is individualized loss, which brings us to the transcendent realm of expenditure: eroticism. Sexual reproduction is distinct from eroticism because unlike the former, the latter has no productive value; it is a wasteful expenditure that approaches death, the greatest of losses. When two discontinuous beings join together, the self falls away and they are granted a foretaste of the continuity of being that is possible only through death, hence the connection between sex and death in Bataille’s philosophy. He writes, "eroticism…is assenting to life up to the point of death." The closer a subject comes to a total loss of self—to death—the more powerful the experience of continuity. For Bataille, eroticism is an aspect of what he calls “inner experience,” a loosely defined term that functions similar to the

Lacanian unconscious insofar as inner experience reaches a subject at a level beneath conscious perception, but also holds considerable power of the subject’s psychical disposition.

When a subject experiences continuity, it happens through inner experience aroused by the heterogeneous matter of the general economy. Eroticism plays such an important role in heterology because of its close connection to death, which is itself a pervasive element in the heterogeneous. If one were to represent this constellation of eroticism, death, expenditure, transgression, heterology, and continuity schematically, we might arrive at the following: eroticism leads to an excessive expenditure, which bring heterogeneous elements into play; death saturates the heterogeneous elements thereby making them taboo within the restricted economy, and thus the erotic activity that creates a loss of the discontinuous self through transgression of these taboos brings the subject into a temporary state of continuity.

3.1.2 Taboo and Transgression

Taboo and transgression work together and are mutually constitutive in a way similar to the intrinsic paradox of jouissance. The system of taboos is established by the strictures of the restricted economy helping it to run smoothly by excluding the heterogeneous elements that would call its dominance into question. Bataille writes,

If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist. […] The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is the religious sensibility and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure, and anguish.\(^{585}\)

The taboo, following the principle of expenditure, must remain in effect and the cost of transgression must be great in order for the act of transgression to have meaning. There is no value in an unintentional transgression because the conscious desire to transgress is what brings

about the inner experience that Bataille is after. He continues: “man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him.” In one of Bataille’s regular examples, he argues against the idea that societies that practiced human sacrifice did so out of a lack of humanity, claiming that they did so because they valued life to highly.

The efficacy of an expenditure is directly proportional to the wastefulness of the act because the feeling of anguish in Bataille’s inner experience is a necessary condition of eroticism—asserting to life up to death. Rather than argue for a move back to naturalism and animalistic behavior, the taboo must remain taboo. This is why egalitarian attempts to redeem expressive noise and situate it alongside conventional music on equal footing are misguided. Noise must remain noise if it is to maintain its transgressive power. Bataille writes, “we are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity.” Jouissance points to the lack in the signifier and endangers the subject’s ability to function within the Symbolic, but Bataille wants us to push through the pain to the limits of the death drive, to transgress the Law, thus leading to a place where the Lacanian Signifier collapses into the heterogeneous Real of Bataillian continuity. I believe we can experience a form of this continuity by transgressing our cultural taboos through radical works of art, and indeed, Akita observes that, “shock treatment is another very important essence of noise. [...] Shock is naturally intertwined with the concept of noise.”

586 Ibid, 39.
587 Ibid, 15.
588 Akita quoted in Woodward, 54.
3.2 (Japanese?) Eroticism

Akita states, “probably the greatest idea of Surrealism for me is ‘Everything is erotic, everywhere erotic.’ For me, noise is the most erotic form of sound…that’s why all of my works relate to the erotic.”\textsuperscript{589} Sexuality may be an important component of Merzbow’s work, but its various guises fulfill different functions in his work, and these functions are further complicated by an infusion of Western practices, representations, and taboos that mix with conceptions of sexuality that are more idiomatic to Japan. He makes a distinction between artistic and pornographic representations of sexuality, and these two categories are separated primarily by aesthetic criteria rather than issues of morality and ethics; Akita finds redeeming qualities in each. The main division is between representations that focus on the genitals and representations that focus on other elements, such as ropes. Either way, they are inherently wasteful in a Bataillan sense because they do not fulfill the productive function of procreation.

Akita often points out the sociocultural differences between Japanese and American representations of sexuality. He states that until the end of the Tokugawa era (1603-1868),\textsuperscript{590} Japan did not have an institutionalized system of taboos because there was no Christianity to circumscribe certain practices as deviant. Nagisa Oshima also attests to this culture of sexual freedom prior to the Meiji period (1868-1912), which was subsequently squashed by the militaristic political strategy of the Meiji government, as well as the push toward modernization. Following World War II, the socioeconomic swing toward the “growth at any cost” philosophy of GNPism brought with it a promotion of sexuality, but having left the Edo era concepts of sexuality behind during twentieth-century modernization, there was no practice to draw upon.


\textsuperscript{590} Also referred to as the Edo period.
“Society therefore,” writes Oshima, “turned instead to models that had no connection whatsoever to the past. People imitated Western (particularly American) sexual culture extremely superficially.”\footnote{Nagisa Oshima, “On Trial for Obscenity,” in 

Despite the popular myth of bizarre sexual practices in Japan, modern conceptions of sexuality were heavily informed by the West. The only significant taboo to remain from the period of sexual repression is the censorship of depictions of genitalia, which accounts for the strange and sundry representations of sexuality such as sex between women and octopi (the genitals are covered by tentacles), *kinbaku* (the focus is on the ropes, not the genitals), and *seppuku* and *hara-kiri* (a knife penetrates the abdomen, rather than the conventional depiction of genital penetration).\footnote{Akita quoted in Chad Hensley, “The Beauty of Noise: An Interview with Masami Akita of Merzbow,” Esoterra.org, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.esoterra.org/merzbow.htm.}

This taboo may account for Akita’s distinction between pornography and erotic art, which is predicated on a focus on either the naked body or fetishized elements, respectively.

It would appear that Akita does not find practices like *kinbaku* and *seppuku* to be inherently transgressive, and indeed, he has written a book and numerous articles on various forms of Japanese bondage and sadomasochism, detailing their place in legitimate Japanese culture throughout history.\footnote{Masami Akita, *Nihon kinbaku shashinshi* (History of Japanese Bondage Photographs) (Tokyo: Jiyu Kokuminsha, 1996).}

Here, one is tempted to buy into the orientalist myth of a culture of perverse pornographic freedom, but this is not exactly accurate. Sandra Buckley writes that while acts such as rape and incest are found in the pornography of pre-modern Japan, there are also examples where these acts are treated in an unfavorable fashion. She indicates that the same is true today. Although pornography, including genres that Akita holds as artistic, is easily

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accessible through vending machines and shops that surround commercial urban areas, the
Japanese quietly disapprove of the prominence and accessibility of pornography.\textsuperscript{594} It appears
that there are cultural taboos in effect, even if there is virtually no government censorship.

It is difficult to accept Akita’s statement that bondage images are neither pornographic
nor transgressive to him.\textsuperscript{595} Even if Freud has diluted the concept of perversion to utter
uselessness, bondage cannot be conceptualized in the same manner as depictions straightforward,
(ostensibly) consensual sex because the power relationship is foregrounded and involves a binary
of submission and domination. Not only are there themes of cruelty and violation, but military
uniforms and paraphernalia often figure prominently in \textit{kinbaku} imagery as well. Going even
further, representations of \textit{seppuku} and \textit{hara-kiri} must be considered transgressive because they
relate to ritualized death. Granted, Akita uses these images for specific reasons that may have
little do to with petty shock value, but two things come to mind: they are indeed shocking to the
majority of listeners who are unfamiliar with the subtleties of \textit{kinbaku}, and when considered
within the context of Merzbow’s project at large, it seems impossible that he does not, at some
level, use these representations of sexuality for their transgressive quality. After all, the professed
beauty and profound nationalist honor that accompanies \textit{seppuku} is only possible if the act is
genuinely transgressive. If the loss of life is not a wasteful expenditure, then a taboo is not
broken, and the act becomes mundane.

Thus far, I have treated Japanese depictions of sexuality, whether pornographic or
artistic, as essentially Japanese, but this also requires clarification. Akita has already brought
Western ideas of sexuality into the discussion, but he also shows that even within a seemingly

\textsuperscript{594} Sandra Buckley, “Pornography,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture}, ed. Sandra

\textsuperscript{595} Akita quoted in Chad Hensley, “The Beauty of Noise: An Interview with Masami Akita of Merzbow,”
traditional Japanese practice like kinbaku, the purity is not what is seems. According to Akita, Japanese bondage was always concerned with the ropes and the power dynamics between the active and passive subjects—undoubtedly due to the influence of the Meiji militarization of sexuality—while Western bondage was more focused on various fetishized items such as corsets, high-heeled shoes, and all manner of elaborate undergarments. During the Korean War, British bondage artist, John Willie, published various pictures in the Japanese “abnormal” magazine, Kitan Club, much to the delight of Kitan Club’s readership. Willie, who would go on to publish Bizarre (a fetish magazine focusing on women’s clothing), is therefore credited with bringing the fetish element to Japanese bondage. What had previously focused on rope work now had the added dimension of extraneous fetish items forever changing the practice of kinbaku. Buckley affirms that the influence of Western pornography remains to this day and contributes both content and market structure. Thus, we have another argument for reading Merzbow as an altermodernist.

3.3 Eroticism as Metaphor

Beyond the pictorial issues, we must also consider the metaphorical dimension of eroticism apropos of expressive noise. The function of the metaphor is twofold: first, we find eroticism used to describe expressive noise and its transgressive quality, and second, we find eroticism describing the relationship between the composer and the listener. Akita sees pornographic expressions as rich with sociopolitical meaning hiding below the surface. He writes, “noise is the primitive libido of sound. Similarly, pornography is the primitive libido of

596 Merzbow, Music for Bondage Performance, liner notes, Extreme XCD 008, 1991, compact disc.


598 Akita quoted in Woodward, 27.
eroticism. Both are very physical, the lowest material of human expression—primary motivations. This “lowest material,” along with the name of Akita’s first record label, Lowest Arts and Music, invokes Bataille’s notion of base material, which is the heterogeneous stuff of the general economy. Pornography is something that a culture must condemn and cast out to maintain the homogenizing taboos that provide structure, much in the way that expressive noise is something that a music must condemn and cast out to ensure that its boundaries can continue to include what is internally defined as music. Pornography and expressive noise share a similar transgressive quality and thus hold a position of importance within Bataille’s philosophy.

The “primitive libido” of which Akita speaks directs us towards Wilhelm Reich’s concept of orgone energy, which Akita uses repeatedly as a simile for expressive noise. Reich describes orgone energy as “primordial cosmic energy; universally present and demonstrable.” Beginning his career as a psychoanalyst under the teaching of Freud, Reich was trained to see sexual abnormalities as leading to psychical strife, and following a series of case studies, he became convinced that the central problem of every psychic disturbance was a lack of satisfying sexual release that could only be achieved through loving, genital-to-genital induced orgasm. Reich writes, “if every psychic illness has a core of dammed-up sexual excitation, it can be caused only by the disturbance of the capacity for orgasmic gratification. Hence, impotence and frigidity are the key to the understanding of the economy of neuroses.” Orgone, in this sense,

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599 Ibid., 27.

600 Akita quoted in Hensley, 2012.


603 Reich, Selected Writings, 37.
behaves similarly to Bataille’s idea of expenditure where an excess of production must be wasted to maintain a state of equilibrium. Reich writes, “Orgastic potency is the capacity to surrender to the streaming of biological energy, free of any inhibitions; the capacity to discharge completely the dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable convulsions of the body.” In essence, this description is a paraphrase of Bataille’s argument for the necessity of expenditure that leads to the feeling of continuity. Thus, sexuality and expressive noise are similar insofar as they are affective prisms through which we experience extreme phenomena—expenditure, loss of self, continuity.

The second metaphorical sense brings Salomé Voegelin’s phenomenological approach to noise into play. She writes,

> Noise exaggerates the isolation of my sensorial engagement and tightens the reciprocity between the listener and the heard. […] In its insistence that I hand over my body to its force, noise cuts the cord to the social and produces a euphoria, an ecstasy of freedom in the besieged but autonomous body. The tight reciprocity of this existence is made abundantly clear when I cannot hear myself anymore. Noise does not accompany me but swallows me.

I will later argue that we do not yield our powers of perception to the capacity that Voegelin claims, but the idea is convincing to a certain extent. The physicality of expressive noise experienced at proper volume sets it apart from many types of music. The sheer volume flattens space, as the sonic energy swarms the listener in a thick cloud of sound. One may argue that the deafening volume at a rock music concert produces the same effect, but virtually all popular music contains a repeating rhythmic component, which structures the sound and creates a sense of comfort and familiarity within the aural assault. An expressive noise concert with a

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604 Ibid., 29.

605 Salomé Voegelin, Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art (New York: Continuum, 2010), 46-7.
comparable sound pressure level will, on the other hand, be perceived with greater intensity because the lack of repetitive sound restricts the listener’s ability to situate him or herself comfortably. Because of the intensity of experience, the listener cannot exist in a space of distanced contemplation in the way that one might listen to a work of chamber music.

What, then, is the nature of this submission of mind and body? Michel Henritzi suggests that “the relationship between the noise performer and the listener…seems to be informed by the rituals of sado-masochistic sex, as the audience agrees to submit itself to the sonic pain of white noise inflicted by the performers. The body of the listener is thus linked to the SM imagery habitually used by some of the musicians.” Even if one does not buy into the idea of an explicitly denotated sexual listening experience, the listening process is at least partially masochistic. Listening becomes a transcendent state where one must be given over entirely to the transgressive intensity of the experience. In sum, the listener has a genuine Bataillian erotic experience.

3.4 Art

Thus far, we have seen how the philosophy of Bataille functions in relation to the various manifestations of eroticism present in Merzbow’s work. Various art movements of the twentieth-century are also important in understanding Merzbow’s aesthetics, and as we will see, the centrality of Bataillian eroticism continues. When Akita discusses his aesthetic ideas, he tends to refer to theories from the visual arts rather than music, and although he found the style of oil painting that he learned in college to be too conservative, it seems that the aesthetics and ideologies of Surrealism, Dadaism, and Vienna Actionism inform his music on a conceptual

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“My work hung in galleries,” he says, “but exhibiting my work like that didn’t appeal to me. […] Working like that was too indirect for my taste. I wanted to show my work to society in a more direct way.” This sentiment of working directly echoes Hans Arp’s statement, “we want to produce directly and without mediation.” The idea of direct, unmediated expression is absolutely crucial to understanding Merzbow’s work and it is something that we will find in each of the artistic movements that follow.

The common thread between Surrealism, Dadaism, and Vienna Actionism is a transgressive element that threatens to subvert the Law, bringing the spectator into the realm of jouissance where meaning begins to collapse. Each movement was a reaction against forces of sociopolitical control and aesthetic homogenization that the artists railed against in incendiary manifestoes. In describing his initial encounters with each of the aforementioned artistic movements, Akita uses the same word: “shock.” Consequently, the power of shocking art to affect a special psychical state is a lesson that Akita has taken to heart and used to great effect in his work as Merzbow.

If Akita cites these three movements as inspirational, and if these three movements are inseparable from their social, political, and aesthetic ideologies, then we find yet another reason why Akita’s claim that Japanese noise contains no meaning is untenable, as well as another reason to read Merzbow as an altermodernist. Even within a movement such as Dadaism that purports to be both nothing and everything, that statement alone is a deliberate anti-foundational

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607 Beyond Ultra Violence: Uneasy Listening by Merzbow, directed by Ian Kerkhof, interviews translated by Misako Furukawa (Amsterdam: Allegri Film, 1998), videocassette.

608 Ibid.


610 E.g., Woodward, 45, 51, 54.
stance that must be considered in its social, political, and aesthetic context. A brief survey of these three art movements will serve to enrich our readings of Merzbow’s music that will follow in section 4.0.

3.4.1 Dada, Kurt Schwitters, and the Merzbau

Because Akita chose to derive the name of his artistic project from Kurt Schwitters’s most enigmatic project, *Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (1923-1943), let us explore the connections between the two artists. Much like Akita’s Merzbow project, from the outset, the Merzbau is rather inscrutable, a status that is amplified by the poor documentation and eventual destruction of the work itself during World War II. At the most prosaic level, the Merzbau was a house in Hannover, Germany that was slowly engulfed by an ever-expanding installation that combined elements of collage, sculpture, and architecture along with a wealth of found materials that Schwitters would add to the project over the course of twenty years. At a deeper level, the Merzbau is a signifier without a signified—a collection of fragments held together by the gravitational force of Schwitters’s unconscious, a product of obsessive compulsion that even the artist himself probably did not fully understand. The Merzbau has undeniable authorial intent and there are deliberate thematic elements—eroticism being first and foremost—but the meaning is illusive. Seen in this light, this hermeneutic aporia could just as easily describe Merzbow’s body of work.

As for specific connections to Schwitters, Akita explains,

The thing that I’m into is collection the sounds that I hear around me. For instance, sounds from the radio and TV programs. The sounds in and around my house, like the sounds in my kitchen. And inner city sounds. I collect all these sounds. And I make tapes of them. The concept is very similar to the creations of

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Schwitters’s rejection by various Dadaist factions is well documented, but by the late 1970s when Akita first encountered his work, Schwitters had already joined the canon of Dadaists, which explains why Akita does not seem to differentiate between the artist and the movement that rejected him.
Kurt Schwitters. Because our works are so similar, I think Merzbow is a very suitable name for me.⁶¹²

In another interview, Akita puts it slightly differently in that he says that he collects “scum” from the world around him.⁶¹³ Recalling Bataille’s base material and Akita’s interest in pornography as the dregs of the cultural unconscious, the connection to Schwitters becomes quite clear. Akita, like Schwitters, is constructing an oeuvre of enormous proportions, elevating the banal, the strange, the erotic, and the transgressive to the level of art. Amidst the Japanese culture of reckless capitalist expansion, Merzbow takes the waste of the capitalist machine and turns it into art.

We must also take into account Schwitters’s central concept, which he describes thusly: “Merz stands for freedom from all fetters, for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline.”⁶¹⁴ Akita is undoubtedly inspired by the aesthetic exhortation of Schwitters, but he too believes that artistic freedom is not the same as abandoning all rules. He states, “I do not think it is easier to make noise than to create harmony and scales. […] The reason people choose to do noise is the same reason they choose to play classical music, grindcore, or country and western, it’s only a product of individual selection.”⁶¹⁵ The point is notable because when an artist creates a massive oeuvre that is both superficially similar and outside the realm of commonly understood expressive culture, there are always

⁶¹² Beyond Ultra Violence: Uneasy Listening by Merzbow, directed by Ian Kerkhof, interviews translated by Misako Furukawa (Amsterdam: Allegri Film, 1998), videocassette.

⁶¹³ Akita quoted in Woodward, 30.


⁶¹⁵ I believe Akita is underemphasizing the unique power of expressive noise, but his statements here originate from a somewhat casual interview and not a carefully constructed theoretical treatise. I also interpret this quote as emphasizing an equivalence of compositional work rather than a qualitative equivalence. Akita quoted in Woodward, 15.
suspicions that the work is, at best, easy to produce, or, at worst, just a big joke. This is only exacerbated by the tendency of music journalists to ask noise music practitioners if their craft is easy.

Beyond Schwitters, broader concepts from Dadaism also pertain. Near the beginning of his *Dada Manifesto* (1918), Tristan Tzara writes “DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING,” continuing later with the following:

Every product of disgust that is capable of becoming a negation of the family is dada; DADA; acquaintance with all the means hitherto rejected by the sexual prudishness of easy compromise and good manners: DADA; abolition of logic, dance of those who are incapable of creation: DADA; every hierarchy and social equation established for values by our valets: DADA; every object, all objects, feelings and obscurities, every apparition and the precise shock of parallel lines, are means for the battle of: DADA […]  

If we transpose this to Lacanian terms, Tzara is attempting to dehisce the Symbolic, to reject the power of the Signifier to structure experience. To “not mean anything” is to have no existence in the Symbolic, for the Symbolic is the realm of structure where the subject must constantly attempt to match signifiers with signifieds in a perpetually imperfect play of meaning; Tzara endeavors to access the Real. Describing the inspiration that followed an encounter with Duchamp’s writing, Akita states, “I found out why Dadaists destroyed all conventional art forms. I decided to destroy all conventional music.” If the Symbolic is concerned with symbolic referentiality, Merzbow goes as far as possible to create a non-referential music, a music that signifies as little as possible, which is to say, a noise music. The Dadaist sentiment of “Dada means nothing” is also echoed in the statements of noise practitioners who claim that “noise means nothing” as well.

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3.4.2 Surrealism

Where Dadaists sought to destroy meaning in favor of nonsense, the Surrealists were inspired by the possibility of meaning outside of rational thought. It is, perhaps, a matter of degrees: non-meaning versus meaning unstructured by consciousness. In his initial *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton writes:

We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary, escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. [...] Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. [...] For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. [...] The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them—first to seize them, then, if need be, to submit them to the control of our reason.  

In Lacanian terms, Breton wants to allow the unconscious to speak without being filtered through the Imaginary. He wants to present the nonsensical, unfiltered messages of the Freudian Id that originate independent of the Ego, and he wants to present them as they are with no attempt to make them conform to the logic of the conscious mind. In this way, we find Surrealists practicing an intuitive art, much like Merzbow’s music is intuitive. “Surrealism for me,” says Akita, “was an alternative sensibility, a way of expression that mixed anarchism,

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alchemy, schizo-paranoia, and fetishism. I was looking for a way of realizing the theory of Surrealism as put forward by André Breton and Georges Bataille.\textsuperscript{619}

When asked how he creates his work, Akita answered, “Naturally. I’m making music for pleasure. I just want to create sound which I like and most sounds that I like are at a very high level. When I have them, I just mix them together.”\textsuperscript{620} This is not to say that Merzbow and the Surrealists do not spend a great deal of time creating their work; rather, the creative premises that inform the work are allowed to remain intuitive while the artist presents them according to his or her aesthetic sensibility, which may in fact be a very time consuming process. Breton defines Surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”\textsuperscript{621} Akita writes, “I wanted to compose real surrealistic music in a non-musical way. Surrealism is also reaching into the unconsciousness. Noise is the primitive and collective [un]consciousness of music. My composition is automatism, not improvisation.”\textsuperscript{622} The idea of expressive noise as a primitive, collective unconscious is reminiscent of Leibniz’s perceptual unconscious that Christoph Cox uses to construct his concept of noise. For Cox, noise is a vast expanse, which gives way to music when the noise is filtered through the expressive codes of a given culture. Seen in this way, Merzbow’s expressive noise is

\textsuperscript{619} Akita quoted in Woodward, 55.


\textsuperscript{621} One should note that where Breton writes, “exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern,” it is more consistent with his overall concept of surrealism to read this as “exempt from any conscious aesthetic or moral concern.” Breton, 1996, 26.

\textsuperscript{622} Akita quoted in Woodward, 15.
constructed from the substance of the unconscious and arrives in the listener’s ears unsymbolized, which is to say, it arrives as a token of the Real.

Akita’s distinction between automatism and improvisation is debatable because some may argue that improvisation is indeed an expression of the unconscious. Akita, however, has a background in jazz and most likely considers improvisation to be an only semi-spontaneous act wherein a musician has the limited freedom of making decisions within a specified set of musical and stylistic codes, all within a limited timeframe (i.e., the creative act happens concurrently with its realization). In contradistinction, automatism is a process of creation that may extend over a long period of development and consciously rejects structural codes.

3.4.3 Vienna Actionism

The Vienna Actionists are another reference point for Akita not only because their aesthetic is predicated on direct, unmediated expression (in the vein of Dadaism and Surrealism), but also because he sees their early explorations of performance art—what they called “material action”—as related to sadomasochistic practices in Japan, albeit with an inverted relationship where the performers themselves are the masochists. In the O.M. Theatre Manifesto, Hermann Nitsch writes

Through my artistic production (a form of life worship) I take upon myself all that appears negative, unsavoury, perverse, and obscene, the lust and the resulting sacrificial hysteria, in order to spare YOU the defilement and shame entailed by the descent into the extreme. […] Histrionic means will be harnessed to gain access to the profoundest and holiest symbols through blasphemy and desecration. Blasphemous provocation is tantamount to worship.

[^624]: Herman Nitsch, Die blutorgel, self-published, Vienna, 1962; unpagedinated.
Much like expressive noise and pornography, the Actionists were concerned with things that Bataille would label heterogeneous: extreme physical acts, excrement, bodily fluids, violent destruction—in sum, Bataillian expenditures. While the Surrealists were usually content to dream up transgressive concepts and express them as novels, poetry, or paintings, the Actionists enacted these transgressions upon their own bodies, often running afoul of the law in the process.

Many of these depraved acts were intended to pose devastating ontological queries to the art establishment, just as intentional noise throws the boundaries of music into question. Otto Mühl, the de facto leader of the Vienna Actionists, writes, “art conceived in this manner cannot fail to have an effect on society. People must open their eyes at last. The world-wide cretinization of the masses by the pigs of art, religion, and politics can only be halted by the most brutal use of all available materials.”

Again, the immediacy of impact is critical to the power of the art. Although one can still be shocked by mere accounts of the material actions performed—naked writhing bodies, clawing, biting, screaming, urinating, flagellating, defecating, penetrating, even slaughtering a chicken and then pulling its flesh apart with their teeth—this is not even close to watching the events unfold in the films of Joerg Siegert or Kurt Kren, and even this cannot approach the intensity of seeing the material action performed live.

In precisely the same manner, one can read descriptions of Merzbow, but these are meaningless when confronted the aural actuality of his work experienced at full volume, and despite the relative safety of abstraction offered by expressive noise (for instance, one does not witness a man defecating in an art gallery), Merzbow’s sound could be equally disturbing to

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627 This description refers to the material action, Manopsychotisches Ballet (1970), filmed by Joerg Siegert. This and other Actionist films can be found at http://www.ubu.com/film/vienna_actionists.html.
some, especially if one experiences the sound in the way that Voegelin describes—i.e., a total loss of self. “Mühl’s Material action idea,” says Akita, “was interesting to use as a treatment concept of sound. Sound can be treated more physically, destructively in a psychoanalytic way.”  

I believe that there are multiple ways of listening to Merzbow, including analytically, but if we consider noise from Voegelin’s phenomenological angle, the physical, destructive treatment of sound to which Akita refers is an encounter with the Real. Assuming the listener experiences the sound at the tacitly recommended level of “well above the threshold of pain,” the brute force of the sonic waves hit the listener in a way that does not filter through the Symbolic; the sound does not transfer into symbolic meaning here because, much like a kick in the stomach, it arrives in extreme, physical excess with an immediacy that defers analysis and symbolization until after the experience. When one experiences Merzbow in this manner, it is only after the sound stops that one can begin to try to understand what it all meant.

3.5 Altermodernism and the Radicant Work

In light of the manifold Western influences evident in Merzbow’s work, one cannot simplify his work to that of his ethnicity, and thus it is useful to consider his work in the context of altermodernism. Nicolas Bourriaud proposes a subsequent term for the artist in the altermodern world: the radicant. Constructing a metaphor from plant biology, he writes,

The radicant develops in accord with its host soil. It informs to the latter’s twists and turns and adapts to its surfaces and geological features. It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves. With its at once dynamic and dialogical significant, the adjective “radicant” captures this contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an object of negotiation.

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629 Bourriaud, 51.
Examining Merzbow as a radicant artist begins to explain how a Japanese artist can borrow from Germany (Vienna Actionism, Dadaism, Wilhelm Reich), France (Surrealism), the United Kingdom (John Willie’s bondage art), and America (progressive rock, jazz) and combine them altogether to form a synthesis that is original and coherent within its heterogeneity. As we have seen thus far, post-war Japan was a social, cultural, political, and artistic hybrid, and this is evident in Merzbow’s work if one is able to listen beyond the cacophony.

Achim Wollscheid, a media artist and Merzbow collaborator, attests to the heterogeneous “adaptation and integration of foreign or alien cultural materials” that enter Japan; however, he continues, “once caught in the cultural net, the various materials develop a peculiar dumb existence of their own, unless formal relations become present”. This may be true of Japanese culture at large, and other Japanese artists certainly echo these sentiments, but this is not what radicant art is about. Baudrillard predicted a move toward simulacra in place of content and authenticity, and in some cases, shoddy postmodern works do fit his model of depthless surfaces thrown together haphazardly; however, where does this leave an artist in the postmodern era who borrows from many cultures with a more substantive grounding behind these various elements?

On the one hand, Akita grew up in a heterogeneous culture moving toward Westernization and undoubtedly absorbed elements of Western culture that had become detached from their original meanings, but on the other hand, he deliberately sought out the various aesthetic and philosophical elements described above. If it were really as simple as a superficial mixing of empty cultural signifiers, perhaps Merzbow would in fact be a postmodernist in the sense that Baudrillard finds so offensive. I believe there is sufficient evidence that Akita does posses a substantive understanding of the non-Japanese elements that contribute to his work, and on those

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630 Achim Wollscheid quoted in Woodward, 54-55.
grounds, I find the radicant to be a useful approach to understand his work. Indeed, Merzbow has roots in many cultural formations.

### 3.6 Animal Rights and Veganism

The final notable influence on Akita and his work is his advocacy of animal rights and veganism. Although it does not fit within the present discussion of eroticism as a central influence, inspiration, and metaphor in Merzbow’s work, it is, nevertheless, centrally important to his work in the new millennium, and thus we must discuss it along with his other influences. Around 2002, Akita began raising bantams, which led to an epiphany regarding the treatment of animals by humans, especially in cosmopolitan society. As a result, he became a passionate advocate of animal rights and a vegan lifestyle. When considered alongside the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of his previous work, the introduction of veganism into his compositional milieu marks an ethical component without precedent in Merzbow’s career. As with many of his obsessions, this led to a period of intense study culminating in a book: *Watashi no saishoku seikatsu* (My Vegetarian Lifestyle / Cruelty Free Life). Akita has published 14 books since 1988, but his book on animal rights is unique insofar as it is not only a history, but also a thesis. Rather than presenting a more-or-less objective history of transgressive culture as before, Akita allows his voice to enter in his promotion of kindness toward animals. As he describes the situation, Japan had a long history of vegetarianism dating back to the 7th century when emperor Tenmu issued an outright ban on meat consumption during the farming season on the grounds that animals were too important to farming to be slaughtered for food. At various points in history, Westerners would introduce a carnivorous diet to the Japanese, including Francis Xavier’s visit in 1549, but it was not until the Meiji period (1868-1912) that a regular diet of

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meat would become widespread. In a 2011 interview, Akita notes that there is a small movement of vegetarians as part of the Japanese food culture, but there is no real political presence for animal rights, an odd fact in light of the international attention that practices such as whaling continue to receive.

Up to this point in Merzbow’s career, the concepts at play are abstract, much like expressive noise itself; however, the conceptual shift toward advocacy for the ethical treatment of animals during his fourth phase is surprisingly concrete and direct. Because the ability of music to convey anything other than itself remains a point of contention, the ability of expressive noise to convey specifics must surely be in question. On the one hand, there is very little in the sound itself to suggest the ethical benefits of a vegan lifestyle, there are no lyrics to convey the message, and there is no widely understood cluster of signifiers that are stable enough to support the specifics of Merzbow’s message. On the other hand, cover art, album titles, and track titles continue to be important in suggesting meaning, and some of his work even uses recognizable samples of animal sounds.

In some respects, wildlife ethics continue the ongoing exploration of power, both conceptually through Akita’s interest in bondage and domination, and psychically through the sadomasochistic listening experience. That said, animal rights are special insofar as Merzbow finds them vitally important. In his previous work, it would be tough to determine how exactly Merzbow feels about culturally aberrant forms of eroticism from an ethical perspective. He tends to approach them with fascination and aesthetic appreciation without rendering judgment on those practices as they happen outside of expressive culture, which may be art, pornography, or

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something in between. With animal rights, however, there is an emotional immediacy in his statements that has the potential to cloud our understanding of Merzbow’s work. This is an issue that I will develop further in section 4.3 when I discuss Merzbow’s 13 Japanese Birds series.

4.0 The Expressive Noise of Merzbow

Faced with a discography of hundreds of albums, where does one begin? As of 2013, discogs.com, an excellent music database, lists 320 of Merzbow’s releases, as well as an additional 233 appearances on collaborative albums, split releases, and compilation CDs. Moreover, a number of these releases are actually multi-disc box sets including, most notably, the 50-CD Merzbox, two fifths of which was a collection of new recordings. In making the selections that will follow, I have chosen particular tracks that show Merzbow’s diversity, drawing from his most widely available albums whenever possible. I have also tried to represent his major stylistic periods, which I will outline below. Periodically, a journalist attempts something resembling a top ten list for Merzbow, but these lists can never be more than a mere sampling of an oeuvre that most assuredly outstrips the journalist’s experience. In working with an artist who does not follow traditional genre categories, it becomes difficult to make a case for any particular work holding more importance than another; where one might begin with the symphonies of a given composer, there is no equivalent feature to define an obvious starting point in this case. Although I will make a case for each of the recordings that follow, the reader must indulge an inevitable measure of my personal taste in these selections.

There is a specious notion that all of Merzbow’s work sounds the same, but in fact, he has developed his work through a number of stylistic periods, and my analyses will show that there is more difference than one would imagine. Although there is no standardized stylistic

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634 These numbers also exclude the handful of releases Akita has created under aliases such as Pornoise and Right Brain Audile. http://www.discogs.com/artist/Merzbow, accessed May 22, 2012.
narrative in place, I see Merzbow’s career in four phases. First comes his experimental phase, beginning in 1979 and extending through the 1980s. Here, he is exploring recording techniques and media, found sounds, field recordings, tape looping, percussion, and non-standard uses of conventional instruments. I feel that it is appropriate to label this first phase experimental because of the exploratory nature of his first decade of expressive noise, which is marked by a rather diverse array of sound sources and compositional techniques. Second, we have Merzbow’s analogue phase, in which he develops his archetypal wall of feedback and distortion. In the 1990s, he moves away from found sounds, looping, and acoustic instruments and gravitates toward guitar pedals and analogue synthesizers, the EMS Synthi A being his staple instrument.  

Third, we have what is commonly referred to as Merzbow’s “laptop” phase. In the late 1990s, Merzbow purchased an Apple computer to create the cover art for his Merzbox and found that computer-based audio applications afforded him new avenues of sonic exploration. During this period, he returns to the sort of looping that he was exploring during his experimental phase, but this time, everything is based in a digital audio workstation rather than a tape deck. Because many virtual synthesizers are made to emulate classic analogue gear, the change from analogue to digital synthesis is almost inaudible. The difference, however, is in the compositional method of creating entire albums from the manipulation of tiny audio samples. Fourth, we find Merzbow’s current phase, beginning in 2002, which is marked by a thematic shift to animal rights and the promotion of a vegan lifestyle. The computer-based compositional methods of his third phase remain in place, but he returns to the sort of field recordings that he explored in the 1980s, this time taking his samples from the animals that he raises.

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636 The Electronic Music Studios (EMS) Synthi A was a small, portable modular analogue synthesizer popularized by progressive rock artists in the 1970s, including Pink Floyd and Tangerine Dream. As of 2012, EMS continues to produce the Synthi A. As a fan of 1970s progressive rock, it is likely that Akita was exposed to the Synthi A sound during his formative years, although the manner in which he uses the synthesizer is very far removed than anything Pink Floyd did with it.
Throughout these stylistic periods, there are a number of touchstone recordings from which other, more peripheral recordings emerge. This central recording may provide a particular production technique, instrument grouping, thematic idea, conceptual approach, sample set, or even sonic material borrowed and reworked for a new recording. For example, when Merzbow created Ecobondage (1987), the raw materials gave rise to at least three albums, including Enclosure/Libido Economy (1987), Vratya Southwards (1987), and Fission Dialogue (1988). Similarly, Merzbow generated so much material using the instrument collection and general tone of Music for Bondage Performance (1991), that he would later fill 12 CDs, which would eventually be released as the box set, Merzbient (2010). The creative circumstances of a given moment in Merzbow’s career gave rise to a series of similar works—much like Bach’s systematic exploration of the prelude and fugue in The Well-Tempered Clavier—and with that in consideration, I have endeavored to write about recordings that represent entire clusters of Merzbow’s oeuvre.

4.1 Ecobondage

We will begin with the title track on the CD version of Ecobondage, which corresponds to the entire side A of the initial vinyl-only release. This track has more to do with remarkably traditional musique concrète and collage than the blasts of distorted feedback that would define Merzbow in the 1990s. The influence of Edgard Varèse and Pierre Schaeffer are particularly evident here; however, Merzbow notes that their music “is a little too academic for me. I learned musique concrète from material like ‘the Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny’ on the Mothers of Invention’s Money album, Zappa’s Lumpy Gravy, The Residents’ Third Reich & Roll, NWW’s [Nurse With Wound] Sylvie and Babs [The Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion] as well

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637 Merzbow, Ecobondage, Distemper DISTEMPER 001, 1995, compact disc; Merzbow, Ecobondage, ZSF Produkt SH62-01, 1987, LP.
as Can’s *Tago Mago* and *Landed*, and the Beatles’ *Revolution No. 9*. Even if he finds Schaeffer to be more academic than musical, Merzbow has nevertheless adopted the idea of thematically coherent found sounds in the present work. Where Schaeffer was interested in the elevation of urban ambience to the level of art, Merzbow takes a cue from Schwitters and builds his version of *musique concrète* from sonic detritus—Bataille’s base material—including samples of scrap metal, barking dogs, and general urban noise pollution.

According to Schaeffer’s theory of acousmatic listening, sound is perceived differently when we cannot visualize its source, whether from seeing the source live, or by picturing it in our mind. The ideal acousmatic listening experience maximizes the auditor’s alienation from the sound sources, forcing him or her to perceive the sounds as pure aural phenomena, unattached to any experiential signifiers. Schaeffer names this alien sound phenomenon the *objet sonore* (sonorous object). In theory, the greater the alienation, the more the auditor can focus on the sound-in-itself. In practice, Schaeffer recorded sounds on a portable shellac phonograph, layered them, and processed them in a way that disguised their literal referentiality. Merzbow uses the same technique with a tape recorder and a mixer. He makes field recordings, performs on a variety of percussion and junk “instruments,” processes these sounds through effects units including a ring modulator and a reverb unit, and he combines them into an aural gestalt.

Irrespective of any possible desire on the part of Merzbow to create an *objet sonore*, as listeners and interpreters, we must ask if it is even possible to listen in this fashion. From the Lacanian perspective, the primacy of perception proffered by phenomenologists is tantamount to a denial of the unconscious. For Lacan, the actuality of experience is a combination of conscious

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638 Akita quoted in Woodward, 52.

and unconscious perception and interpretation. Is it really possible to hear anything at all without some level of recognition or association, even if the listener cannot place it exactly? In the case of “Ecobondage,” there can be levels of recognition—the layperson will be able to pick out the origin of some of the sounds, while an expert may be able to reverse engineer all the sounds—but is there not more to listening than detecting the source? Akita’s references to noise as orgone energy, for example, point to a particular psychosexual state of being, thereby creating an experience of audition that will affect a listening subject in a powerful manner. Auditory claustrophobia could be another state of listening to expressive noise that is potentially unfamiliar in source, but familiar in feeling; however, when comparing the sonic density of *Ecobondage* with *Pulse Demon*, this album is practically ambient.

As for the sonic particulars of “Ecobondage,” the following elements that form the polyphonic voices include the following: a 6/8 rhythmic pulse played on a resonant piece of metal, the sound of metallic scraping, distorted ambient sound, samples of dogs barking, fragments of tunes played from turntables at varying speeds, a synthesized drone, and various timbres of feedback. Overall, there is a constant bed of ambient noise and metallic scraping over which a certain sound dominates in the foreground. “Ecobondage” is loosely organized into what I hear as five different sections over the course of 30 minutes. The first section (0:00-3:40) features a synthesized tone glissing in the low register; the second section (3:40-9:30) features a triple rhythm played on a metallic object with fragments of melody from a turntable operated manually; the third section (9:30-17:00) is dominated by a synthesized drone, while the rhythmic gong motive returns, this time slower and processed through a ring modulator; the fourth section (17:00-24:00) has a thinner texture with a rumbling inharmonic drone as the rhythmic motive is

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640 Merzbow lists the following instruments in the liner notes: bowed instruments played with piano wire, ring modulator, tapes, feedback mixer, effects, percussion, and turntable; I also detect some synthesizer and guitar feedback.
now played backward from a tape at approximately half the original speed; the fifth section (24:00-30:07) sees the return of the variable-speed, reversed-motion turntable in the foreground, which gradually becomes the sole sound source (28:00) by the end.

One could interpret this episodic mass of sound as a study in pure timbre, but Akita himself indicates that there is more here than that. Regarding his early work from the 1980s, Akita states,

My first motivation to create sound was the ‘anti-use’ of electronic equipment—broken tape recorders, broken guitars and amps etc. I thought I could tap into the secret voice from the equipment itself when I lost control. That sound is the unconscious libido of the equipment. I tried to exert control over this with more powerful processing. With the Processed Audio Mixer I was able to control feedback. The feedback sounds of equipment is a central concept for Merzbow. I was an extreme materialist. Feedback automatically makes a storm of noise and it’s very erotic like (Reichian) orgone energy or the magnetic expiation of electronics.  

The “anti-use” of musical equipment supports my concept of expressive noise as the mutually dependent Other of music. Although there are many examples of abused equipment in music—guitar amplifiers driven to distortion, for example—this practice has more to do with coloring explicitly musical sound than misusing the equipment as an end unto itself. If a “use” of musical equipment is to make music, then the “anti-use” of equipment must be to make non-music. Non-music could be many things, but in this case, it is expressive noise. In this quote, we also see Akita speaking metaphorically about the “secret voice” of the electronics that he used. Figuratively speaking, if the secret voice of a tape player is audible only when the equipment is malfunctioning, then this is tantamount to accessing the unconscious of the machine. This colorful metaphor parallel’s Merzbow’s own views of noise and music, where music is the structure and noise is the beyond of structure that exists as a potential threat to the smooth functioning of the system.

641 Akita quoted in Woodward, 52.
Eroticism functions on two levels in Ecobondage: at the thematic level, we find an elaborate poster featuring sadomasochistic imagery, folded and bundled with the original vinyl release; and at the conceptual level, we find Merzbow creating the conditions for a libidinal economy of expressive noise. Apropos of Merzbow’s reference to Wilhelm Reich, we might figuratively consider electronics as filled with potential energy, dammed up by the limited release of conventional use, waiting to explode in an orgasmic burst of noise. Akita further cites Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish as an inspiration for Ecobondage, a word that he translates as “bondage economy.”\textsuperscript{642} If the electronics are crammed with orgone energy, then Merzbow’s role as artist is the management of this sexualized energy, attempting to keep it in check while occasionally allowing orgasmic detonations of aural energy. Amidst the ruble of malfunctioning machines, found sounds, and junk, Ecobondage unfolds like an orgy of base material.

4.2 Pulse Demon

In many ways, Pulse Demon is the quintessential Merzbow album.\textsuperscript{643} It is perhaps the most concentrated example of the deafening swarm of acoustical noise, feedback, and distortion that defines Merzbow’s sound to the casual listener. It is also among the most monolithic works in his extensive oeuvre, with every second filled to maximum density to the point that very little emerges beyond the cacophony, thus making it an extremely difficult work to talk about. Here, more than with any other album, one is tempted to consider the expressive noise as pure experience beyond comprehension, but if we resist this urge, a number of issues begin to appear.

I propose two ways of listening to expressive noise that approaches a theoretical maximum of non-musicality: first, one may listen analytically, searching for form, patterns,

\textsuperscript{642} Akita quoted in Woodward, 47.

\textsuperscript{643} Merzbow, Pulse Demon, Release Entertainment RR 6937-2, 1996, compact disc.
familiarity, and technical explanations regarding the sound production method; second, one may listen holistically; no less actively, but with a broader scope appreciating large-scale movement and overall affect, often searching for meaning through metaphor. Typically, those who have written on Merzbow begin with the tacit assumption that there is nothing in the sound other than randomness and chaos, but if we listen analytically, this is far from true. We must not mistake a lack of musical logic for a lack of a unique internal logic within expressive noise. As long as we insist on trying to hear expressive noise as “strange music,” we are doomed to repeat the myth of the ineffability of Merzbow. In describing “sonic noise,” Voegelin writes,

Noise is formless yet spatial in its concentration on the listening body. It avoids the autonomy of category by being its dialectical opposite, but demands aesthetic autonomy in its sheer insistence on being heard, alone. In noise I hear nothing but the phenomenon under consideration. I cannot even hear myself but am immersed in a sonic subjectivity, more felt than heard.644

The physicality of expressive noise is central to its essence, and the raw power of the sound does tend to flatten any sense of space that one typically finds in music; however, Voegelin relinquishes too much agency as a listener. To hear nothing but the sonic phenomenon is to deny the considerable power of the mind (both conscious and unconscious) to find meaning beyond pure timbre. Even if a hypothetical listener was completely without sonic index—an impossible reality to anyone who has ever heard distortion in heavy metal or even radio static—this does not preclude the possibility of a phenomenological reference point.

To illustrate these two modes of listening, let us take the track “Spiral Blast” as an example. Starting with the analytical perspective, we notice some general features right away. Every sound here is driven to distortion beyond all recognition of its source. Merzbow lists metals, noise electronics, audio generators, shortwaves, synthesizers, and tapes in the album credits, but the sources are almost irrelevant. Under normal musical circumstances, distortion is

644 Voegelin, 67.
an additive process wherein a sound is transformed, but in this case, the distortion is so intense that any semblance of the original waveform disappears and the focus becomes the electroacoustic effect itself. The one original source that matters here is that of acoustical noise (e.g., white noise, pink noise), which has a stable essence and remains recognizable, even as it goes through the reductive process of acoustic filtration. Hegarty writes, “Analogue equipment can be overdriven, brought to noise, and layers of their sound recombined without suggesting tonal relations between separate parts. The limitations of the machinery are precisely what allow the possibility of a going-beyond (like transgression’s relation to taboo).” The sounds are aurally transgressive against the auditor, but they are intrinsically transgressive against themselves as well. The excess is only possible because the electronic equipment can be abused and made to fulfill an unintended function. In a dazzling display of Bataillian eroticism, the correct function of Merzbow’s electronics is obliterated by the wasteful expenditure of expressive noise.

From a synchronic perspective, we find difference created out of register, where high and low register sounds jump out synecdochically from amidst the clamor. Beyond the foregrounded high and low register sounds, it becomes quite difficult to differentiate between sounds. One has the sense of a general fullness, but describing the actual acoustic phenomena of the fullness exceeds the faculties of conscious perception, a point I will discuss from the holistic listening position. I believe, however, that explaining exactly what is happening is far less important than explaining how it functions.

From a diachronic perspective, there is interplay between periodic and aperiodic sounds—bristling distortion versus the shriek of feedback. Lest we endorse the conventional wisdom that holds Merzbow as random, unstructured noise, we must resist the urging of

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645 Hegarty, 158.
Voegelin to capitulate to the phenomenological experience, for careful listening reveals a surprisingly lucid three-part form. During the first part, Merzbow introduces the sounds and modification techniques that will continue in the following sections, each in a discrete block immediately adjacent to the next. We hear blocks of filtered white noise, a steady bass tone, amplitude modulation in the subharmonic spectrum (i.e., tremolo), and thick bands of distortion. The second part (ca. 1:00-3:35) features the steady bass tone introduced in the first part as an ascending ostinato lasting around five seconds. This ascending bass ostinato is the central theme of “Spiral Blast,” beginning imperceptibly and repeating until it is not only present, but also dominant in the texture. Merzbow transitions seamlessly between the techniques of the first section as the higher voice in the second section, moving between feedback, filtered noise, and tremolo, acts in a crazed counterpoint to the bass ostinato. The third part arrives abruptly (3:36-4:30) with the total disappearance of the ostinato. At this point, the texture is dramatically thinned to the point that we notice tiny slices of silence in between high-pitched vibrato. Finally, a looped sample—sped up to the point of unintelligibility—arrives to form the basis for the final minute of “Spiral Blast,” broken up by periodic noise blasts. Compositional logic suggests that the sped up loop is probably the bass ostinato returning, but this is impossible to verify.

The inclusion of music terminology is not meant to suggest that we view expressive noise as “strange music,” as I have argued above, but I do mean for them to suggest that fundamental aesthetic principles (e.g., formal design, form, repetition) are evident here. While none of these principles are necessary conditions for art, it is important to understand their function in at least some of Merzbow’s expressive noise. It is very easy to stop listening at the timbral level, but this misses a depth that has escaped many listeners. One could also argue that the above analysis demystifies Merzbow to the extent that it comes under the power of the signifier—moving from
the Real to the Symbolic—and that I have turned the expressive noise into music through some sort of hermeneutic alchemy. This too misses the point of what I am arguing. The goal of a fuller understanding of expressive noise on its own terms should not imply an ontological shift, necessarily.

Changing now to a holistic listening position, the first thing we notice is the volume, which would almost go without saying for a work of expressive noise if not for the fact that Merzbow intentionally recommends a mastering level of 1-2dB higher than the industry standard to his mastering engineers. As described above, due to the use of all of the PML, and due to the nature of the recorded sound, *Pulse Demon* will play both objectively and subjectively louder than a conventional CD. A listener may choose to enervate the work by drastically lowering the volume to begin and gradually increasing it over time, but then the listener will lose the transgressive power of the listening experience. The shock of the initial loudness is a remarkable effect that does not wear away as quickly as one might think, for Merzbow’s expressive noise is always in excess of expectations. The Real comes into play when the subject has an experience that is not mediated by the Symbolic—in this case, a CD that is surprisingly and uncomfortably loud—and this shock to the senses is only intensified by the lack of any accumulation of volume; the sound simply starts, blasting us from the very first second as if being hit by a truck that is already speeding along at 60 miles per hour. The effect of the immediate sonic explosion also serves to keep us off balance well into the track because there is a constant deferral of aural recovery—there is literally no time to stop and contemplate what has happened before something else, equally jarring, occurs.

Moving on from the initial moment of listening, we are faced with a growing sense of bewilderment as it becomes apparent that the aural actuality of “Spiral Blast” is not only

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646 Woodward, 55.
relentless in its denial of any surface-level musical logic, but is constantly shifting faster than we can comprehend. We can detect levels of macrostructure through analytical listening, but there is the sense that there is an extant microstructure beyond our conscious perception—the background fullness of indefinable acoustical energy. In addressing a striking, yet unfathomable and seemingly unordered aesthetic phenomenon, Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue speak of the sharawadji effect—something that is “unexpected and transports us elsewhere, beyond the strict representation of things, out of context. In this brutally present confusion, we lose both our senses and our sense.”

The sharawadji effect was first introduced in Europe in the 17th century by travellers attempting to describe the beautiful and perceptually random gardens of China, but reintroduced in the sense that Augoyard and Torgue propose, it is a perfect term to describe the effect of confronting the Real in art. Although the mind boggles at the thought of comprehending expressive noise in the structural manner that we often employ when listening to music, the sharawadji effect puts a label on the effect of pleasurable surrender to the Real. It is the Kantian sublime; the boundless, seemingly formless object of indescribable power. From a Lacanian perspective, we might understand the sharawadji effect as operating directly on the unconscious. Linguistic statements often go unrecognized by the conscious mind, but are understood perfectly by the subject’s unconscious; likewise, expressive noise may confound one’s ability to explain its effect, but it is, nevertheless, a powerful experience filled with meaning at an unconscious level.

Once we combine excessive volume with the sharawadji effect, we arrive at something loud, baffling, and compelling that is imbued with a quasi-sadomasochistic libidinal energy.

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Naturally, one could listen to “Spiral Blast” at low volume, thereby conquering the sonic energy, but the listening experience is so much greater when one fully submits to the work, acknowledging the psychical and physical transgressions and embracing them. Bataille found marital sex used for procreation to be the opposite of eroticism because it is both condoned by the restricted economy and intentionally productive. Eroticism is the result of friction with the restricted economy that results in a wasteful expenditure, and therefore, to listen to Merzbow quietly is to render the expressive noise polite and impotent.

Bataille’s transgressive, pornographic literature communicates a sense of the general economy by depicting bizarre erotic expenditures, but understood through Lacanian theory, Bataille has not actually transcended the Symbolic because he must use language to communicate his ideas. This is the basic problem that Lacan finds in trying to speak about the Real, which leads him to search for non-linguistic models (e.g., algebra, topology) of understanding. Unlike Bataille, Merzbow is not beholden to the almighty Signifier and what Merzbow lacks in the specificity of language, he makes up for in the power of experience. Merzbow bypasses language in a radical manner that dehisces the listening subject’s Symbolic, allowing the Real to appear. His expressive noise, therefore, is not a symbolic description of transgression like we find in Bataille, but rather it is the transgression itself.

4.3 Karasu: 13 Japanese Birds Part 4

The work of Merzbow’s fourth phase presents a new set of difficulties because, at one level, he appears to be doing something completely different (i.e., making music about something comparatively tangible), but as significant as this move toward a concrete conceptual center is, his expressive noise continues to find its power through transgression. It would be easy to contrast Merzbow’s first three phases with his fourth phase using the absolute/program music
distinction, as his music now appears to be explicitly about animal rights. Following this line of reasoning, one would conclude that from the 1980s to 2002, Merzbow’s work was pure noise with no meaning other than its own sound color, while from 2002 onward Merzbow’s music is finally about something other than itself. Not only is this a superficial distinction, but it also fails to say anything interesting about either side of his oeuvre. Worst of all, it suggests a sonic cathexis to an aural actuality that, in truth, has not changed a great deal either in terms of compositional style or in terms of physical and psychical listener experience. If the crazed intensity of Bloody Sea (2006) is heard as a scream of anguish regarding the slaughter of whales, and if the sound of Bloody Sea is not drastically different than Venereology (1994), does that not imply that the motivation for Venereology was also anger, and if so, what was the object of the anger? This goes against anything Akita has said regarding his own work, for he constantly returns to the idea that his expressive noise is simply different than mainstream music. Heavy metal bands may use loudness and distortion to signify power, anger, grief, or violence, but it is a mistake to generally apply this same process of musical signification to Merzbow’s expressive noise, especially because the expressive noise is far more sonically transgressive than heavy metal. He may borrow some of the codes of heavy metal, but the idea of suddenly hearing Merzbow as a one-man metal band with noise generators instead of guitars truncates the hermeneutic process.

Some have argued that noise is inherently malleable and will adapt to any sort of program that one wants to place on it.\(^\text{648}\) This argument seems to concede that any possibility of meaning in expressive noise is necessarily extrinsic, but as long as we continue to read expressive noise as strange music, we will be blind to the unique experience it provides. When one insists on a rigid distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic meaning, it quickly spirals out of control. If we hold

\(^{648}\) Bailey, 178.
the narrow view that denotational meaning is paramount, then we must lessen the importance of meaning created through experience that cannot be described through linguistic units, and we further ignore the possibility of meaning decoded by the unconscious completely beneath the level of conscious perception. Moreover, when we apply the same rationale to linguistics, we find that the signified/signifier relationship is no less sacrosanct thereby leaving us in hermeneutic void.

How then might we interpret Merzbow’s fourth phase? Perhaps his stance on animal rights is a framing device functioning similar to an expressive title given to a piece of music or a painting. It suggests a context for interpretation without rigidly determining meaning, which is to say that even though a specific ethical stance is different from a general idea of eroticism through sound, they function in a similar manner. Merzbow encourages thought about animal rights while we experience his expressive noise, even if he does not necessarily wish to represent it sonically. Where Ricoeur describes music exhibiting a certain existential-ontological mood or humor in lieu of denotational reference, we can say the same about the way that Merzbow’s ostensive content is manifest in the aural actuality of his music.

We might consider the countercultural component of veganism in Japan. Because there was no widespread movement supporting animal rights and a vegan lifestyle in the early 2000s when Merzbow was first exploring these themes, his condemnation of animal products goes against mainstream society, much in the way that his expressive noise goes against mainstream music. I am not sure that veganism and expressive noise are comparable in terms of transgressive power, but they may originate from the same kernel of rebellion within Merzbow. For example, on the track “Bird Killer Governor Ishihara Deserves to Die” on *Kamo: 13 Japanese Birds Part

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649 See chapter one, pages 16-17.
6, Merzbow states, “A Tokyo Governor named Ishihara is promoting the extermination [of] savage doves and crows. I [have] written a protest song for this shit policy.” Despite the egalitarian motives of Merzbow’s vegan turn, his message continues to be powerfully riotous.

Once Merzbow transitioned to a computer-based setup, his move toward animal rights activism soon followed, and so I will examine a selection from his *13 Japanese Birds* cycle as a way of talking about both issues. While there are no direct or explicit music/noise connections, Merzbow cites Olivier Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’Oiseaux* (1958) as the central inspiration. Both are expansive, thirteen-part works by men who have a particular fondness for birds, Messiaen being an avid ornithologist and Merzbow raising a sizable number of birds in a pergola on his property. I would even argue that in a very few places, Merzbow creates aestheticized birdsong similar to the way Messiaen transposed birdsong to Western music notation. Beyond that, we are faced with the difficulty of reading a specific ethical stance from the abstraction of expressive noise. Merzbow frames the issue with evocative track titles including, “Requiem for the 259,000 Quails Culled at a Farm in Toyohashi,” “Once the Human Meat Is Done, Cut It Up and Mix with the Vegetable Curry,” and “Burn Down Research Facilities,” as well as with his cover art, but as with *Pulse Demon*, the listener remains under the power of the sharawadji effect.

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651 Ibid.

652 “Currently I have bantams, fantails pigeons, Ukokkei fowls (silky fowl) and duck. Some of them were brought in from hospitals and other activists. They are domestic poultry as well as ornamental birds. I keep them in a pergola. They are part of my family. While I’m away on tour, my family takes care of them.” Akita interviewed by Andre Pluskwa, *Kochen Ohne Knochen*, accessed May 30, 2012. http://blog.merzbow.net/?search=Kochen+Ohne+Knochen

653 These titles come from parts five, six, eleven, and twelve, respectively.
Each of the thirteen parts was recorded within the span of thirteen months and there is a strong sense of continuity between them, especially because of the use of live drums on each volume. I have chosen part four simply out of personal preference, but this analysis could apply to much of the more than thirteen hours of music contained within the cycle. Karasu is the Japanese word for crow, which presents two possible directions based on species: the common crow, often considered a pest due to its resilience in an urban environment and its tendency to cover said environments with excrement,\textsuperscript{654} and the raven, with its sinister presence in mythology. Merzbow appears to evoke both of these species of corvus simultaneously. The album covers of the cycle range in tone, but Karasu is easily the most disquieting with its featureless silhouettes perched overhead on a black and white picture of a desolate, leafless tree. At the same time, Merzbow seems to want to redeem the common crow stating, “people hate these birds and abuse them because they are considered harmful birds. But it’s very insignificant harm, as all they do is shit and scatter garbage. I think human beings cause more environmental disruption.”\textsuperscript{655} Thus, Merzbow encourages us to hear the expressive noise as both sinister and as a vigorous defense of a harmless bird.

The cycle as a whole revisits some elements from Merzbow’s musical past, including live drum set, heavy metal, and a healthy dose of free jazz, all of which are evident in Karasu, and all of which reinforce Merzbow radicantism.\textsuperscript{656} One of the most notable features is the sense of spaciousness that is occasionally present. The typical Merzbow recording is completely dry, with no added reverb effects to suggest physical space. The listener is confronted by overwhelming presence. However, there is a rare sense of spaciousness at various points on each of the three

\textsuperscript{654} Akita quoted in Batty, 2009.

\textsuperscript{655} Ibid.

long tracks—“Argus,” “Stone the Crows,” and “Morgue.” At times, the mix sounds open, with each element occupying its own space, which allows the listener to perceive depth and timbral distinction in a way that is very different from the constant onslaught of frequencies that make listening to *Pulse Demon* so taxing. The expressive noise retains its transgressive power, but at the same time, the sharawadji effect is somewhat lessened by the clarity of the mix. At other times, the sounds fill up the space and create the claustrophobic sensations that typify Merzbow’s sound, but when the more lively, spacious sound is paired in the same track with the more dry, dead sound, each sonic presentation is affected.

On a conventional recording space is used to suggest a live performance, and even if the musicians recorded their parts at different times in sound isolation booths, the producer will carefully craft the spatial sound architecture so as to suggest live performance. By moving between live sound and dead sound, Merzbow foregrounds a musical technique that, much like acoustic noise, is supposed to remain hidden.

The free jazz influence manifests most clearly in Merzbow’s drum set performances, which ground the listener in something sonically familiar, despite its arrhythmic nature. His style evokes free jazz drummers such as Han Bennink and Rashid Ali with a barrage of non-metric thunder that forcefully propels a general sense of rhythmic drive without suggesting any localizable rhythmic pattern.657 Akita recalls, “I saw the Cecil Taylor Unit during 1973 in Tokyo. It was my first time and I was very shocked, they played a one and a half hour piece called ‘Akisakila.’ […] ‘Akisakila’ was one of the greatest noise experiences I’ve ever had.”658 Merzbow’s drum set work resembles that of free jazz drummers on a moment-to-moment basis, but if we take the entirety of an extended track like “Argus” (19:40) into consideration, it

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657 Han Bennink is cited as an influence in Woodward, 10.

658 Akita quoted in Woodward, 45.
becomes evident that his performance also moves in stages, similar to his performances on electronics. The majority of Merzbow’s albums from his analogue phase onward reflect a pattern of creating a timbral configuration and moving it through multiple stages, transforming the timbral landscape through varying sound production techniques. In much the same way, Merzbow’s percussion performances move through stages, at some points concentrating on a collection of toms, at other points focusing on bass drum and ride cymbal, or any combination thereof.

As for the general sonics, the first six minutes involve drums working in tandem with a low frequency ostinato to form a chaotic substratum over which the middle and high frequency bands come into play, changing at a much faster rate. One could almost hear this as a standard guitar, drums, and bass configuration with free jazz sensibilities, pulverized by Merzbow’s expressive noise aesthetic. Another novel feature is the presence of discernible frequencies from some of the synthesized sounds. Throughout most of his analogue phase, Merzbow favors inharmonic sounds, but in his third and fourth phases, pitched sounds begin to appear, albeit not in any determined harmonic relationship and not with any artificial octaval divisions. He tends to sweep these pitched sounds through the frequency spectrum, sliding from frequency to frequency without landing anywhere in particular. An interesting product of the presence of simple waveforms is that in the upper frequency range, they begin to sound like birdsong. The rapid fluctuations of pitch within a limited range, coupled with the track titles and imagery, evokes a certain avian essence, even if the pitch contour does not resemble anything found in nature. The crow’s call, after all, is but a humble utterance: *caw*.

“Stone the Crows,” the second track on *Karasu*, is different and is actually instructive in understanding Merzbow’s compositional logic. It is easy to get lost in the barrage of noise on
CDs like *Pulse Demon* because there is so much timbral similarity. An astute listener may pick up on some repeating motives or the transition from one sound source to another, but it is difficult to keep track of the shifts because the varying noise sources blend together into a mass unless one is an extremely attentive listener. On “Stone the Crows,” Merzbow uses some clear tones, often separated by register. Through the piece, we can usually discern an unusually clear low and high register with the middle space taken up by the typical filtered noise. Because of the clarity of tone, it is easier to differentiate between motives, and one can observe how Merzbow shifts between them.

The longest section occurs around the 18-minute mark and involves an ostinato made of a looping rhythm and a downward sweeping tone. This is unusually easy to hear because the texture has thinned substantially. We hear the loop enough times to become familiar with it before other noisier sounds enter and occupy the foreground. From here, Merzbow allows the subsequent sounds to dominate the texture, although if one listens carefully to the submerged background sounds, the ostinato is continually present until the about the 24-minute mark. This same sort of introduction and buildup occurs again and again in the track (and in Merzbow’s work in general), although it is usually harder to hear because the previous section overlaps the new section by up to 30 seconds.

Finally, we must consider how Merzbow’s previous sources of inspiration figure in his newfound fascination with animal liberation. The Vienna Actionists did slaughter animals during some of their material actions, but they did so in the processes of renouncing their humanity, regressing to a sort of pre-Symbolic state favored by the Surrealists, thereby highlighting humankind’s latent animal viciousness lurking under the power of a society beholden to the Signifier. Perhaps Merzbow’s automatism is his way of experiencing (and providing to the
listener the experience of) Bataillian continuity—bursting through the walls of the restricted economy into the realm of animalistic instinct. It can never be a complete regression, however, because animal sexuality is the polar opposite of eroticism as Bataille defines it. To surrender one’s humanity completely is to destroy the Lacanian Law and to cease to exist, for the transgression inherent in a momentary refusal of social, moral, and ethical strictures requires a countering taboo if it is to have meaning. Perhaps Merzbow’s fourth phase is an attempt to go beyond the societies that subjugate animals—to transport the listener to a place beyond the restricted economy to show that it is possible, and to show that the walls of the restricted economy are not as unimpeachable as one might think. If one can transcend them through erotic expenditure, maybe one can transcend them in the tangible realm of animal rights.

### 5.0 Conclusion

Far from an impenetrable, empty sonic presence, we find many approaches toward an understanding of the radical music of Merzbow. Most broadly, Lacan’s concept of desire and the Law create a framework for understanding the transgressive power of expressive noise, especially as Merzbow uses it. Through a traumatic encounter with the Real, we are confronted with the sort of erotic and transgressive release of energy that Bataille conceptualized. Merzbow’s expressive noise pushes us beyond structure, beyond the Symbolic, into the realm of jouissance where we confront the terrifying and endlessly enticing unknowable beyond.

On a more specific level, the culturally and morally transgressive practices of modernist art movements such as the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Actionists help us to understand some of the aesthetic motivations behind Merzbow’s work. He brings these cultural renegades together to create a truly radicant mélange, confounding and enthralling us in equal measure. By tracing Merzbow’s influences through the artistic philosophies of these radical movements, we begin to
understand something of both Merzbow’s philosophy of noise and music, and the reason for the sounds that he creates. His shift in focus toward animal rights adds a new conceptual layer to the post-2002 works, but rather than abandoning the sonic practice of the first two decades of his career, he continues to explore these avenues, now with a more explicitly stated message.

By spending time on an examination of the concept of noise, as I have done in chapter two, and revisiting the concept of expressive noise in the context of Merzbow’s music and attitudes toward the concept of noise, we can move beyond the term “noise music,” without hiding behind it, vaguely, as if everyone already understood what it meant. Expressive noise describes a very powerful experience, but unlike some who have chosen to hold fast to phenomenological description, I believe that the perceptual component is inextricably tied to the greater conceptual issues behind the sonic expression. Far from being music “about” sound or noise, the Bataillian erotic dimension offers both a powerful listening experience and an interesting message about music and its limits.

My discussion of Merzbow as a radical composer situates him within the general field of music as a nomadic force creating disruptions along the outer conceptual shell of music. By combining the various facets of his work that I have explored in this chapter, we can better appreciate his work qua music, as well as his contribution to musical art on a broader scale. As one of the most radical of radical composers, Merzbow challenges fundamental conceptions of music, just as he challenges the listener to experience the jouissance of expressive noise.
Concluding Remarks

I can still remember discovering the music of John Zorn, Diamanda Galás, and Merzbow during my teenage years. Although I had grown accustomed to music that was ostensibly shocking—typically from a moralist perspective—like that of Nine Inch Nails and Rammstein, the impact of hearing Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow for the first time was altogether different. It was more than loud guitars or obscene lyrics; it was a true musically transgressive aural ambush. Although I had neither the musical experience nor the conceptual framework to appreciate what exactly was so wonderfully disquieting, I found it to be incredibly compelling. The crazed energy of Zorn was a sensory overload, the maniacal shrieking of Diamanda Galás was actually alarming, and my first encounter with Merzbow involved a moment of serious panic when I thought that surely my speakers had been ruined by the initial blast of noise. This music, along with a great deal of other radical music that I would discover during this period all held an intangible element of danger and fascination—an intangible feeling that would last for years.

What exactly made this music so compelling and yet so utterly unfathomable? I struggled for years to answer that question. After more than a decade of devouring any even tangentially relevant interviews, articles, and books on these composers, I was not finding satisfying answers as to why this music was so uniquely able to delight and perplex. Certainly the mystery of it drew me in, but I always felt somewhat discouraged at the same time because it was apparently impossible to move beyond the rather crude level of: “this freaks me out, and I love it.”

By the time I embarked on my graduate work in musicology, I was still listening to this music, as enamored of it as ever, and I was frustrated by the general lack of scholarly attention and the insufficiencies of any available methodologies to come to terms with this music. Even though some scholars had begun to write about Zorn, the directions of their research did not lead
to the sort of interpretive answers for which I had been searching. It was now possible to find Zorn albums in certain non-specialty record shops, and it was not impossible to find others who had heard of Merzbow (even if they had not actually *heard* Merzbow), but the general recognition of Zorn, Galas, and Merzbow as leading figures in what was loosely referred to as “experimental” or “avant-garde” music had not translated into scholarly attention or interpretive methods that led to increased understanding in the realm of musical meaning. With Zorn and Merzbow serving as widely recognized leaders of their respective musical milieus, and with Galás earning recognition in a more singular, but no less important capacity, I felt sure that I could not be the only one who wanted to engage with this music at a deeper level. Thus, this study began partially out of passion, partially out of necessity.

While the scant amount of scholarly attention devoted to Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow was part of the problem, the other main issue was methodological. Few of the existing approaches toward musical understanding seemed to move beyond the boundaries of the particular analytical techniques used (e.g., cultural analysis, literary analysis, historical analysis, syntactical pitch analysis), if indeed they could be used at all when attempting to understand radical music. Moreover, otherwise valuable methodologies like socio-historicism tended to shrink and collapse into virtual irrelevancy when confronting this music, for where a socio-historicist reading of a work of more conventional music could use an already existing vocabulary to tie contextual issues to musical features in a rigorous, substantive manner, this method failed to inform more than context without the ability to describe music in terms of pitch, harmony, rhythm, and form. In sum, the absence of appropriate interpretive techniques compelled the creation of new musical concepts.
One of the primary issues in coming to terms with the heterogeneous musical expressions of artists such as Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow is the apparent inability to consider the work of any given radical composer as anything but its own, unique and disparate expressive form. Without a set of reference points, it is impossible to unite the work of composers like Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow except through their difference from conventional modes of musical expression. Through the category of radical music, I offer a unified discursive space, which thereby allows comparative study both between radical music and conventional music, and between various types of radical music.

On first listen, the music of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow does appear to be disparate, but upon closer examination, their respective expressive languages, unique as they may be, share a number of features at a deeper conceptual, if not always sonic, level. During the genesis of the concept of radical music, I considered a wide array of features potentially present in the work of radical composers, and ultimately, eight features emerged as most frequently occurring in the music of Zorn, Galás, Merzbow, and others:

1) Intrinsic transgression

2) Extremism

3) Important conceptual components

4) Lack of institutional support

5) The centrality of timbre

6) The focus on recordings over scores

7) Cultural hybridity

8) Important extra-sonic elements
These features are not a rubric for determining the radicalism of a given work or composer; rather, they are a set of reference points based on commonly occurring features that allow us to consider diverse forms of radical musical expression in relation to one another. The variegated landscape of radical music requires a certain amount of conceptual fluidity and the ability to tolerate expansion and evolution. Undoubtedly, the above list of features will be expanded in accordance with the needs of future studies, just as some of the features may not be useful or applicable depending upon the requirements of the work at hand.

Once the concept of radical music was in place, the next dilemma hindering the understanding of radical music was the rather amorphous delineation amongst concepts of musical sound, non-musical sound, and noise. Because radical music so frequently involves sonic and extra-sonic elements that are far beyond what can unproblematically be identified as musical, it has been necessary to develop a concept that allows one to speak about the relationship of music, non-music, and noise with more precision.

To remedy this problem, I have proposed the concept of expressive noise, which provides a way to think about the transgressive qualities of radical music in terms of both sonic features and aesthetic and cultural deviance. Through the concept of expressive noise, we can begin to speak about certain features of radical music that, until now, have not had any sort of common terminology through which to discuss and compare. After surveying many previous conceptions of noise, I arrived at the following six categories within which definitions tend to fit: acoustic, communicative, subjective, symbolic, transcendent, and phenomenological. Expressive noise potentially includes any of these dimensions either as singular entities or in various combinations, again, according to the requirements of the work at hand. Like radical music,
expressive noise should be considered a fluid concept with the potential for expansion and change in accordance with the needs of a particular interpretation.

The various facets of radical music and expressive noise come together within my approach to musical hermeneutics—the thick interpretation. When one’s goal is to craft a compelling interpretation, it seems most prudent to consider as many perspectives and approaches as the work demands; however, my proposal of a thick interpretation hermeneutic is not an invitation to practice a sort of haphazard theoretical bricolage where bits of ideas are excerpted free of their theoretical context and thrown together in a mélange of surfaces. Rather, a successful thick interpretation must be theoretically rigorous, and one must take great care in finding and demonstrating affinities between the various theoretical concepts that come into play, as I have tried to do in each of my case studies.

Finally, in this study, I sought to provide an extended, theoretically rigorous introduction of Lacanian concepts to music. Although there have been some applications of Lacan to music in recent years, there has not been anything involving a systematic introduction to his basic ideas within the musicological discourse. Despite the pervasive (and specious) notion that Lacanian theory is both inscrutable and insular, I have shown how it can function alongside other theoretical paradigms and contribute productively toward a compelling thick interpretation. Moreover, it has proven to be a particularly valuable theoretical system when grappling with any sort of non-standard, transgressive, or bizarre mode of expression. Because the theory is focused so squarely on making sense of the nonsensical, it is apropos when facing a musical expression that confounds any conventional path toward understanding.

Ultimately, the success of a thick interpretation, as well as the advantages of using Lacanian theory, will be judged by the cogency of the interpretations to which they lead. In each
of my case studies, the concepts of radical music and expressive noise provided a discursive environment from which to begin crafting my thick interpretations, while various Lacanian concepts provided ways of understanding some of the more bizarre sonic elements that had, until now, vigorously resisted explanation.

John Zorn’s *Astronome* is a gauntlet of screaming, distortion, and animalistic aggression, and at around forty-five minutes in length, the work challenges the listener to persevere through seemingly unending intensity. From this position, merely listening to the work in its entirety is difficult enough without even attempting to understand what one is hearing. The intensity of the volume and the aggressive tone of the music scarcely leave room for one to collect enough coherent thoughts to reflect on what is happening; however, after constructing a thick interpretation, the work began to unfold revealing hidden layers of meaning changing *Astronome* from a mere “vocalise opera” to a fascinating meditation on, and ritual for, creativity itself. Zorn’s dedicatees—Edgard Varèse, Aleister Crowley, and Antonin Artaud—each contributed to various facets of the interpretation in both musical and thematic capacities. The addition of the writings of Paracelsus as well as Zorn’s own musings on the act of artistic creativity led to the metaphor of artistic creation as an alchemical process. The addition of Lacan’s concept of the Real then tied everything together because it showed that the trauma of the work is not merely aesthetic, but is also a psychical trauma enacted upon the auditor. With these elements in play, I concluded that *Astronome* is both about a ritual of creativity and is the purification ritual of creativity itself.

On first listen, Diamanda Galás’s *Wild Women with Steak Knives* is ostensibly a formless expanse of bizarre vocal sounds, but a hermeneutic approach uncovered a surprising level of meaning within the work. While textual analysis and Galás’s history of social activism suggested
a connection to feminine (if not explicitly feminist) philosophy on a somewhat explicit level, there are very few actual linguistic elements in the work, and thus an interpretation based solely upon these few textual clues would be rather unconvincing, especially if there was no way to tie them to the aural actuality of the work. In light of the fact that the bulk of Galás’s vocal expression in *Wild Women* consists of nonsense sounds, Lacan’s concept of feminine jouissance helped reveal these sounds as an expression beyond the Symbolic, which was further supported by the feminine philosophies of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. On one level, the theoretical paradigms of Cixous and Kristeva are antithetical to those of Lacan, but further analysis demonstrated a surprisingly harmonious relationship between Cixous and Kristeva’s concepts of femininity and Lacan’s concept of sexuation. All three thinkers contributed toward the idea of a radical mode of feminine expression that transcends normative phallogocentrism, and in this way, the nonsense vocal utterances began to take on meaning apart from their timbral makeup. Finally, Galás’s connection to Maniat lament practices, and specifically the concept of *ponos*, tied the various textual and psychoanalytic elements together to create a coherent and illuminating thick interpretation leading to an understanding of the work as a subversive expression of feminine power—an *écriture féminine*—that is also about feminine power.

Merzbow poses the greatest challenge because his work is so actively contrary to conventional music both in terms of the absence of traditional musical features and in terms of his anti-musical compositional intent. Throughout his career, Merzbow has remained steadfast in his musical iconoclasm issuing forth sonic challenges to anyone who might define music by any sort of convention of tonality, beauty, or even musicality. While this assessment is valid, it belies the fact that Merzbow has created a unique and carefully considered expressive language that is much larger than the sort of straightforwardly anti-musical readings that are often used to explain
away his music in lieu of actually confronting it. I found that Lacan’s theory of desire and the Law created an interesting framework for understanding Merzbow’s use of expressive noise. With the addition of Georges Bataille’s theory of erotic transgression, I could then read Merzbow’s work as an expression of jouissance—an aural erotic experience that transcends the Symbolic and brings the auditor into a traumatic encounter with the Real. Merzbow’s aesthetic influences range from mid-twentieth-century Modernist movements (e.g., Dadaism, Surrealism, Actionism) to Japanese eroticism (especially *kinbaku* and pornography), and these all serve to further illuminate the way that he conceives of his work paradoxically as both music and transgressive anti-music.

*Directions for Future Study*

During the course of this project, a number of tangential issues arose that were beyond the scope of the project, but would merit further study. One such issue concerns Lacanian theory. In a future study, it would be useful to explore additional Lacanian concepts and their relationship to musical expression. My introduction to Lacanian theory in chapter one must be considered preliminary because even though the concepts introduced and used in the above case studies contributed toward successful thick interpretations, it was beyond the scope of the present study to provide an exhaustive survey of Lacan’s work. Although I introduced the most critical and pertinent elements of Lacanian theory, there is much work yet to be done in transposing psychoanalytic concepts to musicological hermeneutics.

A clear direction for further research would be the application of the thick interpretation hermeneutic to other radical works not limited to those by Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow. Composers and bands such as Mika Vainio, Ryoji Ikeda, Sunn O))), and Hijokaidan would all
benefit from this approach. Each radical composer will require a unique hermeneutic construction, but the tools and concepts described herein will provide a foundational method, and from the framework provided in the present study, future thick interpretations can be constructed by changing the particulars according to the needs of the work at hand.

Beyond the work of artists who self-identify as musical composers, it would also be interesting to apply the concepts of radical music and expressive noise to those who self-identify as “sound artists.” Irrespective of the usefulness and legitimacy of sound art as a concept or disciplinary category, scholarship on the work of artists such as Janet Cardiff, Bill Fontana, and Christian Marclay could potentially benefit from the expanded notion of music that radical music and expressive noise provide. As I have argued in the previous pages, the general idea of music can be broad enough to encompass a great deal of expressive sonic practices that share very few features with what is conventionally considered to be musical expression, and as such, I see no reason that a field recording by Stephen Vitiello or a sound installation by Max Neuhaus cannot be understood as musical expression, so long as they are not subjected to a rubric of melody, harmony, and rhythm.

The concepts of radical music and expressive noise were created to address theoretical lacunae that constrained the possibilities of understanding and interpretation of certain streams of music, but they also have potential value to the field of music in general. Because they address the very fringes of musical practice, they also provide a way of thinking about the conceptual periphery of music, which therefore has implications for how one conceives of music that is not radical. In a future study, it would be interesting to explore the ramifications of a more clearly defined musical periphery on more centrally situated musical expression. I no longer feel that it is necessary to be an apologist for radical music, but this hardly constitutes a discursive victory.
for aberrant forms of sonic expression. At this time, it has been absolutely necessary to create the new discursive space that is radical music because the existing hermeneutic models no longer served the sort of music I brought to them; however, with time and increased scholarly attention, a future comparative study between radical and conventional music may expose our conventional conceptions of music more as discursive constructs and less as the timeless criteria that they continue to function as. As long as the discourse of Western music maintains its conceptual continuity based around melody, harmony, rhythm, form, and timbre, the concept of radical music will be necessary. Should this view change, a future study might reveal these forms of sonic expression as only apparently oppositional.

Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps the final question is: have I found answers to satisfy my long quest for greater understanding of this difficult and obscure music? Would my thick interpretations have seemed suitably compelling to a listener like my former self, enraptured by the music and hungry for a better understanding of it? While I do not attempt explain the function of every sound in every work in the way that a syntactical pitch analysis could, in theory, explain the reason for every note in a Bach fugue, I found a way to make sense of each composer’s expressive style in a manner that related directly to actual sonic features of the work without resorting to glossing over the aural actuality as a mere consequence of some more easily expressible explanation at the level of general compositional concept. I found a way to understand why their music sounds the way it does, and that, after all, was one of my most pressing questions. I approached the work looking for deeper meaning, and in each case I was able to find it.
Each of my case studies wrestled with works that were difficult to explain through any sort of existing methodology, but by constructing a thick interpretation, the works began to open up and reveal a new depth of meaning. It is my hope that if the reader has found the concepts of radical music, expressive noise, and thick interpretations convincing, he or she will adapt these ideas to fit the needs of future projects. Above all, I hope that, whatever the value of any methodological innovations offered, the reader has gained a new appreciation for the work of Zorn, Galás, and Merzbow, insofar as their exquisite music is the sine qua non of this entire project.
Appendix A — The Borromean Knot

The Borromean knot is a topological figure that Lacan uses to explain the interrelationship of the three orders of the psyche: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (hereafter, the RSI). Where Lacan used linguistics to speak metaphorically about the RSI, he found knot theory useful insofar as it moved beyond representation—the Borromean knot is the structure itself.

![Borromean knot diagram]

**Figure 2**

The properties of the knot are such that if one of the rings is broken, the formation dissolves and thus demonstrates the interdependence of the RSI. As Malcolm Bowie puts it, “everything that exists ex-ists—has its being in relation to that which lies outside it—and dichotomies and
complementarities are no exception to the rule.” The features that each order excludes serve to define the RSI, and thus they do not function as discrete, autonomous units.

It is also apt insofar as none of the orders take hierarchical precedence over the others. Should the Borromean knot become untied and the rings broken, the subject’s psyche collapses into psychosis; however, a forth ring, known as the sinthome, may artificially hold the knot together in an ad hoc capacity providing the subject with something that he or she may use to artificially maintain psychical constitution. This could take the form of a drug addiction, any manner of compulsive behavior, or even artistic expression.

The three orders are easily distinguished, but a bit of commentary is necessary to explain the significance of the overlapping regions. First, there is the region between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which is where we find meaning. Recall the subject who supposes his or her enunciations to originate in the Imaginary (the level of ego), when in fact that subject has been tricked and the meaning actually originates in the Symbolic. Second, the region between the Symbolic and the Real shows “Phallic Jouissance” (represented by $J_\phi$ in Lacanian algebra), which exists in the Real, but is limited by the Symbolic by the instantiation of the signifier of the name-of-the-father. $J_\phi$ thus represents the subject’s loss upon the acquisition of language. Third, the region between the Imaginary and the Real shows the “Jouissance of the Other” (represented by JA). This is a special non-phallic jouissance available only to women. For Lacan, all men are subject to the phallus—the master signifier—because of the castration complex, but not all women are subject to the phallus, and thus can create an alternate discourse. Finally, object (a) appears in the center of the Borromean knot representing the unattainable object of desire that drives the subject’s psyche.

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