

## How to Think Sound in Itself? Towards a Materialist Dialectic of Sound

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### Abstract

This paper develops an ontological-aesthetic perspective on sound that draws primarily on the works of the philosophers Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Karen Barad. The basic starting point is here, how to think sound in itself, a fundamental question in 20th and 21st century music and sound art. I argue for a dialectical materialism of sound which I set off against a Deleuzian materialism of sound developed by the philosopher Christoph Cox. Instead of identifying sound with a quasi-palpable material stuff, the paper will revolve around the idea of a split or antagonism and a conception of the real as tied to a void, in which neither subject nor object are primary.

### Introduction

*The Karl Marx of our inspiration was sound.*

Morton Feldman

It has become somewhat of a commonplace to characterize the opening shift underpinning electroacoustic music and sound art, as well as contemporary music more generally, as a move towards “sound in itself,” i.e. as an uncovering of a substantially material access to a previously barred sonic dimension. Diverse practical and theoretical approaches to music developed in the 20th and 21st centuries can be seen as different attempts at defining a “materialism of sound”, i.e. as striving to reveal or get through to “sound’s being”. The idea of overcoming representation unites a great number of otherwise dissimilar artistic approaches: The rejection of symbolization asserted by Pierre Schaeffer’s phenomenological *objet sonore*; John Cage’s listening to sounds in themselves; Helmut Lachenmann’s *musique concrète instrumentale*, the increased focus on experience, perception and embodiment in recent sound art; experiments in sonification of inaudible signals; the treatment of audio recordings as “non-representational sound matter” by artists like Francisco López; the Varèsian “liberation of sound”; and the material emergence of timbre and form in the work of a composer like Agostino Di Scipio may serve as examples of artistic practices directed towards grasping the materiality of sound. However, the question of how to think “sound in itself”, of sound’s material and ontological status, is also what fundamentally distinguishes these approaches. Materialism is thus not at all a given, not even in the sciences; its nature is itself object and result of scientific thinking and discovery. As Friedrich Engels already wrote in the 1880s: “with each epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science, materialism has to change its form” (Engels, 1941, p. 26). Hence, the question is not simply one between idealism and materialism, but what materialism may actually mean in philosophy, the sciences, and political and artistic practice.

However, the very idea of sound-in-itself and the primacy of a material understanding of sound have recently also become the object of a number of critiques that attempt to shift the focus towards contextual, discursive and semantic fields of determination. Seth Kim-Cohen's notion of "non-cochlear sonic art" (Kim-Cohen, 2009) as well as recent neo-conceptual tendencies may serve as examples. My work is not part of this line of critique.

In this paper, I want to briefly sketch out what I call a materialist dialectic of sound, an idea that is part of a larger ongoing research project on materiality in compositional thought. It is at once a defense and an assertion of the material nature of sound in connection with the materiality of compositional practice more generally and on the other hand a critique of certain non-dialectical attempts at a "reenchantment" of matter as an inherently creative and vital substance.

In what follows, I will first proceed by way of a critique of a notion of sonic materialism, which was recently proposed by the philosopher Christoph Cox and which I regard as paradigmatic for a certain contemporary Deleuzian "anti-representational" conception of materialism. In the second part of the paper, I will try to outline a concept of sound-in-itself as the real of a compositional process, by drawing on the theorists Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Karen Barad. Instead of identifying sound with a quasi-palpable material stuff, the paper will revolve around the idea of a split or antagonism and a conception of the real as tied to a void, in which neither subject nor object are primary.

## **Vital Matter**

In a 2011 paper titled "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism", philosopher Christoph Cox argues for a new theorizing of (sound) art (Cox, 2011). He starts off with a critique of predominant theoretical approaches focusing on the textual and visual nature of art, which, according to Cox, fail to grasp the material substance of (sound) art works. Instead of reading (sound) art works as complexes of signs and representations, and thereby assigning language a privileged status, Cox argues for a treatment of art works as complexes of material forces that challenge the "dual planes of culture/nature, human/non-human, sign/world, text/matter" (Cox, 2011, p. 148). Cox tries to demonstrate how sound art can disclose a domain outside discourse and question what he describes as a predominant anthropocentrism in contemporary theory that privileges human symbolic interaction. Drawing primarily on Gilles Deleuze and Friedrich Nietzsche, Cox's materialist theory of sound is based on the idea that sound represents nothing, that matter, which is in a constant dynamical flux, is itself creative, and that it "presents a play of sonic forces and intensities" (Cox, 2011, p. 153). For Cox, sound is grounded "in the patterns of becoming immanent to nature" (Cox, 2011, p. 150). Nature is thus not the opposite of human culture, but is itself understood as artistic and creative. It is creative self-organization, from chemical reaction to crystal formation to organic life. Cox draws on Nietzsche, who describes his concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as "artistic energies [Mächte] which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist – energies in which nature's art impulses [Kunsttriebe] are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way" (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 5). For Cox, sound art constitutes a shift, which opens up a virtual dimension of the sonic. While music, for Cox, is still too much tied to the idea of notation, which is based on arresting the fluidity of sound and elevating the representational concept over its actualization, sound art can tap into the unconscious sonic flux of nature itself. Theories that focus on signification, linguistic concepts of difference, and representation

therefore appear to remain within the confinements of an idealist conception of meaning and, hence, cannot think this anonymous sonic flux, which sound art works to reveal.

However, isn't Cox's ontological-aesthetic attempt at overcoming anthropocentrism precisely an anthropomorphizing of matter as a palpable and creative force? Cox, like many of his fellow Deleuzians, seems to construct animism in the name of materialism, i.e. a reenchantment of matter, which rejects modern science's disenchantment of the material world, and rejection of any unifying concept of nature. The Deleuzian philosopher Jane Bennett, for example, describes her "vital materialism" in her recent book *Vibrant Matter* like this:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp (Bennett, 2010, p. 122).

This radical dynamical monism, which is based on the One, the univocity of being, the one matter-energy, insists on the vital, positive creativity of matter. Instead of being what challenges the priority of the ideal, matter thus becomes itself idealized and anthropomorphized. Art, in its dealing with matter is thus oriented towards revealing matter's immanent creative vital force. It is thus paradoxically not aimed at the material as such, but at ascending to the virtual by means of the material. As Deleuze writes, "music molecularizes sound matter and in so doing becomes capable of harnessing non-sonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 343). While, for Cox, Bennett, or Deleuze, art is never representational and the affects it produces are in a sense immanent to matter, one should not lose sight of the fact that this form of "materialism" – seemingly so tangible and concrete – is one which is ultimately directed towards escaping ephemeral matter towards the infinity of the virtual, the will or drive animating matter. For Deleuze, art is therefore a procedure of de-materialization and spiritualization of matter, for it is, as he writes, "the ultimate goal of life, which life cannot realize by itself [...] Nature or life, still too heavy, have found in art their spiritual equivalent" (Deleuze, 2010, p. 100). In line with this, Deleuze reads the carnal physicality in the works of painter Francis Bacon precisely as lines of flight escaping material finitude. As much as I concur with Cox's criticism of representational forms of analysis and interpretation of music and sound art, the reenchantment of nature or vital matter-energy as creative force ultimately de-materializes matter by spiritualizing it.

## Sound as the Real

If sound matter is thus neither to be reduced to an ideal perceptual object nor to be regarded as the actualization of some non-material ideal, nor to be identified with a substantialized, palpable, physical creative matter, we need to proceed from the inner split itself. The form of materialist dialectics of sound that I want to outline here is one which gives primacy to compositional practice as a discursive-material process, i.e. as a form of thought as practice that continuously redraws the cut between sound and its description.

However, this dialectic is not understood as creating the unity of opposites nor as the gesture of a great reconciling synthesis, but as the inscription of a constitutive gap into the One itself. The Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek develops a form of materialism that revolves around the idea of a constitutive incompleteness of matter. Instead of being based on a creative positive concept of matter, materialism is thus much rather determined by negativity; there is

a structural void, an impossibility of closure, a gap, or constitutive blind spot, which evades us. Žižek connects this gap to Lacan's register of the real. As he writes: "the status of the Real is purely parallaxic and [...] it has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective" (Žižek, 2006, p. 26). This parallaxic status of the real becomes visible with regard to sound-in-itself, when one considers the various attempts of grasping it in terms quantifiable acoustic descriptions, in terms of perception, of symbolization, or of "sound matter". As Žižek writes, "the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly, but only through the lenses of a multitude of symbolic fictions, virtual formations", and thus the, "radical antinomy which seems to preclude our access to the Thing is already the Thing itself" (Žižek, 2006, p. 26).

The move that centers on the antimony itself averts any substantialization of the real as something "behind" the symbolic and it rejects the simplifying notion that notated Western art music remains within idealistic symbolizations, whereas sound art and the legacy of *musique concrète* have overcome symbolization and passed on to sound-in-itself. In his description of sound as asignifying background noise, Cox draws on Friedrich Kittler, who describes media-technological developments of sound recording in terms of the Lacanian registers of the real and the symbolic. Regarding the fundamental shift sparked by the invention of audio recording technology, Kittler writes: "The Real takes the place of the Symbolic [...] That is the depth of the gulf separating Old European alphabetism from mathematical-physical notation" (Kittler, 1999, p. 25). The sonic real is thus understood as an infinite, gapless, and undifferentiated multiplicity, an asignifying noise, which is "killed by the letter" and reduced to a finite set of symbols. When the sonic phenomenon inscribes itself into a wax plate without previous symbolization, the musical-symbolic notion of sound is being shattered. According to Kittler, the means of recording and transmission of sound thus form non-symbolic accesses to sound-in-itself. Kittler's idea of the replacement of the symbolic by the real and Schaeffer's *objet sonore* share a rejection of the reducing abstractions of notation and music theory. Schaeffer wrote that sound was to be constructed concretely, thus immediately and not-theoretically and without reference to symbolizations, which conceive of sound merely as abstract "intellectual creations" (Schaeffer, 1974, pp. 18-19). The sonic real killed by the letter was to be unearthed.

The real as "what resists symbolisation absolutely" (Lacan, 1988, p. 66), as Lacan puts it, is here opposed to sound description, whose differential, symbolic, and always reductive structure, cannot grasp the real. But this stark opposition of symbolic signifier and external real, which thus conceives of sound-in-itself as preceding symbolization, approaches a Kantian Thing in itself, an unknowable and external X, which is what Žižek tries to avoid by identifying the antinomy barring access to the Thing with the Thing itself. Lacan rejected the equation of the register of the real with a transcendental object beyond the symbolic. Therefore an immanent and not a foundational conception of the real that is covered by symbolization, would undermine the notion that attempts of musical symbolization, such as notation, tempered tuning, and parametrization, bar the access to sound-in-itself.

Every language or symbolic order contains gaps, exceptions, and impossibilities, for there is no total set of all signifiers, no complete symbolic order. Every attempt at a total symbolization remains incomplete. There is always a remainder, a residue, which reveals the inconsistency of the symbolic. However, the real is not an originary in-itself beyond the symbolic as what language cannot grasp, the symbolic network touches the real in its attempt to grasp it. As Bruno Bosteels writes vis-à-vis Alain Badiou's reading of Lacan in his book *Theory of the Subject*: "Lacan's materialism, from a politico-philosophical perspective, would

thus lie in an undaunted insistence on some traumatic kernel of antagonism that always-already fissures every social reality” (Bosteels, 2006, p. 140).

This objective impasse or impossible point, the symptomatic real of a situation, is precisely the “pass” for the subject, or the point from where an artistic intervention operates, where it encounters the real. If we understand the real as the “impossible” of a situation, an artistic intervention – the creation of a new possibility or an achievement of the impossible – is a moving of the real. And this breach, the determination of the determination, i.e. neither a reduction to the place, nor a vindication of original purity, but a displacement of the place, a crossing of the limit, is opened up by a formalization (Badiou, 2009, p. 30). Formalization, i.e. the creation of form in connection to a compositional model, is not directed towards representing something external, nor towards a consistent totalization, but towards the singularization of immanent impasses and impossibilities. As Lacan says: “The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization” (Lacan, 1998, p. 93).

The formalization in the music of composers such as Iannis Xenakis or Karlheinz Stockhausen, for example, while relying heavily on symbolic structures, is entirely non-representational. It is the inscription of sound-in-itself as the real of musical composition, not as physical substance, immediately given perceptual phenomenon, or virtual dimension. Sound-in-itself is thus not merely an effect of discourse and entirely internal to it, nor is it a pre-existent external matter. It is much rather constituted by drawing a border in compositional practice. Feminist theoretic and theoretical physicist Karen Barad describes the constitution of the observed and the observer in the scientific practice of quantum physics. Neither subject nor object are primary, but the result of a cut executed by material arrangements or apparatuses. Barad writes: “the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy. In other words, *relata* do not preexist relations; rather, *relata-within-phenomena* emerge through specific intra-actions.” Thus “apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices-specific material (re)configurings of the world—which come to matter [...] Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 140).

The physicist Niels Bohr himself addresses how this cut between subject and object is constituted performatively through the use of apparatuses in research practice. Bohr’s illustrative example is that of a person with a stick or cane interacting with a room in complete darkness. The person may hold the stick firmly and explore the room, the distances to objects etc., whereby the stick becomes part of the subject, or the person may hold the stick loosely and sense its properties, whereby the stick becomes itself the object of observation. Furthermore we may think of a third use: when the person knows the room and its position better than the stick, it may use the room to measure the length of the stick.

Matter is thus neither pre-existent nor a purely subjective fantasy, it is the objective result of a material-discursive arrangement. We can understand compositional models or sound synthesis systems as apparatuses that determine a border between subject and object that are both result of this border. Thus instead of understanding compositional practice as an anthropocentric practice relying on an imaginary discursive framework that bares access to the real creative material forces of sound-in-itself, we should understand compositional practice and its apparatuses as material (re)configurings of the world.

Christoph Cox describes musical notation as the composer’s way of commodifying the transitory nature of sound, to produce a vendable product, to reify music. Cox – and a number

of other theorists of sound art – essentially depicts notation as an idealist notion in which an abstract conceptual realm of notation is primary. This idea not fails to grasp the complex status of musical notations between sound description, instructions of action, and compositional model and its constant involvement with musical and compositional practice. To ontologize the difference between sound art and music would mean to fail to understand their practice as thought and the materiality with which they operate. As Alain Badiou writes with respect to the Real, “the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance... Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real” (Badiou, 2007, p. 52). Sound-in-itself is thus a constitutive gap of composition itself: There is no sound-in-itself, except in composition.

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