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The Subject of Music as Subject of Excess and Emergence: Resonances and Divergences between Slavoj Žižek and Björk Guðmundsdóttir

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Abstract

In answering the question “who is the subject of music,” we argue that it is a subject of excess and emergence, and we rely on the definition and development of these terms by Žižek and Björk. Such a subject is movement and activity; it exceeds the experiences, objects, others and symbolic order that make it who it is; and it emerges through desire and drive, and resonance and animation. We open with a brief discussion of Žižek’s subject of excess, which we then relate to his approach to subjectivity in music. After an analysis of Björk’s music, centered on the piece “Black Lake” and from a perspective informed by Žižek’s account of subjectivity, we shift our attention to Björk’s thoughts on music in order to find elements that allow for the development of a subject of emergence. While the elements of excess and emergence are present in both accounts of the subject, Žižek’s and Björk’s respective focus on one of these concepts allow us to develop a fuller picture of subjectivity, particularly but not exclusively as it is engaged with in musical activities.

Key Words: Subjectivity; Creation; Self-Transformation; Resonance; Popular Music; Classical Music; Musical Subjectivization

Overture

Who is the subject of music? Who is the subject who sings and plays, rather than simply speaking and working—whose speaking is singing and whose work is playing?

Such a question is easily answered with reference to the subject of expression, who speaks and sings because it has something to say. This subject pre-exists its expression, and so expresses thoughts and emotions that are the condition and reason for being of its song. Its expression can consequently be authentic, if it matches a particularly personal or honest experience—thought, emotion—or inauthentic, if it merely repeats what is expected of it by others—if it attempts to sell rather than create, work rather than play. However, we have reasons to question and reject such an answer. If the subject of music pre-exists its music, then what pre-existed this subject and allowed it to express itself musically? How can these new songs be anything but the product of old songs, anything other than their continuation? If the musical subject desires to express itself and communicate an experience, how can its songs be anything but responses to other subjects?

We aim to displace this question away from the notion of expression, in order to see what continues to be at stake in the subject. We argue that the subject of music is the subject of excess or, in other words, that the musician (and so the singer) and its music are always in excess of the experiences that make it who it is—and so more than who it is at any given moment—and in excess of the genres from which it can borrow—and so more than its music is in the musical landscape. Indeed, the subject of excess creates itself through its music, becoming itself and opening new possibilities in its musical practice, as it sings and plays.

We turn to the conception of the subject offered by Slavoj Žižek, as a subject of excess, and to the practice of popular music offered by Björk Guðmundsdóttir (henceforth referred to as Björk, following her stage name), which we argue also presents a subject of excess. Throughout this paper, we bring together the approaches of philosophy and of musicology. We open with a brief discussion of Žižek's subject of excess, which we then

relate to his approach to subjectivity in music. After an analysis of Björk's music centered on the piece "Black Lake" from a perspective informed by Žižek's account of subjectivity, we shift our attention to Björk's thoughts on music in order to find elements that allow for the development of a subject of excess different than that offered by Žižek.

The choice of Žižek as an interlocutor for us and for Björk also follows from his highly developed and intricate theory of the subject of excess and of its emergence, and from his application of this theory to music as well as to popular culture. Yet a Žižekian analysis alone would not suffice since, as we will show, he comes short of giving music its full relevance and his full attention, and since he neglects a facet of musical subjectivity that Björk highlights, that is, the sources of the movement of subjectivity that lie outside of desire and drive, in others and in things. In this manner, we also follow his attempt to go beyond the subject's own understanding of itself. Björk's subject, as we will see, is a subject of excess that has the potential to emerge constantly anew.

First Movement: Žižek's Subject

The subject is movement and activity. We must pay attention to the phrasing: the subject is not *in movement*, it is not *active*, it is not *moved* or *moving*: it is movement, activity, a series of movements and activities. It is without a prior substance and it exceeds all of its determinations. It is not *made*, *formed*; rather, the subject subjectivizes itself and individualizes itself. Thus, rather than speaking of anonymous or external processes of subjectivization, Žižek turns our focus toward the activities that are the subject, the movements through which it emerges—always in an intersubjective social space¹.

Such a characterization of the subject as activity, however, comes with a caveat: the subject is fundamentally passive, outside of rare moments of genuine activity; and the passive activity of the subject is one that is marked by failure and by lack. Žižek does argue that there is no unified agent, be it the subject or the unconscious, that there is no self-transparency, and that there is no fully determined experience (1998a).

Fixation is the first movement through which the subject emerges. The subject attaches itself to an idiosyncratic component of its history, places this object or goal above all others, and risks everything else for it. In this way, the subject is able to detach itself

from substance, and opens the possibility for action. Discipline is the second movement through which the subject emerges. What will become the subject submits itself to discipline because of its fear of death. The inevitable fact of death—that the body will die—cannot be negated, that is, avoided or overcome. Discipline, taken on by the subject as its own activity, negates the body: it is the renunciation of body and pleasure. As a result, discipline comes to stand in for Death and maintains it as a horizon. In this manner, discipline is a Master that is less oppressive than death, since it can be accepted: not only does it solely negate the body and ward off death itself without negating it; it also creates its own pleasure, allowing for “surplus-enjoyment” (2000: 106), an enjoyment that comes from the subject exercising the Law of discipline upon itself.

In these two manners, the subject exceeds itself and exceeds substance, by focusing on the object of fixation or the object of discipline and by exceeding it—it makes it more than it is, and becomes more than it was itself before turning toward them. Indeed, fixation and discipline go beyond their objects: they are ways to want Nothingness. Nothing forces the subject’s choice to want to be attached or disciplined, its choice of an object of stubborn attachment, or its choice of a discipline and of a Master—and especially not the objects themselves. In fixation and discipline, nothing is to be enjoyed, which is to say that the subject *must* enjoy what turns out to be nothing, and that there is no thing that can be enjoyed.

Consequently, we can see how desire and drive are the central motors of the activity that is the subject. Žižek argues that desire and drive presuppose one another; that both emerge out of our entanglement with the symbolic order; and that they are “the two ways of avoiding the deadlock of negativity that ‘is’ the subject: by finding satisfaction in the repetitive circular movement of drive, or, alternatively, by opening up the unending metonymic search for the lost object of desire.” (2000: 298) Enjoyment (*jouissance*) is already-lost and unattainable, *and* it is always present as an injunction of the superego—we must not only do what we must do, we must also enjoy doing it. Renouncing enjoyment in fact brings about its own enjoyment as a remainder. Desire leads us toward things, but is always thwarted, because none of these things is ever the one that we truly desire, that would bring us enjoyment. Drive is our movement toward things, as enjoyment always accompanies our pursuing them—but as a stain, as undermining our reasons for pursuing them and our achievements.

Each of these two movements creates a different subjectivity. The subject of desire faces the Law, its prohibitions, and is a lack; it seeks enjoyment but can only fail to realize it. The subject of drive is self-reflexive, in terms of wanting to make itself be seen and to control the way it is seen, and is a surplus, is more than a thing, more than a body; it acknowledges the impossibility of success in seeking enjoyment. The subject of desire chooses; the subject of drive wants to be chosen, makes itself chosen—and under each figure, the subject cannot help but pursue the enjoyment that it cannot attain (2000: 293).

Desire and drive are what make the subject more than mere subjectivization or individualization—more than a mere part of the ever-differentiating social world (the grounds for his criticism of Badiou, Balibar, and Rancière in 2000, chapter 4). The subject is emptiness, comes before subjectivization, is in excess of this very process, and so makes it possible:

the subject is inscribed into the very ontological structure of the universe as its constitutive void, but that '*subject*' designates the contingency of an Act that sustains the very ontological order of being. 'Subject' does not open up a hole in the full order of Being: 'subject' is the contingent-excessive gesture that constitutes the very universal order of Being.
(Žižek 2000: 160)

It is the subject's contingency that allows it to maintain Being as a universal order. The subject is an unnecessary but unavoidable step back from Being as the given, a step that creates Being as the given. It is a withdrawal that is a separation from the environment, not to return to nature, but to achieve an experience of the pure self, of the source of the subject's capacities. This break opens an emptiness whence the symbolic order can emerge.

This subject—which Žižek argues is the Cartesian subject—is no longer within the symbolic order, enunciated, already identifying symbolically and imaginarily with its *objet petit a*. It is not complete self-consciousness, but rather the consciousness of being directly related to that of which it is conscious. It is awareness that nothing is immediate, that reality is always mediated, that there is always a decision to everything the subject does (1998a: 260-261). Yet the cost of this step is that the subject is expelled from Being, while also remaining a part of it. In this manner, the subject is an act, a decision, a contingent gesture, and so it is always precarious (2000: 158). The subject, emerging from desire and drive, is consequently always in excess of the world and to itself and these

processes, because of its decisions and actions. However, it can operate a meaningful transformation once it is conscious of its own excess.

Such a subject of excess goes beyond both desire and drive, in disentangling itself from the symbolic order. For the subject to accept its destiny allows it to recognize that it is lack and failure. In recognizing the Other (the symbolic order, the determination that produce the subject) for what it is, the subject can resist it: it can pursue something other than the maintenance of this symbolic order that makes it exist as what it is, in the way it does; it can thus undermine that which makes it what it is, but through an ethical act, which does not rely solely on the rules and practices that make it possible and creates new rules and practices. At that point, it becomes able to reconfigure the Other. Such a reconfiguration of the symbolic order can extend to a reconfiguration of musical tradition, in its styles, genres, and forms—which is also a transfiguration of the subject itself.

Second Movement: Žižek's Music

In Žižek's work, music is primarily a locus of political, psychical and historical activity. As James (2011) has observed, for Žižek, "the proper role of the musical artist is to organize an egalitarian space," a utopian community in which music is neither "bacchanalian, nor...ascetic"; rather, the audience, in Žižek's words, is "ritualistic[ally] immers[ed] into a particular substance...individual idiosyncrasy," and, though a crowd, is able to keep "the universal...in check" through this same idiosyncrasy. In strictly psychoanalytic terms, by contrast, music is, "at its most elementary... [an] act of *supplication*: a call to a figure of the big Other (beloved lady, King, God...) to *respond*, not as the symbolic big Other, but in the real of his or her being...Music is thus an attempt to provoke the 'answer of the Real.'" (Žižek 2008: 245; emphasis in the original) Music can also serve as a register for the historic development of the subject, as Holly Watkins notes, observing that:

For Žižek, music's true history consists not so much of what anyone may have thought about or done with music at a given time or place as of the way in which compositions articulate the travails of the Western subject as it sheds the last vestiges of religious certainty, assumes the burden of Kantian autonomy, and ultimately finds itself in the Lacanian predicament of being barred from the ineffable cause of its own desires. (Watkins 2012: 450)

Whether it is classical or popular music, Žižek seems relatively indifferent to music as sound. When, for instance, he was asked about the punk band The Clash, Žižek asserted: “I like their activity...they were engaged [politically]. So I like everything about them...except their music.” (quoted in Massey 2013). It is not the music that is interesting to Žižek, but rather this “everything” else attached to it.

On “Classical” or Serious Music

When it comes to serious music, Žižek identifies himself as an unapologetic elitist, “a conservative European high modernist” (quoted in Medeiros 2011). Like fellow Marxian theorist Theodor Adorno, Žižek is particularly interested in Arnold Schoenberg, whose atonal music represents an historical event, or more pointedly, the “only true artistic Event of the twentieth century...a shattering...modernist breakthrough” (Žižek 2014a: 157). This breakthrough is, notwithstanding his invocation of a “true artistic Event” and echoing Adorno, essentially political: a radical act that subverts established order. Queried on musical modernism and Schoenberg versus Stravinsky, Žižek asserts:

I am against Stravinsky, for Schoenberg. I think that when we get a breakthrough in art, like with Schoenberg, we always get then accompanying it, a figure like Stravinsky. Renormalising the breakthrough. Cutting off the subversive edge of the breakthrough. (Žižek 2014b)

Žižek describes Schoenberg’s turn to atonality in the early 20th century as a radical moment for “vanguard art...vanguard rupture,” but more than that, a key moment in history: the First World War was not the outcome of the building socio-political forces from out of which radical music and art emerge as a symptom, but rather the war was a reaction to vanguard art, a reaction to the threat to order posed by such art—a “forceful and violent return of a patriotic slumber destined to block the true awakening.” (Žižek 2014a: 157-158) Yet Schoenberg’s 1909 monodrama *Erwartung*, op. 17—arguably the *ne plus ultra* of early atonal, Expressionist music—is not merely political for Žižek, but also a watershed for the musical representation of the unconscious and the subject, in the first instance as a work that nominally stages female hysteria (its protagonist seems to be a hysteric, and Schoenberg’s librettist may have drawn from Freud’s case histories for material). Of particular interest to our discussion of Žižek and music, however, is his interpretation of the

subjectivity at play in *Erwartung*: through its analogy to Freudian dream-work and its dialectical relationship between form and content—the gap between which comprising a “primordial repression”—*Erwartung* stages the void of subjectivity as the indeterminate content “that eludes the musical form and is as such constituted by it, as its remainder.” (Žižek 2014a: 176)²

The bulk of Žižek’s writing on “serious” music focuses on Wagner. While he makes a case for Wagner on a number of counts—Wagner’s operas “supply Žižek with his most consistent source of interpretive nectar” (Watkins 2012: 450)—Žižek looks primarily to Wagnerian opera as evidence for the historical development of the subject. He devotes a considerable amount of ink to Wagner’s quintessential Romantic opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, using it as a means to address the trope of infinite longing as both an aesthetic category and a facet of human suffering. Žižek’s assessment of Wagner’s operas—specifically *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*—as “the two single greatest works of art in the history of human kind” (Žižek and Dolan 2002: 104) hinges on the understanding of Wagner as “attest[ing] to this irreducible gap in modern subjectivity even while trying zealously to efface it” (Watkins 2012: 449). *Tristan* is, ostensibly, a music drama with desire at its core, driving towards the possible recovery of lost unity or a lost object, via its musical and dramatic elements: the plot transports two lovers fatalistically towards a union in death; musically, the opera hinges upon the long-range, delayed resolution of a dissonant harmonic progression, which functions as an analogue for transcendent sexual union. The opera fails on a philosophical and psychological level, according to Žižek, insofar as it is based on a fantasy of union with the Other—of immersion into a (musical) realm of pure bliss, beyond language, beyond death—as a means to overcome the trauma of symbolic castration; the opera succeeds insofar as it reaffirms the estrangement-unto-death of the subject.

Žižek’s interpretation of Romantic music also includes, importantly, Robert Schumann, whom Žižek associates with a particular kind of failure, namely the failure of melody. Failed melody in 19th-century music represents “the loss of what one never had”: the self-contained melodies of Viennese classicism become impossible as Romanticism gives itself over to the representation of the depth of the subject. For Schumann, a “radical reduction to subjectivity” gives rise to “unheard melody”, evidenced by the dialectical relationship between voice and piano in his songs—wherein neither part carries the whole melody as such; rather, it exists “on some elusive, intangible third level which merely

echoes in both of the levels that the listener actually hears, voice and piano.” (Žižek 2008: 253) The melody becomes impossible, inaudible, unrealizable: as such, Žižek asserts, it becomes “an exemplary case of the Lacanian *objet petit a*,” the object of desire, a lack, a hole in the Symbolic order (2008: 255). In terms of music and subjectivity, then, subjectivity “hinges on the absent melody—that is to say, the modern subject emerges when its objectal counterpart (in this case, a melody) disappears, but remains present (efficient) in its very absence: in short, the subject is correlative to an ‘impossible’ object whose existence is purely ‘virtual’.” (2008: 262)

On Popular Music

The difference between popular music and popular cinema in Žižek’s philosophy is that he seems to like the latter and not the former. Where popular music is concerned, he appears decidedly ambivalent: Žižek calls himself a “’68 generation conservative. I secretly think that everything really interesting in pop music, rock, happened between ’65 and ’75. I’m sorry!” (quoted in Massey 2013)³

Žižek’s perhaps best-known discussion of popular music centers on the German group Rammstein. The band is credited with giving rise to the so-call *Neue Deutsche Härte* or New German Hardness movement, following the release of their first album, *Herzeleid*, in 1995. Rammstein has long been criticized as a band that actively flirts with fascism, due to their use of a militaristic visual aesthetic that hints at Nazi imagery—including using Nazi-era film footage from Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*—and a harsh, uncompromising, industrial metal aesthetic of distorted guitars and four-square, martial rhythms. Žižek’s rebuttal of the claims that Rammstein are a fascist band is based upon the notion of over-identification, arguing that Rammstein push listeners to identify with explicit “images and motifs” of Nazism, “directly confronting us with its obscene materiality and thereby suspending its efficacy.” (Žižek 2011:386-87) This activity—overstatement of the “intrusive materiality” of fascism—“by-passes” Nazi ideology, liberating the pleasure of the sights and sounds of Rammstein’s performance so that they can be enjoyed in their “pre-ideological status.” (Žižek 2011: 386)⁴

“Rammstein,” Žižek asserts, “are my guys” (quoted in Massey 2013). He makes it quite clear that, like the Clash, Rammstein are likeable because of their political orientation

and activity, which is plainly leftist. As Žižek observes, “I think they’re extremely progressive...they explicitly supported Die Linke [Germany’s left-wing, democratic socialist party]...I like their extremely subversive, from within, undermining of all this [that is, proto-fascism].” (quoted in Massey 2013) Indeed, one of Rammstein’s most popular songs, “Links,” asserts the band’s dedication to leftist ideology: “My heart beats to the left!”

Ultimately, while Rammstein may be Žižek’s “guys,” it is by no means clear that he likes Rammstein’s music, or that he is responding to them as musicians, any more than he does with regard to The Clash. His assessment of the band as “progressive,” for instance, is strictly a political observation: the music is by no means “progressive” from a musical point of view: it is a highly generic, even slightly dated hybrid of industrial metal and dark glam, presented within the very familiar context of rock-as-spectacle, coupled with the mild *frisson* of Nazi aesthetics. There is very little, in the end, to differentiate Rammstein musically from similar acts—such as Ministry, Marilyn Manson or White Zombie—who share a musical aesthetic and gently flirt with fascistic imagery. Arguably, Žižek is drawn to Rammstein not because of the music, and not just because of the politics, but also because he finds himself united with them in common cause, observing that both he and the band have endured the label of leftist fascists—it makes sense, therefore, to follow Rammstein’s political lead, to “take over these—all of these—authoritarian gestures, unity, leader, sacrifice, fuck it, why not?” (quoted in Massey 2013) This ambivalence towards music as such poses some special problems for the scholar-critic seeking to understand and engage with the topic of Žižek on music.

Žižek’s problematic engagement with music—an engagement typified by a “carnavalesque mode of argumentation. Like a maddened bee, Žižek buzzes back and forth over a sprawling field of cultural motifs, repeatedly dipping into the same ‘flowers’ from slightly different angles of incidence” (Watkins 2012: 450)—raises the question, where do we go from here? How might Žižek’s notion of music as that which “renders the true heart of the subject” as an “inaccessible excess...the abyss of radical negativity” (quoted in Watkins, 452) relate to subjectivity in the music of Björk?

Third Movement: Björk's Music

How might Žižek hear Björk, were he to treat her music as serious—that is, were he to follow his insights into subjectivity rather than the political implications of her creations and performances? Björk appears to present a particularly good “subject” for an investigation into music and subjectivity, given that critics laud as her commitment to creativity and emotional honesty—she is a composer-performer whose music comes “from deep within” (Pareles 2015). Given Björk’s vast and multifaceted oeuvre, what we offer first here is a case study: a critical and primarily musical analysis—drawing on Žižek’s observations on music—of a representative work, namely the song “Black Lake” from the 2014 album *Vulnicura*. We chose this song for several reasons, not the least of which are its substantial length (it is over ten minutes long), its characteristic textures and underlying compositional ethos, and its purportedly direct connection to the singer’s personal experiences and emotional world. It is, moreover, tempting to argue that “Black Lake” is a virtual treatise on music and subjectivity, especially from the perspective of Žižekian music criticism.

Vulnicura is a concept album: all of the songs are linked by a common theme, namely suffering in the wake of the catastrophic failure of a relationship. Unlike some of Björk’s earlier albums that are more esoteric or abstract, *Vulnicura* is unabashedly personal: the impetus for the album derives from personal tragedy, and the music is intended to serve as both a register of and reflection upon the range of powerful feelings engendered by the tragedy. The visual elements of the album—most strikingly, the album cover art, which features Björk in a black latex bodysuit but with a gaping wound in her chest (“vulnicura” means “cure for wounds”)—also attest to the visceral immediacy of her feelings relating to event that precipitated the album, namely her break-up with Matthew Barney, her long-time partner and father of her child. The nine songs on the album document the collapse of their relationship and its aftermath through what critics seem to universally recognize as music that is striking, profound, even disturbing in its emotional intensity and honesty. The *New York Times* review of *Vulnicura* celebrates the way in which Björk’s songs “reveal the interior landscape of heartbreak and healing” (Pareles 2015); the *Los Angeles Times* called it her “most personal record” and “miraculously expressive” (Roberts 2015); and *The Guardian* describes the album’s “black despair” as comprising “one emotional sucker punch after another” (Petridis 2015). The critical discourse surrounding the album makes it clear that what is purportedly on offer for

listeners is a kind of unfettered access to Björk’s inner, subjective world, an encounter with the “real” Björk. But how is this access accomplished? What is the truth of this encounter with Björk as the subject of her music? And where does this encounter take place?

At just over ten minutes, “Black Lake” is the longest song on *Vulnicura*. The centrepiece of an album that coincides with what she calls “the most painful thing I ever experienced in my life,” Björk has insisted that “Black Lake”—because of its directness of expression—is a song she is “really embarrassed about. I can still hardly listen to it.” (quoted in Hopper) The most important musical details about the song concern its texture, harmonic structure and form. The song is written for strings and solo voice, with electronic sounds. The juxtaposition of composed strings and electronic elements was also employed on the 1997 album *Homogenic*, though in “Black Lake,” the strings serve as an explicit aspect of personal expression and the healing process for Björk—“The only way I could deal with [the pain] was to start writing for strings.” (quoted in J. Hopper 2015) The main function of the strings in “Black Lake” is to provide the song’s simple harmonic structure, a repeating eight-measure phrase and oscillating between three chords— the submediant (VI—built on the sixth degree of the scale), the tonic (i—built on the first degree of the scale) and the subtonic (VII—built on the seventh degree of the scale):

Harmonic phrase structure of “Black Lake”

Key:	D-sharp minor								
Chords: :	VI	i	VI	VII	VI	i	VI	i	:
Measures:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	

The simple texture of the string part—essentially one chord per measure, with some passing notes—evolves in complexity as the song progresses, ultimately providing a counterpoint to the declamatory and relatively free vocal line; at points of high emotional tension, the strings lose harmonic stability and coherence in an apparent analogue to psychic distress. The electronic parts, which first enter as tentative, fractured beats

beneath—that is, accompanying and even incidental to—the voice and strings, gradually grow in complexity and density, until the string parts are overwhelmed (indeed, the very identity of the string part is ultimately compromised by pitched electronic sounds that confuse the roles of the two parts) in a wash of deep bass, beats and other digitally-generated sounds.⁵ In “Black Lake,” there is ultimately a dialecticizing of the voice and the accompanying parts, and between the two parts—strings and electronics—themselves. Björk’s voice gradually loses its privileged position as a melodic line as the song progresses, its melodic primacy challenged by the blossoming counterpoint in the strings—the vocal part is never particularly lyrical, often echoing the halting, sing-song dyads of the string accompaniment—and the gradual electronic saturation of the song’s soundscape. “Black Lake” ends with a return to the unaccompanied string passage that began the song.

The chords of “Black Lake” warrant further comment. Identity in this song is not only obscured through texture—the electronic sounds overwhelm the string parts, and the string counterpoint itself introduces some modal ambiguity—but also through the song’s harmonic structure. Each phrase, as in the diagram above, essentially oscillates between submediant (VI) and tonic (i) chords. The function of the tonic chord is to provide a sense of orientation, of stability, commonly characterized as “home”: the tonic chord is the chord of return, and provides the fundamental harmonic identity—key and mode—of a piece of tonal music. One important function of the submediant chord is to substitute for the tonic, since they have two pitches in common. In “Black Lake,” the effect of the oscillation between these two chords—which, as played by the strings, implies a living, breathing subject insofar as it mimics the rhythm of inspiration and exhalation—is to weaken the identity of the tonic: by not being placed first in the chord progression, and juxtaposed with a very similar chord, the tonic is subordinated to the submediant. The addition of the subtonic (VII) chord to the progression further undermines the tonic: the subtonic, by nature, “pulls away” harmonically from the tonic chord, further weakening its primacy and identity as “home.” Here, then, the tonic chord—as home, as centre—is thus bereft of its special and stabilizing identity: it is, instead, isolated and adrift. The subject—the musician as much as the listener attempting to ascribe an identity to the musician—is never entirely “home” or centred; it finds itself ceaselessly emerging, stable only in moments of silence, which nonetheless function as moments in the movement of emergence that is carried throughout the song.

The formal structure of “Black Lake” is one of its most significant musical aspects. The song comprises a sequence of verses: based on the correspondence between the musical phrases and the lyrics, there appear to be 11. Many of the verses are separated by what Björk calls “Freezes”: long moments of harmonic stasis—generally, a single sustained chord played by the strings—in which voice and electronic parts drop out (there are seven “Freezes” in “Black Lake”: the shortest is approximately 12 seconds in duration; the longest is approximately 33 seconds). These static periods comprise, in total, approximately three full minutes of the song, and are meant to represent emotional nadirs, or the points at which feelings overwhelm words:

It's like, when you're trying to express something and you sort of start, but then nothing comes out. You can maybe utter five words and then you're just stuck in the pain. And the chords in-between, they sort of represent that. Those minutes of stuttering silence. Then, you maybe manage a few more words, and then you're stuck again. We called them “the freezes,” these moments between the verses. They're longer than the verses, actually. It's just that one emotion when you're stuck. It is hard, but it's also the only way to escape the pain, just going back and having another go, trying to make another verse (quoted in Magnússon).

From a Lacanian/Žižekian perspective, these “Freezes” appear especially relevant: they surely belong to the register of the symptom, possessing as they do the quality of “wanting to say”—that is, characterized by being “stuck,” by a “stuttering silence” wherein words are blocked by pain—and fulfilling the symptom's destiny to repeat itself (Miller). They are, however, not merely moments of silence, stuttering or otherwise; rather, they are musical gestures—sounding gestures—of non-movement. Why insist upon this distinction? Because these static gestures are precisely not the silence that, according to Žižek, betokens the (modern) subject of music. He insists that, as in Schumann's songs, or in the solo piano music, such as *Humoresque*, where the composer inexplicably notates a third, unplayed and unheard part, a “non-vocalized ‘inner voice’,” the

‘unreal’ dimension of music... is now elevated into the structural principle of the ‘unheard voice’; the ‘true voice’ is now explicitly posited as Silence itself, as an ‘impossible’ object which, for a priori reasons, cannot be heard and around which, like a traumatic kernel, the musical sounds actually produced circulate. (Žižek 2008: 256)

For Žižek, the subject is both correlative to the absent voice (that is, the subject emerges at the moment “its objectal counterpart (in this case, melody) disappears, but remains present...in its very absence,” and is also akin to Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, insofar as *objet petit a* is, “as the paradox of a voice which cannot be materialized... the unfathomable X, the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*” (Žižek 2008: 263). In the case of Björk’s “Black Lake,” the Freezes are not silence: they are moments of sustained sound, harmony bereft of melody, accompaniment to a silence that carries its own meaning. It is paradoxically in the “Freezes,” in fact—pedal points, moments of relative stasis in which the tonic chord is sustained—that harmonic identity, which is normally determined through motion, is affirmed. The “Silence” or the “true voice” in Björk’s song is thus that voice which is not heard, which she herself characterizes as “stuttering silence”: an unheard singing voice that is proper to the place held open by the long, sustained—we could say, empty—chords of the Freezes. The meaning of the Freezes themselves are not, as Björk observes, that they mark the failure of words but rather the failure of melody as carrier of meaning, and the point at which the subject emerges, revealed by the meaning carried by the harmony. The ending of “Black Lake”—and recall that, musically/structurally the song, as a simple succession of verses lacking harmonic momentum, does not ever *have* to end—re-inscribes the subject: not in the verbatim return of the song’s opening, originary string passage, which Björk associates with self and with a process of healing, but rather, the subject appears at the moment of closure, in the activity of closing off the musical sounds, in Silence.⁶

Fourth Movement: Björk’s Subject

While Žižek offers a Hegelian/Lacanian approach to Björk’s music that is able to account even for her own explanation of that music, a complementary but divergent account can be found and developed further in Björk’s own theorization of her musical practice, which we present here without reference to Žižek to add to the case study of Björk’s “Black Lake” along Zizekian lines. The mid-career retrospective of Björk’s work, prepared for an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, includes a booklet of exchanges through emails between Björk and Timothy Morton, a philosopher who is developing an object-oriented ontology. Björk explains that her musical practice relocates

human beings within what is not them, within a vast array of objects, natural and cultural, so as to blur their boundaries. She describes these two aspects of object-oriented ontology as animism and resonance.

Animism de-centres human beings and replaces them among the things they find and use as things that are found and use other things. This animist perspective turns us toward things and their soul, and allows us to speak of there being soul in “each laptop, each bird , each building” (Guðmundsdóttir and Morton 2015: 9).⁷ Animated and animating just like all these things—in an internal relationship of mutual animation and not moved or moving externally—the subject belongs to the same realm as them. The subject does not come first; rather, the animist perspective opens a possibility for us to care for ourselves through caring for other entities as well as through ecological care. None of these forms of caring is primordial; rather, Björk posits an equivalence between them, as facets of any caring. The subject cares for what is animated, for things with soul—that is, for what animates it and for what she animates. This equivalence shows the subject as one entity among many in an ecosystem where each depends on the other.

Within this system, human beings, like all beings and things, resonate with what surrounds them. Just as atoms resonate, just as things resonate with other things, we also resonate with each other and with everything that surrounds us. Such resonance takes place with differing intensities of intentionality, beginning at the subatomic level and including the attempts of subjects to willfully create resonance in the realm of other objects and beings that also resonate subjectivity. Music can consequently be a way for us as subjects to “finally open up to resonance.” (2015: 9) This opening is where we place the site of emergence of the subject: like all things, the subject resonates with what surrounds it; however, it can also decide to resonate with and to create echoes in things. While resonance happens no matter what we do, speech is one way for us to enact resonance, in an action-driven manner; music is another, which Björk suggests is currently lacking and which she seeks to develop.

Björk expands on this idea of resonance by speaking of her “habit of physically absorbing things which comes in handy when i sing.” (2015: 14): singing is a physical action that emerges from what has been absorbed. But the song does not carry ideas as speech—“embroidered elaborate phrases” (2015: 14)—does. She describes her lyrics instead as acting as signposts, “musicmoods,” and shortcuts to feelings: they belong to the

physicality of singing, to the activity and passivity of the subject, they help the listeners find their way through the musical space. Lyrics continue to have a narrative element, they aim to tell a tale. However, without any guarantee that they will be understood by the listener, their function remains less narrative and more related to manifesting the physicality of emotions. Björk can thus oppose her stance in the world, which would be carried into an “ism” and into sentences, to her stance in the space of magic and of the unspeakable—the space that is proper to music, a space of resonance rather than a space of pure action.

We come to resonate through various degrees of attachment to things and to our surroundings, which always involve and presuppose our contact with them, with detachment and love as extremes. To say that we can only detach ourselves because we are aware of being and of remaining attached in a more fundamental manner, and that we only love and care because we remain separate from what we love, is not a platitude: we find an active passivity and a passive activity in animistic caring and in resonance. This active and passive movement is the subject: the condition of attachment and detachment, the possibility of resonance. Through animism, resonance and attachment, we see a subject emerging, exceeding its surroundings, exceeding what it resonates with, exceeding that to which it is attached, adding to it through its caring, through its explanations and its speech, but also through its singing.

Music can present these different elements, with “some dark beats” being attempts at abstraction and detachment, and melodies being attempts at caring to the point of merging (with other entities and with the ecosystem as well)—both leading to the same place (2015: 18), where there is passion in minimalism even without the possibility of merging, and where there is swirling, where there are loops in what is streamlined (2015: 21). Music, in its loudness, can be liquid like an ocean, as Björk’s simile suggests, allowing us to live as fish in water—undifferentiated and active, supported by the current and forced to go against the current.

The subject emerges from what animates it—its previous thoughts and actions included. It emerges from its unknowing and knowing attunement, that is, its relationship to things, its frustrations and successes, its caring and its indifference. And so Björk can write: “yes: we can merge and survive, 1 + 1 is three” (2015: 18): the subject is the kind of caring that animism and de-centring makes possible and the resonance that singing

makes possible—it becomes more than it was before intentionally resonating with what surrounds it.

We can trace the presence of this conception of music and of its emergence throughout Björk's work through two attempts to bring them into songs. The first kind of attempt consists in placing her voice among other voices. In *Vespertine*, many of the elements of Björk's subsequent music emerge: the layering of her voice, the use of a choir, sparser music, and a unified musical approach with few if any references to popular genres characterize this album. Yet it is in the following album, *Medúlla*, that she takes to its extremes the attempt to place her voice among other voices, as the singing of a subject among subjects. Without the least nod to the *a capella* tradition, *Medúlla* features almost exclusively voices, to the exclusion of instruments. At most, electronic "dark beats" are used in conjunction with beats created from human voices.

The voices of others are featured pre-eminently. Male voices reoccur and in dialogue with Björk's, allowing both voices to coexist and lead into each other's melodies. Beats and instrumentations are also played by vocalists. The throat singing of Tanya Tagaq (whose recent and widely lauded album is titled *Animism*) operates to merge humanity, animality and the time-keeping function of the beat. Björk's voice does not appear against a background of electronic and traditional instruments, but rather as part of an ensemble of voices and instruments.⁸

Above all, the album is marked by the equality given to the many instances of Björk's own voice, where she does not sing a "lead" or a "melody" that is supported by "harmonies", but rather is present in different manners at the same time, in a way that suggests her distancing of herself to offer many perspectives at once, just as much as merging with her surroundings to give a unified song that brings together her different aspects. No clear meaning emerges out of the intertwining and differentiation of these voices in their relation to one another and in the relations between the beat and the melody that is present through them as well as in their opposition to the rare electronic beats.

Instead, Björk turns us toward herself as a sonic singing subject, able to absorb the emotions, the surroundings, and the relationships that have allowed her, in resonating with them, and to surpass them to become the artist she was not before beginning the process. She also turns us toward ourselves as sonic listening subjects, able to absorb our own

emotions, surroundings, and relationships because of our attunement to her own absorption, ours merging with hers through the song, yet leading us to different subjectivities. As with Žižek's theory of subjectivity, there is no absolute, unified subject. Yet, unlike Žižek, Björk does not present subjectivity merely surrounded by things and people and moved by desire and drive: she is moved by what surrounds her and moves it as well; she participates in it. Her animism refers both to soul and to reciprocal indirect influence—to animation.

The second kind of attempt to bring ideas around music and emergence into song consists in Björk placing her voice among natural things. In her exchanges with Morton, the landscape and culture of Iceland stand in for the North and stand opposed to Hollywood, itself a synecdoche for the West and its disenchanting nihilism. While the ecological thinking attached to this nihilism awaits an unavoidable apocalypse, the North offers more space and with it, a connection between “plant / people / sound / animals.” (Guðmundsdóttir and Morton 2015: 11) There is no hierarchy in this series, only lateral connections as part of a unified space, where sound has a physical existence alongside vegetal and animal physicalities—where different forms of presence are possible and intertwine. In *Biophilia*, Björk attempts directly to bring natural elements into music and to show music as part of nature. She explores how to incorporate these resonances both in the studio and onstage using Evan Grant's chladni plates, Henry Dagg's Sharpsichord, as well as a tesla coil and pendulum-strummed harps together with choirs and acoustic and electronic instruments. As an attempt to change how music is made and perceived, *Biophilia* functions by replacing the voice and human subjectivity in a relation with instruments and natural objects that is one of reciprocity, mutual animation, resonance and spirituality, rather than domination or simple willful creation.⁹

As early as 1997, Björk's album *Homogenic* already trod on these grounds, preoccupied as it was with the question of identity and what it means to be Icelandic (Walker 2003: 27:50). Two video clips for singles from the album reveal the attempt at letting magic happen: “Jóga” presents the magic of the landscape, which is animated as if it has purpose and intentions, while “Hunter” presents the magic of metamorphosis not only between human and animal, but also between flesh and synthetic existence—whether the artifice is virtual, given the use of animation to achieve the effect, or robotic, as the animation suggests.

The two songs open the album, and present a stark contrast in mirroring approaches. “Hunter” begins with electronic beats and a distorted voice, with strings and an untreated voice blending in to complicate the instrumentation by adding an organic quality emerging from the dominant electronic elements. “Jóga” instead begins with strings and untreated voice, and a softer, less percussive instrumentation, with slow beats emerging in the pre-chorus and post-chorus to prepare transitions and bring a sense of movement as more instruments join in at the second chorus to mark the differences in the “emotional landscape” she creates. In both songs, the organic and electronic instruments at times seem to compete, but generally tend to be present as different features of a landscape, never entirely absent from the whole, called by each other and Björk’s voice, and calling each other for a sense of completeness.

If there is any kind of homogeneity in this mix where voices are both natural and synthetic and where natural and synthetic elements compete with one another and demand each other, it is to be found in the layering and intertwining of instruments, the calls from one element to another, which come from the attempt of the subject to resonate with the ways in which these elements already interact and are animated, to bring them together and to arrange its own place among them. The subject as singer emerges through this intention to re-animate through resonance, and makes itself different, able to better merge with its environment and with these things. Guided by this singer, the listener can also become that emerging and merging subject. Music is not a world within, not the expression of the self, but rather a dimension of the world in which the subject participates and must further and better perceive the way in which it participates in this world (Guðmundsdóttir and Attenborough 2001: p.1 of unpaginated text).

Finale

Speaking about *Dancer in the Dark* and the songs she wrote for *Selmasongs*, Björk highlights the importance of communication in music:

I was thinking about how a lot of composers have been really bad at communicating with people. [...] Quite a lot of them seem to sacrifice relationships while they are alive and just have the most intimate relationship with their song. You listen to their music now and it immediately talks to you. (Guðmundsdóttir and Attenborough 2001: 3)

As in the case of our interaction with things, communication is not limited to our interactions with other people. If we truly de-centre human beings in our ontology, we must also allow for communication with things or, as in this case, with a specific kind of song (not all music would fit under this banner, and no criteria seem to apply to operate distinctions). Composers have a relationship with a song that is external to them, that is animated by them but also animates them, that is their attempt intentionally to resonate with their surroundings, but that they also resonate with, that changes them from the outside. In this way, they can act as agents of communication not only between persons, but also between worlds (Walker 2003: 48:30). Listeners hear the music, *it talks* to them in ways the composer could not have imagined or intended, they relate to songs as things and not merely as part of their own psyche.

Composing and listening are examples of activities through which we subjectivize ourselves and are subjectivized. Žižek presses us to understand how this mutual subjectivization takes place through desire and drive, as they relate to arbitrarily chosen individuals among objects and other people, and as they are shaped by our relationship to the symbolic order—the big Other. Despite her focus on our always continuing relationship of resonance with objects and people, Björk agrees with Žižek that through such activities we emerge as subjects, that is, as capable of exceeding ourselves, our surroundings and our mutual resonance. Resonance and the symbolic order consequently appear as two sites of genesis of the emerging subject—and resonance perhaps better explains the emergence of the particular subject of music, of the practice of music as a specific manner of interacting with the symbolic order.

Beyond their respective focus on emergence and ontology, or on excess and psychology, where Björk and Žižek's positions diverge the most is in the register of their extra-philosophical theorizing: beyond seeking understanding and developing a discourse of knowledge, as Žižek admittedly does through psychoanalysis, Björk remains a musician. She allows listeners to absorb these ideas, to resonate and merge with their own physical and musical environment rather than to develop an intellectual understanding of them. She seeks to change their perception of music and, in so doing, of themselves and of their own movement of emergence.

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Notes

¹ Several studies have dissected the theory of the subject Žižek develops; as a result, we limit ourselves here to central considerations directly tied to our question and we focus on the account of the subject offered in Žižek (2000); for a more complete study of the subject, we can point toward: Watkins 2012, Vighi and Feldner 2010, Robinson and Tormey 2005.

² A further difficulty to confront with respect to Žižek on music is that he is quite often wrong about the details of the music he discusses. For example, he cites the “atonal orchestration” of Schoenberg’s massive symphonic song cycle *Gurrelieder*, which is, strictly speaking, nonsensical: orchestration—the deployment of instruments for particular effect in a musical score—does not relate to the vertical or horizontal relationships between pitches, and so cannot be tonal or atonal. Žižek is getting at the notion of Schoenberg using the orchestra in the tonal *Gurrelieder* in a manner similar to the large scale atonal works of 1909-1911 that immediately precede it (*Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 16, the monodrama *Erwartung* op. 17, and the music drama *Die glückliche Hand*, op. 18): that is, using the orchestra polyphonically, as though it were a chamber ensemble, to isolate or foreground melodic counterpoint. Ultimately, Žižek’s argument—that *Gurrelieder*, rather than serving as an homage to Wagner and a summation of the aesthetic of the late 19th century, instead betokens the tensions of incipient modernism—fails to take into account important facets of the work itself, namely that the treatment of the orchestra is not merely asynchronous—completed at different times and therefore reflecting two different aesthetics—but quite likely intentionally bifurcated: the opening half of *Gurrelieder* is Wagnerian, in terms of textual content, which is reflected in the orchestration; the second half, with its depictions of a chaotic hunt, eschews the homogeneity of Wagnerian scoring for Schoenberg’s heterogenous and kaliedescopic sound palette (see Campbell 2000).

³ Žižek considers himself an elitist when it comes to music, even eschewing the popular when it comes to western Classical music, denigrating Tchaikovsky, for instance, at every turn. While Tchaikovsky plays a role as one side of Žižek’s dialectic of Romantic melody—a dialectic in which Schumann’s “failure,” vis a vis the dissolution of melody in 19th-century music confronts Tchaikovsky’s real failure in trying to preserve a kind of classical melody past its time—it is also clear that Žižek simply hates his music. In discussing the film *Black Swan*, for instance, Žižek asserts that Tchaikovsky’s music—the score of the film is comprised largely of rearranged fragments from *Swan Lake*—is “bullshit... Tchaikovsky is out for me, no? It’s popular music.” (Meideros 2011).

⁴ Although, the terms of this enjoyment are not entirely clear: it seems that Žižek is describing a kind of enjoyment issuing from the confrontation with what James Little calls “neutralize[d] totalitarian signifiers” (Little 2011: 4) rather than with, again, the music *qua* music.

⁵ Some of the programmed electronics are reminiscent of the “microbeats” heard on the album *Vespertine*: small samples of noise often sounding like mistakes or electronic glitches, rather than a carefully manicured digital sound palette.

⁶ The return of this opening passage, with its striking harmonic ambiguity, really affirms “Black Lake” as a circular journey, as an exemplar of the death-drive: as Žižek might have it, a musical representation of “the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain” (Žižek 2009: 62).

⁷ All quotations from the MOMA retrospective are as found, embracing the lack of respect for typographical conventions Björk displays in her emails to Morton.

⁸ For a complete musicological analysis of *Medúlla*, see Malawey (2011), whose focus is on the notion of emergence.

⁹ This attempt requires an analysis of its own, extending into the notions of nature and culture at play in Björk’s thinking and practice—which would also greatly benefit from a dialogue with Žižek’s own consideration on the relationship between nature, culture and subjectivity. For the instruments mentioned here, see <http://www.cymatics.co.uk/>; <http://www.humansinvent.com/#!/10304/sharpsichord-the-solar-powered-harp-that-plays-itself/>; and L. Hopper (2013).