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Focused Listening: The Aesthetics of Parallax

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Abstract

Even though Slavoj Žižek has written many words about music without really saying much about it, his work nevertheless contains much that for the philosophically minded musicologist, or for the musically minded philosopher, can stimulate thinking. For the author of this article, for example, some of the ideas presented in Žižek's 2006 *The Parallax View* have stimulated thinking about the possibilities of taking a comparable approach—that is, a metaphorically 'parallax' approach that involves considering an object of attention alternately from more than one perspective—not just to music but to sounds in general. Along with summarizing Žižek's views on music per se, "Focused Listening: The Aesthetics of Parallax" explores various ways in which persons in the presence of a single 'sound object' might listen to, and thus perceive and hear, that sonic phenomenon.

Key Words: Parallax; Jouissance; Musical Analysis; Listening/Hearing; Perception

Even though Slavoj Žižek has produced many words about music without really saying much about it, and even though his approach to music, as has been noted in this journal, “cannot be described as aesthetic” (Little 2011: n.p.), his writing nevertheless contains much that for the philosophically minded musicologist, or for the musically minded philosopher, can stimulate thinking.

One of the valuable contributions that Žižek makes to discourse in general and which can easily be applied to critical discourse in music is the idea that since 2003 has informed a series of books edited by him and published by the MIT Press. With one of his characteristic rhetorical questions that disguises a proposition, early in the brief foreword to the entire series he asks: “Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a ‘minor’ author, text, or conceptual apparatus ...?” (Žižek 2003: vii). In the monographs that make up the Short Circuits series, foundational texts or bodies of texts in various humanistic fields are ‘shocked’ towards fresh interpretation by being brought into close proximity with the Lacanian psychoanalysis that has long been at the heart of Žižek’s work. Since the advent of the so-called New Musicology in the 1990s, intellectual sparks have indeed been generated when the symphonies of Beethoven and the songs of Schubert were ‘short circuited’ by, for example, narratology and hardcore feminism, but surely there is room for more of this sort of thing. What might happen, one wonders, if mainstream Hollywood film scores, or the repertoire of 1950s bebop, or the recent work of Lady Gaga, were examined through such unlikely filters as, say, the globalization theories of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, or neo-Marxism as preached by Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School, or Peircian semiotics?

Another of Žižek’s useful contributions to critical discourse in general, and the one that prompts this essay, is the idea that underlies his 2006 book *The Parallax View*. Although fitted with a Short Circuits imprint, *The Parallax View* is not nearly so short or tidy as the other books in that on-going series; indeed, the publisher’s blurb on the dust jacket informs readers that “Žižek himself describes [the book] as his magnum opus” (Žižek 2006: n.p.), and it seems to take as its target for short circuiting the entire corpus of

thought—from Marx and Engels to Georg Lukács and Alain Badiou—that constitutes dialectical materialism.

As a starting point for his sustained argument, Žižek offers a pair of anecdotes (one having to do with the use of sophisticated ‘colour theory’ for the purposes of psychological torture in Barcelona prisons during the Spanish Civil War, the other having to do with the 1940 death of Walter Benjamin, who in contrast to conventional wisdom apparently did not kill himself in order to avoid capture by the Nazis but, rather, was assassinated by *Soviet* agents in order to prevent publication of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”) whose basic elements exist on such different levels that even a momentary ‘short circuit’ between them seems unlikely. “What these two stories share is not just the surprising link between high culture ... and base brutal politics”, Žižek writes, “more radically, what the two stories share is that the link they establish is an *impossible short circuit* of levels which, for structural reasons, can never meet [W]hat both these anecdotes share is the occurrence of an insurmountable *parallax gap*, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (Žižek 2006: 3–4¹). Midway through his introduction Žižek notes that various modes of ‘parallax gap’, not all of them insurmountable, fairly permeate the modern intellectual world; they are to be found in the fields of quantum physics and neurobiology, in realms of thought devoted to “ontological difference”, to “the Real” (in the Lacanian sense), and to “the unconscious” (in the Freudian sense), and even—“last *and* least”, he writes, but not surprisingly, considering that this is coming from Žižek—in theories devoted to the vagina (Žižek 2006: 7). All this, however, is merely embellishment of an idea proposed three pages earlier when he asks, in typical Žižekian fashion: “Is not ‘parallax’ yet another name for a fundamental *antinomy* which can never be dialectically ‘mediated/sublated’ into a higher synthesis, since there is no common language, no shared ground, between the two levels?” (Žižek 2006: 4).

I would answer Žižek’s question thusly: Unless one is willing to concoct new meanings for words in order to suit one’s personal agenda, then, no, ‘parallax’ is most definitely *not* another name for a fundamental antinomy, or opposition, between principles that arguably can never be reconciled or synthesized. But I would add to this blunt response the positive suggestion that ‘parallax’ *could* be another name, if used judiciously, for the experiential by-product that results from something perceived simultaneously from more than one perspective.

After all, the Greek word *παράλλαξις*—a combination of *παρά* ('alongside') and *άλλος* ('change')—is one that ancient astronomers invented to identify not just the optical effect but, more significantly, the perceptual effect produced when a far off object (for example, the moon or a planet) is regarded alternately from two points of view that are in close proximity to one another (for example, an observer's right eye and left eye). Originally a term associated with the measurement of distance by means of visual triangulation, 'parallax' since the middle of the twentieth century has also been used by researchers in cognition to refer to animals' and human beings' ability to pinpoint the location of unseen sound-producing objects by means of aural triangulation. Analogously and quite famously (but mentioned nowhere in Žižek's book), the term 'parallax view' figured in the title of first a 1970 novel by Loren Adelson Singer and then a 1974 film by Alan J. Pakula, in the plots of both of which an investigative journalist tries to, in effect, 'triangulate' facts by sorting out the differing accounts of persons who have witnessed a political assassination. So long as it is made clear that the word is used as an element in an analogy, 'parallax' is, I think, a perfectly good adjective with which to describe a situation that features the convergence of multiple approaches to any single object of attention.

The objects of attention that at the moment interest me are aural. Inspired by Žižek in general but in particular by the premise that drives his 2006 'magnum opus', I will thus embark on a series of parallactic explorations of sonic phenomena that range from the most obnoxious examples of noise to the most soothing examples of music. But in a Žižek-inspired essay that deals at least in part with music, would it not be inappropriate to fail to begin with an overview of Žižek's *own* views on music?

* * *

Žižek on music has received not nearly so much attention from the Anglophone academic community as has, for example, Gilles Deleuze on music, or Jean-Luc Nancy on music. The buzz surrounding Nancy's thoughts on music has lately dissipated, but it was loud in the final years of the twenty-first century's first decade, when, in the wake of the English translation of his 2007 *Listening*, the US-based Society for Music Theory made Nancy the topic of the 'philosophy special interest group' discussion at its 2007 annual conference and then in 2008 sponsored a formal Nancy session as part of its joint meeting with the American Musicological Society. Deleuze's thoughts on music—most of them

articulated only in a pair of chapters in the 1980 book *Mille Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus)* that he co-authored with Felix Guattari—have had more staying power, and, like his thoughts on the cinema and other art forms, they have generated far more commentary in the form not just of journal articles but even entire books; the essays contained in Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda's 2004 *Deleuze and Music* are not so much critical examinations of Deleuze's ideas about music as they are music-based flights of fancy triggered by such Deleuzian metaphors as 'the rhizome' or 'the tree', but clearly they indicate the strong influence on modern intellectuals of Deleuzian thinking.

Although he has yet to generate such an abundance of commentary, it remains that Žižek—page for page, word for word—has much more volubly expressed opinions in relation to music than have these other still currently fashionable continental thinkers. The longest of Žižek's discourses on music, mostly on the operas of Wagner, is found in the second half of the 2002 book, *Opera's Second Death*, that he co-authored with Mladen Dolar. But there are lengthy disquisitions on opera as well (in particular on Wagner's *Parsifal*, on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and on Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper*) in Žižek's 1989 *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and in his 1992 *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (in which case he deals not just with *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Don Giovanni* but also with Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*). Žižek makes reference to opera, too, in an appendix attached to his 1997 *The Plague of Fantasies* (the works he mentions are Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Wagner's *Parsifal*), but these references, in contrast to the others just cited, are relatively brief, and they share space with fleeting references to non-operatic music by such chronologically diverse composers as Pachelbel, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Frank and Schoenberg.

Apropos of its primary content, the appendix is titled "Robert Schumann: The Romantic Anti-Humanist" (Žižek 1997: 261–65). It is not Schumann's music, however, that is the object of Žižek's attention here. Rather, Žižek concentrates on the lyrics of certain Schumann songs, just as in his comments on opera he concentrates not on the operas' scores but on their librettos. It is not difficult to notice the thread that connects this apparently diverse material. *All* of the songs and operas that capture Žižek's attention touch on what has long been one of his favourite themes; tragically or comically—or, more

often, tragically—their texts deal explicitly with the linked ideas of love and death, of sex and sublimation.

As much as Žižek has written on specific musical works, he has not written much on music *per se*. One of the rare instances in which he does address music independent of text, and even attempts a definition of it, is found in his 2005 book *Interrogating the Real*, in an essay titled “Is Wagner Worth Saving?” (Žižek 2005: 283–303). Introducing a commentary that, as one might expect from Žižek, touches less on music than on such topics as anti-Semitism, the Oedipus complex, and communities of homoerotic men, he nevertheless writes:

With Romanticism, music changes its role: it no longer merely accompanies the message delivered in speech, but contains/renders a message of its own, ‘deeper’ than the one delivered in words. ... As Schopenhauer put it, music directly enacts/renders the noumenal Will, while speech remains limited to the level of phenomenal representation. Music is the substance which renders the true heart of the subject, what Hegel called the ‘Night of the World’, the abyss of radical negativity: music becomes the bearer of the true message beyond words during the shift from the Enlightenment subject of rational *logos* to the Romantic subject of the ‘night of the world’, i.e., with the change of metaphor for the kernel of the subject from Day to Night. Here we encounter the Uncanny: no longer external transcendence, but, following Kant’s transcendental turn, the excess of the Night in the very heart of the subject (the dimension of the Undead), what [Gary] Tomlinson [in *Metaphysical Song* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 94] called the ‘internal otherworldliness that marks the Kantian subject’. What music renders is thus no longer the ‘semantics of the soul’, but the underlying ‘noumenal’ flux of *jouissance* beyond linguistic meaningfulness. This noumenal is radically different from the pre-Kantian transcendent divine Truth: it is the inaccessible excess which forms the very core of the subject (283).

Thus Žižek identifies himself, like Nancy and Deleuze, as someone whose tastes in music are of a remarkably conservative sort. Perhaps Žižek indeed listens to, and enjoys, many kinds of music. And perhaps he thinks about music, in general, in many different ways. But one learns about his interest in, say, the German rock band Rammstein or the songs in *The Sound of Music* or the political overtones of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from interviews in the popular press and from the blogs of fans, not from work published under his own name. The ‘rock star’ of contemporary theory in fact pays little attention to rock music. Nor does he mention, ever, so-called non-Western music. Aside from noting the popularity of Pachelbel’s famous *Canon* (Žižek 1997: 247–48) and observing—astutely—

that certain instrumental pieces by Bach can indeed be regarded as abstract formal structures quite removed from performative contexts (ibid., 253–54), Žižek almost never makes reference to Western art music that pre-dates the so-called ‘common practice’ period. Similarly, his references to Western art music of a distinctly non-traditional sort—for example, the fleeting comment, in his 2010 *Living in the End Times*, to the effect that John Cage’s “treatment of the minimalist dialectics of sound and silence can be compared only to [Anton] Webern’s” (Žižek 2010: 381)—are so few and far between that they prove the point. From Žižek’s writings as a whole one gathers—and in this respect there is really quite a lot of evidence to be gathered—that his preference not just for listening but for provoking thought is the clearly tonal and mostly Germanic ‘standard’ repertoire that dates from between the middle of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, from the first flowerings of the so-called Enlightenment through the eruptions of modernism in the years surrounding World War I.

Even the two thick paragraphs in *The Parallax View* about the possibly “deceiving nature of [music’s] affects” deal not with the raw substance of music but only with what music, according to European conventions, seems to emotionally ‘express’. Alluding to Rousseau (“who first clearly articulated [the] expressive power of music as such”) and then to Schopenhauer (who contrasted speech’s limitation to “phenomenal representation” with music’s apparent ability to “directly” express, or enact, “the noumenal Will”), the prolific Žižek makes his first point by creatively paraphrasing what he had written in the essay about saving Wagner:

Music is the substance which portrays the true heart of the subject, which is what Hegel called the “Night of the World”, the abyss of radical negativity: music becomes the bearer of the true message beyond words with the shift from the Enlightenment subject of rational Logos to the Romantic subject of the “Night of the World”, that is, the shift of the metaphor for the kernel of the subject from Day to Night. Here we encounter the Uncanny: no longer the external transcendence but, following Kant’s transcendental turn, the excess of the Night at the very heart of the subject (the dimension of the Undead), what Tomlinson called the “internal otherworldliness that marks the Kantian subject”. What music expresses is no longer the “semantics of the soul” but the underlying “noumenal” flux of *jouissance* beyond linguistic meaningfulness. This noumenal dimension is radically different from the pre-Kantian transcendental divine Truth: it is the inaccessible excess which forms the very core of the subject (Žižek 2006: 229–30).

His second point, not at all the same as the one with which he follows this same idea in the Wagner essay, challenges the platitude (usually attributed to Schopenhauer) that ‘music cannot lie’. Taking Wagner’s sexually charged *Tristan und Isolde* as his example, Žižek states boldly that if we take a close look “we cannot avoid the conclusion that music itself—in its very substantial ‘passionate’ rendering of emotions, celebrated by Schopenhauer—not only can also lie but *lies in a fundamental way as to its own formal status*”. The big lie in *Tristan*, Žižek suggests, has to do with the difference between the sublime essence of the story and the sometimes mundane way in which the story unfolds; whereas “the metaphysical ‘truth’ of the opera” seems to concern “the way the amorous couple is inexorably drawn toward the fulfillment of their passion” and their “orgasmic self-extinction”, in the opera’s narrative flow “this inexorable sliding toward the abyss of annihilation [is] interrupted again and again by (often ridiculous) intrusions of fragments of ordinary daily life”. In contrast to its metaphysical truth, then, the opera’s *actual* truth is found “not in the [main characters’] passionate drift” but in “the ridiculous narrative incidents/intrusions which interrupt” this drift (Žižek 2006: 230).

All this verbiage about ‘metaphysical truth’, ‘noumenal flux’, and music’s ineffable ‘message beyond words’ perhaps makes the hearts of Žižek’s sympathetic readers beat a little faster, in the same way that Žižek’s occasionally quite explicit descriptions of cinematic sex scenes perhaps triggers a palpable rush of blood to certain parts of his readers’ bodies. But in essence Žižek here, and in many passages elsewhere, is touching on questions that at least since the middle of the nineteenth century have been asked countless times by writers who range from performers and composers to deep-thinking philosophers to authors of laypersons’ guides to so-called ‘music appreciation’. Some of these authors have suggested that the emotions expressed by music are quite explicit, as much capable of being identified and labeled—and as much provocative of empathy—as are the emotions expressed by characters in a novel or a play. But others have suggested that music cannot possibly express, much less contain, true emotion, and that the closest music can come to expressivity is by delivering effects that are merely analogous to affects; occasionally these affect-like musical effects have to do with kinetic or mimetic devices, but most of the time they involve nothing more than fluid combinations of tension and release that are somehow akin, in the terminology promoted by musicologist and Gestalt psychologist Leonard B. Meyer, to expectations fulfilled or thwarted (Meyer 1956: 23–38).

Žižek clearly understands these two fundamentally different views on what Meyer, in the title of his landmark 1956 book, called ‘emotion and meaning in music’. Just as clearly, Žižek has developed, as is his prerogative as a music lover, a view of his own. His frequent linkage of music with the Lacanian concept of *‘jouissance’*—a form of enjoyment whose ‘substance’ is inversely proportional to the perceiver’s understanding of what is being enjoyed (Žižek 1989: 68)—suggests an innocently hedonistic relishing on his part of what he takes to be music’s expressivity. At the same time, the simple fact that he almost never writes about ‘abstract’ music (i.e., purely instrumental sonatas or string quartets or symphonies) and instead writes about songs and operas suggests that the range of music he finds genuinely expressive is rather limited. Indeed, Žižek’s consistent concentration on text-equipped music suggests that what he regards as music’s most special quality, the quality that ineffably lies “beyond linguistic meaningfulness”, might actually be the quite effable ‘meaningfulness’ that he—functioning not as the musical analyst he never pretends to be but as the trained psychoanalyst that he has always been—gleans from dramatic situations and relatively concrete strings of words.

Writing in 1960, during the heyday of modernist thought, music theorist Edward T. Cone offered that the proper way to hear—i.e., to understand—music of *any* sort was analytical (Cone 1960: 174). In today’s postmodern world, such a stiffly judgmental opinion seems as much preposterous as would be a suggestion that Žižek’s apparently preferred approach—wallowing in the music’s raw lusciousness while at the same time (psycho)analyzing its concomitant text to the nth degree—is the only way to go. In the arena of musical experience, there is not much room for prizes; to grant assessment marks to the various ways in which listeners might consume and digest music makes no more sense than to evaluate, say, the various positions available to a couple engaged in heterosexual intercourse. To the couple that consensually participates in sex for the first time, all that really matters is that the many positive preliminary details—flirting, examination of sniffed or tasted pheromones, initial responses to tactile foreplay, etc.—sooner or later climax in an experience that is in at least some ways satisfactory to both participants. Likewise, to the listener of music, perhaps all that really matters is that the time spent with music—no matter how deep or shallow the engagement—be time that is considered to have been not wasted.

* * *

The cerebrally analytical mode of listening championed by Cone and the mindless, sensual mode championed by Žižek represent very different modes of listening. But is it not the case that a listener can partake of both of these modes—and others—simultaneously? If the formalistic and expressionistic modes are regarded not as mutually exclusive elements of a dichotomy but only as extreme points of a continuum, is it not the case that an individual listener will more often than not find himself or herself in effect moving along the continuum in one direction or the other, leaning this way or that but never abandoning the connection to whichever way, at the moment, is construed as ‘opposite’? If for the sake of argument the formalist/expressionist polarity is seen as a black-and-white image, is it not the case that most musical experiences of most human beings consist entirely of ever-shifting shades of grey?

It seems obvious that there exist a multiplicity of listening modes, evident at any given moment of any listener’s experience with what is conventionally described as ‘music’. But one wonders. Inspired by Žižekian thinking as a whole but provoked in particular by Žižek’s appropriation of an astronomical term for the title of his 2006 ‘magnum opus’ that celebrates the virtues of taking different critical approaches to single philosophical tenets, this writer, at least, wonders about the possibilities of regarding music, and sonic phenomena in general, simultaneously not from more than one critical perspective but from more than one *perceptual* perspective.

The multiple perspectives about which this writer wonders do not lie on an easy-to-grasp continuum of the sort described above, a continuum whose opposite ends describe extreme degrees of intellectual or emotional engagement with the sonic phenomenon (musical or otherwise) at hand and whose very identity as a continuum implies that, with the exception of the extremities, every point along the continuum represents a mixture of attitudes. In contrast to the infinite number of points that exist along a continuum, the multiple perspectives that prompt this essay seem to number only two. The either/or situation has to do not with the amount of energy or the quality of energy that an auditor invests into his or her listening experience; rather, this binary situation has to do with the simple question of whether or not the listener is investing any energy at all into the experience.

So that readers can follow on their own the path that led me to the sentence that ends the previous paragraph, the question might be rephrased in a way that provokes a

more open-ended answer, in a way that at least allows for the possibility of a continuum. Before the rephrased question can be posed, however, it is first necessary to massage the definitions of a pair of words that pertain to what sentient creatures do not just with their ears but also with their brains.

Like most users of the French language, Jean-Luc Nancy in his *Listening* distinguishes between two words whose translations into English often have their meanings not distinguished but conflated. For the French, 'écouter' ('to listen') is to pay conscious attention to a sonic phenomenon, and 'entendre' ('to hear') is to understand that phenomenon. In the voluminous *New Cassell's French Dictionary*, alas, the secondary definition of 'écouter' is 'to hear', and the secondary definition of 'entendre' is 'to listen', but perhaps that is a concession to the readers of English for whom the *Cassell's* dictionary is designed.

In fact, English speakers do, in various ways, acknowledge a difference between the physical-mental act of attending to a sound and the mostly mental process of grasping the sound's import. We even distinguish between the mere taking in of sonic stimuli and the sorting out of sonic stimuli in such a way that the sounds are not just *sensed* (by the ears) but are regarded (by the brain) as somehow *making* sense, although we do not yet have a good word (outside the specialized vocabulary of clinical psychology) to describe the former action. Indeed, we sometimes use the very same word to describe *both* the indiscriminate taking in of sonic information and the usually quite deliberate processing of it. There is no ambiguity when we bark at a friend: "If you actually listened to me then maybe you would hear what I'm saying". Yet just as the constantly running surveillance camera at the convenience store 'sees' not just the special events that are perhaps evidence of an armed robbery but also all the many insignificant events that constitute the store's quotidian existence, so the open microphone at a politician's press conference 'hears' not just the occasional juicy sound bite that finds its way into journalists' reports but also all of the event's inconsequential noise and blather.

Following the French, then, the verbs 'listen' and 'hear' for the purposes of this essay will have meanings comparable to the vision-related verbs 'look' and 'see', the first word in each set implying a willful effort to sort through the myriad stimuli that are involuntarily received by a conscious person's ears, or eyes, the second word implying a comprehension of whatever small bit of the stimuli is actually *perceived* by the person's

thinking apparatus. We look so that we might see; similarly, we listen so that we might hear.

The rephrased question, then, could be: Confronted with numerous sounds that compete for his attention, can the auditor truly listen simultaneously to *all* of them? Put another way: In the presence of multiple sonic 'things', is it really possible for someone to listen to, and thus to hear, more than one of those sonic 'things' at the same time? Or does the auditor, when faced with many sonic stimuli, combine various individual sounds into multiphonic units and then attend to these units one after the other? Is exposure to a multiplicity of sounds comparable to watching a three-ring circus, a situation in which the auditor/viewer is of course aware of all the many events taking place but is able to focus on, and thus appreciate, only one event at a time? Does dealing with a multiplicity of sounds *necessitate* listening to these sounds, for the sake of hearing them, not in parallel but in parallax?

In a book that examines the arguably posthumous career of the idea of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, one of the first American theorists to take so-called postmodernism seriously, writes that grappling with an 'ism' of any sort "involves a kind of Gestalt alternation between two forms of perception of the same object", an alternation between what one *thinks* one 'knows' about the 'ism' as it perhaps existed in the past and what one *actually* knows about how that same 'ism' relates to one's personal present, and thus in order to really understand the issue "a shift of attention must be registered in passing from one perspective to the other" (Jameson 2012: 21). Similarly, Hal Foster, in an essay that pre-dates Jameson's book by almost two decades, wonders about the fate of postmodernism and suggests that the search for the apparently lost ideology might be aided by an alternation of perspective. "Every moment is nonsynchronous, a mix of different times", he reminds us. Thus the contemplation of anything from the past is a contemplation not just of whatever historical 'object' might be under consideration but also of how we situate that 'object' in the world in which we live today. Simply put: "Our consciousness of a period not only comes after the fact; it is also always in parallax" (Foster 1993: 5–6).

A single sonic 'object' surrounded by noise is likely not so as elusive as the concept of postmodernism. Nevertheless, to locate a single sound in the midst of many sounds is no easy task. Like an open microphone, our ears of course 'take in' a great many pieces of

sonic information at the same time, but how can we possibly listen to it all? I would argue that we make sense of the lot by listening to just one piece at a time. We do this rapidly, and we do it constantly, shifting our attention from millisecond to millisecond during any single listening experience. And thus, as both Jameson and Foster suggest is the case for our grasp of historical periods, and as Žižek suggests happens when we contemplate dialectical materialism or any other difficult theoretical model, our consciousness of sonic phenomena comes always in parallax.

* * *

Seeds for this Žižek-triggered thought project were first planted, I recall, during a summer vacation in the Rocky Mountains, when to escape the drone of a television set I abandoned the condominium and headed outside for a meditation break. Soon enough I noticed a rush of white noise that increased in volume as I got closer to the bottom end of the parking lot. Even before the cigarette was out I realized that what I was not just taking in with my ears but also listening to was the sound of traffic on the interstate highway. But then I realized that what I taking in was not merely the traffic noise but, rather, a balanced mix of that noise and the gentle roar of the creek that ran alongside the highway. And I puzzled over the fact that although I could easily enough listen to—and thus hear, and appreciate—the ear-pleasing sonic blend, I could pay attention to the sound of the creek (or the traffic) only if I succeeded in the considerable mental effort of, in effect, stifling the sound of the traffic (or the creek).

At the time of this epiphany my bedside reading was Žižek's *The Parallax View*. I never engaged with the book enough so that I actually started to care one way or another about dialectical materialism, and I only recently discovered that Žižek had not come up with the titular concept on his own; rather, he borrowed the concept from the Japanese writer Kojin Karatani, whose 2003 *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (several reviews of which, by Žižek, feature the phrase in their titles) perhaps owes a debt, at least so far as 'the parallax view' is concerned, to a 1999 essay in literary criticism by Clémentine Deliss, who very likely got the idea, as so many modern writers have gotten ideas about so many things, from James Joyce.² But the book's title fascinated me, and it was not long before I came across numerous more examples of parallax listening. These examples eventually became so numerous as to be, literally, limitless. Indeed, I discovered that the sonic

equivalent of the parallax view can be experienced, at will, whenever one is in the presence of sound.

Parallax listening can be experienced, for example, while one is trying to write and using the time-tested technique of ‘audio-fying’ one’s words (not reading those words aloud but, rather, *imagining* the sound of those words even as they appear, one after the other, on the computer screen) at the same time a program such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* plays much too loudly on the television set in the adjacent room. The writer might well experience the cartoon’s unwelcome blare as a load of what psychologists call ‘meaningful noise’ (that is, as the combination of syntactical music, verbally expressive dialogue, and narrative-based sound effects that in fact it is), in which case the result is likely to be distraction and annoyance. Alternatively, the writer can choose to group all the genuinely meaningful television sounds, as well as the genuinely meaningful chatter of the kids who are enjoying the show, into a general category of sonic nonsense, against the background of which he can comfortably listen to, and hear, the silent sounds of his in-progress sentences (Holding and Baker 1987; Smith 1989; Szalma and Hancock 2011).

Parallax listening can be experienced in the presence of a very large flock of starlings whose collective chirping forms the sort of sound that electronic music composer Oskar Sala, in creating the avian noises for Alfred Hitchcock’s 1962 film *The Birds*, labeled a “vocal curtain” (Wierzbicki 2008). On first exposure, this curtain is perhaps regarded as a single monophonic ‘thing’; upon closer inspection, one notices that the fabric comprises layers of varying density and timbre, and that from time to time the fabric is pierced with ‘holes’ through which non-bird sounds can be perceived. It is perhaps impossible to listen to, and hear, individual birds, but with focused listening it is quite possible to hear individual sections of the noise.

Parallax listening can be experienced—and probably *is* experienced, far more often than music-lovers realize—in the concert hall as an orchestra performs, for example, a symphony by Mozart or Beethoven. The music consists, of course, of not just a melody line against a harmonic backdrop but also counter melodies, a bass line, accompanying patterns, and all sorts of figurations that provide punctuation, colouration and the like. Is it the case that the attentive concertgoer listens to *all* of this and thus hears the entirety of the music? Or is it the case that he or she listens to the entirety of the music and thus is unable to hear—because of human limitations—such details as the timbre of the

percussion instruments or the viola section's articulations? If 'close listening' to one orchestral section or another occurs, is not the listening to everything else, at least for the moment, reduced to a sort of 'distant listening' that is not much conducive to genuine hearing? The questions can easily be translated to texted music of the sort beloved by Žižek. Does 'close listening' to a composition's extra-musical elements—the poetry in a Schumann song, say, or the reflective/anticipatory plot-related metaphors in the libretto of a Wagner opera—not force 'distant listening' to be applied to matters of rhythm, harmony and dynamics? Does paying attention to the so-called purely musical matters not necessitate a momentary decrease of attention to the words?

Perhaps the most illustrative situation in which to experience the sonic equivalent of the parallax view would be a listener-controlled enactment of the work that John Cage preferred to call simply his 'silent piece' but which for more than a half-century has been generally known as *4'33"*. The work's erroneous title, like its frequently encountered but likewise erroneous description as a performance vehicle for solo pianist, is owed to the fact that its premiere performance in August 1952 was indeed delivered by a pianist who for precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds did not play. In fact, the 1961 published instructions for Cage's 'silent piece' specify that "the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time" (Cage, in Gann 2010: 184). The piece may last any length of time, it is important to note, so long as that time is divided into three discrete sections. It would be a mistake, then, to think that at the premiere the performer during the prescribed time did nothing. Importantly, the acclaimed virtuoso pianist David Tudor sat at his instrument and marked the 'frames' of the three sections by opening and closing the piano's lid. Most members of the audience at the time likely did not realize it, but Tudor's actions in effect were signals for them to 'turn on' and 'turn off' their powers of focused listening.

Cage in interviews often remarked that he enjoyed performing his 'silent' piece' in private, usually outdoors near his long-time home in Stony Point, New York. In presenting this piece to my undergraduate students, I invite them to try the same thing for themselves, and I ask them to account for how they deal with the 'on/off' issue. For those of them who eventually understand what the Cage piece is all about, the responses in various ways articulate the phenomenon of parallax listening. When the piece is 'off', the students say, they simply take in all the sounds around them whilst paying attention to none of them; when the piece is 'on', they listen to, and hear, whichever individual sounds or

combinations of sounds they choose, and they realize that the choices—the decisions about how to ‘filter’ the sounds, about how to alternate between various listening perspectives—is entirely up to them. In his 2010 book on Cage’s ‘silent piece’, Kyle Gann notes that commentators today often credit the piece with breaking down the barrier between so-called art and non-art. But a perhaps more important effect, Gann writes, was “to drive home the point that the difference between ‘art’ and ‘non-art’ is merely one of perception, and that we can control how we organize our perceptions” (Gann 2010: 20).

Žižek, like Jean-Luc Nancy, is a person of strong but markedly conservative musical tastes, someone who knows what he likes and chooses to ignore all the rest, and so it is hardly surprising that Cage figures not much at all in his writings. Still, the above-noted mention of Cage in *Living in the End Times* is telling, for it makes the point that Cage’s primary contribution to music, like Anton Webern’s and Erik Satie’s, arguably had to do with defining the sections of a composition not by means of harmony (as had been the case with, say, Beethoven) but, rather, “by means of time lengths” (Cage 1970: 81; quoted in Žižek 2010: 381–82).

Cage is (in)famous, of course, for suggesting that music can be found in random sounds, such as those that transpired outside the concert room during the premiere performance of *4’33”*, or those that transpire within earshot whenever I or one of my students engages with the ‘silent piece’ in privacy. Such an experience would require the would-be finder of music to pay attention to sounds that are in no way connected and then, by means of “inventive listening”, connect them in such a way so that they are *perceived* as music (Wierzbicki 2014). The inventive listener, in other words, would be finding meaning in sounds whose happenstance combinations in fact have no meaning.

Žižek, in his concluding remarks on Cage and Satie, brings together the seemingly unrelated concepts of observing phenomena from multiple perspectives and making linkages between multiple phenomena that have nothing in common other than the fact that they occur—paratactically—one alongside the other. He notes that the “shift onto duration as the main structural principle” of music allowed Satie and others “to break out of temporality to atemporal eternity”, and he implies that the turn from emphasis on traditionally logical syntax applies as well to other areas of thought. Although this seems to be “an apparent paradox”, he writes, in reality it is

[a] profound dialectical necessity. ... Is this structure not the one of *parataxis*, of atemporal constellation replacing linear temporal development? Where there is parataxis, the parallax, its dialectical counterpoint, is not far away (Žižek 2010: 382).

* * *

Žižek throughout *The Parallax View* prefers the term ‘parallax gap’ to the one that serves as the book’s title. This makes tactical sense, for he uses the Greek word only in a metaphoric way, not to identify anything ocular but only to suggest that our understanding of most allegedly singular social/political/philosophical situations might be enhanced if the situations were considered from multiple and arguably irreconcilable ‘points of view’.

It is to the disadvantage of writers on music/sound that the phrase ‘points of view’—which in its literal meaning is precisely what makes possible the parallax phenomenon—is in English and most other European languages synonymous only with ‘ways of thinking about’ something or other. There is no equivalent phrase to describe the various ways in which music/sound might be sensed or perceived or considered or interpreted. Indeed, the vocabularies of most human languages are much more generously equipped with words related to what humans do with their eyes than to what they do with their ears (Viberg 1984; Branigan 1989).

Dismayingly, between words associated with the eyes and the ears there are few direct equivalents. The effortful act of ‘looking’ is matched, of course, by ‘listening’, and the comprehending act of ‘seeing’ is matched by ‘hearing’. But what (other than so clumsy a formulation as ‘the ability to hear’) is the aural equivalent of such a basic word as ‘sight’? For that matter, are there aural equivalents of such highly valorized phrases as ‘seeing is believing’, ‘eye-witness account’, or ‘OK, I get the picture’? And what of all the words—functional as both nouns and verbs—that denote various ways, usually with suggestions of intensity as well as motivation, in which humans use their gift of sight? Are there aural equivalents for ‘stare’, ‘peer’, or ‘gaze’, for ‘gape’, ‘glance’, ‘peek’, or ‘glimpse’, for ‘peep’, ‘ogle’, or ‘leer’? When we use our eyes we perhaps take in a ‘vista’, ‘image’, ‘panorama’, ‘scene’, ‘view’, ‘sight’, or ‘picture’, but what words do we have with which to label what we take in with our ears? Aside from the heavily weighted verbs ‘to overhear’ and ‘to eavesdrop’—which suggest an innocent and accidental taking in of aural information whose producer(s) likely want to keep private and, on the other hand, a deliberate and

possibly malicious act of using one's ears to violate someone else's privacy—the sonic vocabulary has almost nothing to call its own.

Surely in real life there exist situations in which auditors in effect fixatedly 'stare' or 'gaze' at the content of sonic phenomena. Surely, too, there are situations in which auditors, willingly or not, in effect merely 'glimpse' or 'glance' at the sounds around them. Western culture lacks words to describe what transpires in these situations, but that does not mean that the situations cannot be explored. To follow Žižek's example and take a parallax view to dialectical materialism, or whatever else triggers one's intellectual curiosity, will of course not reward the thinker with the final answer to his or her questions; it will, however, give the thinker a richer understanding of the matter, and that in itself makes it worth the effort. Similarly worth the effort, I think, is the application of the idea of 'parallax' to sounds. Focused listening that allows us to sort out the 'gazes' from the 'glimpses' and the 'glances' will not tell us everything there is to know about what we listen to and perhaps hear. Nevertheless, the parallax approach to sonic phenomena is likely to make our aural experiences at least a bit more interesting.

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Notes

¹ In this quotation and in all the quotations that follow, the emphases are original.

² It is in the fourth episode of *Ulysses* (“Lestrygonians”) that Joyce introduces the term, and the concept of, ‘parallax’. As the episode’s title suggests, Joyce’s central character, Leopold Bloom, is at this point in his wanderings around Dublin concerned mostly with eating. But he is concerned as well, because his appetite for lunch at one o’clock in the afternoon is pressing on him, with the passage of time. He notices the ballast office, outside of which is a ‘timeball’, a pole-mounted sphere that is mechanically set to drop to mark locally perceived hours of the day as they relate to official Greenwich time. Observing the timeball in the suburb of Dunsink reminds Bloom that he has recently perused a book, the 1885 *Story of the Heavens*, authored by the astronomer Robert Ball. In this book Ball discusses, amongst many other things, the idea of ocular parallax as a means for measuring the distances from the earth of bodies far out in space. Seeing the ball and thinking of Ball spurs Bloom’s stream-of-consciousness way of thinking. As Joyce tells the story: “Mr. Bloom moved forward raising his troubled eyes. Think no more about that. After one. Timeball on the ballast office is down. Dunsink time. Fascinating little book that is of Sir Robert Ball’s. Parallax. I never exactly understood. There’s a priest. Could ask him. Par it’s Greek: parallel, parallax” (Joyce 1961: 154).