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Ontological Incompleteness and Music by Slavoj Žižek

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Abstract

Slavoj Žižek is known for quoting with the same enthusiasm the main names of Western Philosophy and the classics of pop culture, cinema, literature, and music. Therefore, in such rich theoretical framework, it is possible to glimpse a few connections that the philosopher himself has not yet developed in detail. This essay is precisely about of these connections. More specifically, this essay can be seen as an endeavor to think some of Žižek's writings on music having as a main reference the concept of ontological incompleteness. The philosopher discusses the concept of ontological incompleteness based on several areas, from sciences to movies and literature. Notwithstanding, in this specific case musical examples are left aside. Even though Žižek does not analyse music from the perspective of such concept of ontology, it is possible to argue that Žižek's writings on music already leave some clues and examples that justify an analysis of that kind. That is the task proposed in this critical essay: to present how an approximation between his thoughts on music and on ontology is possible.

Key Words: Slavoj Žižek; F.W.J. Schelling; Music; Ontology

In the public lecture 'Ontological Incompleteness in Painting, Literature and Quantum Physics',¹ Slavoj Žižek presents his ideas on ontology using images, literature texts, movie scenes, TV series and scientific theories as examples. The idea that the universe comes from a void, but a positively charged void – an idea that comes from Schelling – is in the background of the ontology described by Žižek. In that pre-ontological void, some sort of accident must have happened, "something went terribly wrong",² and the universe came into existence. Similar to one of the stories in which Žižek describes the indecision of God minutes before he created the universe, beneath the reality we confront in our everyday lives lies a ground that is not actually all clear and defined. It is as if our reality were not well programmed at the moment it was created, which resulted in certain cracks in its ontology. Through several examples taken from art, philosophy and the sciences, Žižek evokes moments from our phenomenological experience in which we can face those ontological gaps in reality.

The philosophy developed by Schelling, more than mere reference – it is something that is already present in books such as *The Abyss of Freedom* (1997a) and *Less Than Nothing* (2012) – is quoted in this lecture by Žižek as an inspiration for his own thoughts on ontology. Writing about *Die Weltalter*, he (2012: 15-6) says that "[a] whole new universe is disclosed here: the universe of pre-logical drives, the dark 'ground of Being' which dwells even in the heart of God as that which is 'In God more than God Himself'". The proto-cosmos described by Schelling is evoked by Žižek through numerous examples. Therefore, it is not the beginning of the universe that is in the spotlight, but what came before the reality we experience and the kind of structure that is hidden beneath this reality's ontology.

Two places at the extreme poles of the globe are the geographical examples mentioned by Žižek. The philosopher reports how he experiences the incompleteness of reality in places like the extreme south of Argentina, where the landscapes look as if they were still waiting to be finished, just like in the painting *The Death of Marat*, by Jacques-Louis David, in which the background seems to have been left unpainted. In that sense, our phenomenological experience of the universe can be compared to that of someone who truly believes in what he/she sees in a movie scene, but one day has the opportunity to see the movie set and all the tricks employed in order to create the illusion of battles, wars, encounters and so on: they might seem finished events at a

first glance, but there are still many untied knots. Or to evoke a beautiful metaphor used by D.H Lawrence in *Chaos in Poetry*, those cracks that compose the reality we experience are like the scratches artists put in the umbrella that protects us from the existing chaos out there.

The reinterpretation of certain classics and old literary texts can be seen as compelling examples of the little fissures in our universe. The most impressive case from literature mentioned by Žižek is the French writer Pierre Bayard, who analyzed some classic detective stories and argued that, even though they were fictitious, the crimes were still not properly solved by their creators. That is to say, the character who committed the crime according to the author of the story (and, therefore, the creator of the whole plot) is not whom the author says it is. Bayard wrote about the Holmes' case *The Hounds of Baskerville* and Poirot's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and presented strong evidence that the crimes were still open, as if, even though the authors intended to put an end to those cases, there is always some space between the stories' pillars waiting to be explored.

By giving many other examples taken from geography, painting, literature and the sciences, Žižek manages to evoke the phenomenological experience of a universe that is at its core incomplete, as well as the moments in which we can find the cracks in our reality. It is interesting to notice, however, that even though the philosopher does not mention any example related to music in the lecture, we can find the connection between incompleteness and musical pieces in some of Žižek's texts. What is the analysis of Schumann and Bach that Žižek presents in the book *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997b) if not an analysis of absence itself as a fundamental element of music? Are Žižek's comments on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony not precisely about the ontological incompleteness of that piece?

Many of Bach's pieces were composed literally as forms that could be performed by different instruments. Žižek (1997b: 254) described them as some sort of "matrix that does not prescribe all the details of its performance", as in the Goldberg Variations, for example. Each of those pieces, as a musical idea, has its own gap to be filled every time a musician performs it with a specific instrument. Another example of incomplete ontology in Bach's music can be found in the complex polyphonic structure that is, in some pieces, condensed in one solo instrument, like in the second movement of the three sonatas for solo violin, in which the harmony is almost completely missing and the listener must fill in its absence. The melodies played by the solo instrument in those cases are built upon harmonic accompaniments that are not actually present.

Even more evident is the case of Schumann's songs. The Brazilian critic Arthur Nestrovski (2005: 203, our translation) says about the first song of the *Dichterliebe* that "the voice seems to emerge from the piano music with an eagerness of a suppressed desire". Even though there is apparently just a vocal melody accompanied by the piano, when one looks more closely, as Žižek does, the melody is actually somewhere in between the singing and the piano accompaniment. To go even further, Žižek argues that in some of Schumann's pieces the very melody is almost nonexistent, in the sense that it is deeply implicit in the relation between the vocal line and the piano music from which the voice emerges. What is missing becomes the foundation that structures the reality of Schumann's music.

While in the songs the intertwining between piano, voice and lyrics is what structures them and hides their melodies, in the piece for solo piano *Humoresque*, Schumann seems to have composed a song without the vocal melody and the lyrics; a song in which the voice is "reduced to silence, so that all we actually hear is the piano accompaniment" (Žižek 1997b: 261). According to Žižek, the *innere Stimme* written in the score represents precisely that voice reduced to a silent element between the two piano lines. If in Schelling's ontology the pre-ontological void provides the basis for our reality, in *Humoresque* the *innere Stimme* as a missing element works as a ground for the music. The silent melody has a "status of the impossible-real which can only exist in the guise of a writing; that is to say, the physical presence would annihilate the two melodic lines we hear in reality" (Žižek 1997b: 262).

When analyzing *Carnaval*, also by Schumann, Žižek presents another example that can be read based on the relation between proto-reality and reality. The piece is developed around the only section that, as noted in the score, should not be played, namely, *Sphinxes*. For starters, *Sphinxes*' theme is written based on a trick, also used by Shostakovich and Bach, in which the composer uses letters from names, in Schumann's case his own last name and also Asch – the name of his girlfriend's hometown –, and finds the corresponding notes of the chosen letters following the German cipher. According to Žižek's reading (Žižek 1997b: 266), "the whole piece thus pivots around 'Sphinxes' as its absent, impossible-real point of reference". Continuing his non-conventional analysis, the Slovenian philosopher makes a parallel between the piece *Carnaval* and the pre-ontological moment proposed by Schelling: besides the letter/notes trick just mentioned above, the name *Sphinxes*, given to the missing section that structures the whole piece, also means Butterfly, which is the name of its following section. Žižek sees in the interest Schumann (and also Aristotle) has in

Butterflies not only the curiosity regarding the insect itself, but also the interest in the process through which it goes: from a incomplete insect, a mere worm, something like a half-dead creature without a soul, that, at some point, becomes a well-formed beautiful insect in all its detail. The worm stands for the pre-ontological moment of the butterfly, just like the misshapen pre-ontological moment of reality that Schelling describes. Following that line of thought, *Sphinxes*, besides being the missing pivotal element of the piece, also stands for the proto-reality of its following section, *Papillons* (Butterfly).

Instead of approaching *Carnaval* as a festive and friendly party, Žižek reminds us of all the meetings between masked people in which one does not know exactly who or what is beneath the mask. The image evoked is precisely that of an incomplete ontology: a world in which what is hidden behind the appearance is uncertain. In Schumann's *Carnaval*, the only section that does not resemble that universe of the unfinished is *Reconnaissance*. That section is taken to be the most beautiful section of the whole piece, a section that would fit perfectly in a Hollywood romantic scene. And precisely in that fact lies the irony of it all: the very section that escapes the incomplete proto-reality scenario is the one that sounds naïve, way too simple and even kitsch, almost as if it were a fake.

If in Bach's music, structural elements are implicit in the solo melody, and in Schumann the absent element is the pivot of the piece itself, the Ninth Symphony of the gigantic Beethoven, particularly in its last movement, is incompleteness itself, ready to be filled with any ideology that might be of particular interest. Žižek's analysis of the Ninth Symphony can be found in his documentary on Ideology³ and in his book *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). The philosopher notes that *Ode to Joy* appears in the most divergent political contexts, such as in the *Reichsmusiktage* in Germany 1938, and later it was also played for Hitler's birthday; in China's Cultural Revolution; in contemporary Japan; and it even united East and West Germany during the Olympics Games in the '70s. What kind of structure, if not a true empty significant, as Žižek puts it, could be used in opposite contexts and still fit perfectly? However, we should bear in mind that the emptiness that composes reality is not actually passive. In Beethoven's case, beneath the apparent empty ideological receptacle that seems to be the Ninth Symphony and the Ode to Joy in particular, is Beethoven's own architecture that is in no way neutral.

Nestrovski (1996), in his essays on Beethoven, highlights the deep levels that music reaches with the German composer, as if behind each melodic line, harmonic

arch or theme, a detailed arrangement of smaller structures, like a music composed brick by brick, note by note, were hidden. Adorno, in his *Philosophy of New Music*, already warned us about the dangerousness of linking Beethoven, Brahms and other composers to famous and naïve melodies composed by them, arguing that those passages are but ruins of their music and have no longer the same deep meaning they had when they were understood as parts of much bigger pieces. That happens because the genius of Beethoven lies much more in the formal organizations of his pieces than in the famous melodies or cadences that, in the end, are an incomplete aspect of the whole. Through those ideas we shall read Žižek's analysis of Beethoven's Ninth: the section *Ode to Joy* is just part of a whole piece and what should be understood is precisely its role in relation to the other sections. Approaching *Ode to Joy* with those ideas in mind we might be able to see through the cracks of its reality and find out what is hidden behind it.

The general structure of the ninth symphony includes, besides the *Ode to Joy*, other parts often seen as problematic and incoherent, since they do not keep any of the sacred anthem features sung by the choir during the Ode. However, according to Žižek's interpretation of that symphony, the Ode should be understood as the very problematic part when it is compared with what happens next in the music. Stanley Kubrick already knew very well that the section played right after the Ode, a festive Turkish-like music, is actually the ground of the Symphony, that is the serious part of it all, and that is why Alex, in *A Clockwork Orange*⁴, feels at home when that part of the symphony is playing in the background. Giving a step further, by adopting that perspective we not only find a new way of listening to the symphony, but also the apparent emptiness of the Ode acquires quite a straightforward meaning. After the Ode, the music never recovers that serious aspect it had before. If played isolated from the other parts, as it happens most of the time, the Ode's choir melody yields the image of a simple, naïve and at the same time sacred piece instead of a piece of music that expresses an explicit political message. But, as Žižek describes it, *Ode to Joy* works as a kind of Musical Critique of Ideology in which it stands for a naïve vision of people gathering together and feeling like one big community while, in fact, the truth is what happens next, when the other sections interrupt the praise as if saying "You want to celebrate the brotherhood of men? Here it is, then, real humanity..." (Žižek 2008: 273).

We can find the existence of two levels in the references Žižek makes to music, one being superficial and incomplete, and the other a deeper level that actually functions as the ground to the first one. It is in that sense that Žižek sees a relation

between his thoughts on art and the ontology proposed by Schelling: there is reality as we perceive it, incomplete as the examples above show, and a proto-reality that, in a way, gives birth to reality itself; just like in the *Columbo* episodes where the spectator is always presented to two realities, one with the blind spots that most people take to be the only one, and the one Columbo perceives, a deeper one, that is, the real version of how the crime was committed.

Just like it is said that a friend of Darwin used to say that God created fossils and planted fake clues to distort our understanding of the past and, then, test our faith; and in the same way that Felix Ventura⁵ invented the entire genealogical tree of his clients so he could alter their present and future; we hope that the music examples we presented in this essay, most of them taken from Žižek's texts or lectures, might shine new lights in the cracks of our current conception of music, but without filling in all the gaps, for that would most certainly ruin the beauty of it all.

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Notes

¹ Žižek, S. (2012) 'Ontological Incompleteness in Painting, Literature and Quantum Theory'. Accessed February 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddctYDCTIIA>

² Žižek's words in beginning of a documentary on his life. Taylor, A., director (2005) *Žižek!*, US/CA: Zeitgeist Films.

³ Fiennes, S., director (2012) *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, UK: P Guide Productions.

⁴ Kubrick, S. director (1971) *A Clockwork Orange*, US/UK: Warner Bros.

⁵ From the Book: Agualusa, J. (2004) *O Vendedor de Passados*, PT: Dom Quixote.