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Auditory Atmospheres: Music, Media Technologies, and Literary Representation

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Five Theses for Discussion

1. What is the status of the literary representation of music in the age of media-technological reproducibility? In our digital age, computers and earphones allow the listener to experience the bodily and affective immersion in a seemingly limitless cyberspace of music files, whose aura they can project back onto their surroundings, transforming reality into resonant projection screens of their own fantasies, desires, and aesthetic sentiments.
2. The inherently diffuse character of the concept of atmosphere lends itself to further explorations of its interdisciplinary “travels” through a largely uncharted territory encompassing sound studies, philosophy, and literary criticism.
3. The possibilities and limitations of digitally mediated atmospheres open up a new understanding of the literary representation of musical experiences by high-modernist writers.
4. A comparison between Thomas Mann's description of the production of musical entrancement by the fashionable gramophone in *Der Zauberberg* and Georg Trakl's exploration of the Orpheus myth in his poem "Passion" (see end of this document) reveals a hidden conflict in early 20th century culture between state-of-the-art media-technological reproducibility and a seemingly anachronistic exploration of "live" or "real-time" musical atmospheres through the literary imagination.
5. Drawing from various interdisciplinary positions, I propose to define auditory atmospheres as highly contingent framework conditions of sonic, especially musical experiences. Emerging in the evanescent here and now, they promise a temporary suspension of the alienating subject-object split through the immersion of the human subject's imagination in affective encounters with intensively captivating acoustic events. But ultimately this effect is a phantasm, an illusion, albeit one that is of the greatest significance for meaningful listening. Triggering something in the audience's unconsciousness and directly affecting their bodily disposition, auditory atmospheres—whether live or technologically mediated—partially opens themselves to analytic reflection but only afterwards, in a belated intellectual response forming itself once the initial shock of the sonic experience has settled down or passed away.

Georg Trakl, "Passion" (2. version, 1914):

Wenn Orpheus silbern die Laute rührt,
Beklagend ein Totes im Abendgarten,
Wer bist du Ruhendes unter hohen Bäumen?
Es rauscht die Klage das herbstliche Rohr,
Der blaue Teich,
Hinsterbend unter grünenden Bäumen
Und folgend dem Schatten der Schwester;
Dunkle Liebe
Eines wilden Geschlechts,
Dem auf goldenen Rädern der Tag davonrauscht.
Stille Nacht.

Unter finsternen Tannen
Mischten zwei Wölfe ihr Blut
In steinerner Umarmung; ein Goldnes
Verlor sich die Wolke über dem Steg,
Geduld und Schweigen der Kindheit.
Wieder begegnet der zarte Leichnam
Am Tritonsteich
Schlummernd in seinem hyazinthenen Haar.
Daß endlich zerbräche das kühle Haupt!

Denn immer folgt, ein blaues Wild,
Ein Äugendes unter dämmernden Bäumen,
Dieser dunkleren Pfaden
Wachend und bewegt von nächtigem Wohllaut,
Sanftem Wahnsinn;
Oder es tönte dunkler Verzückung
Voll das Saitenspiel
Zu den kühlen Füßen der Büsserin
In der steinernen Stadt.¹

When Orpheus silver stirs the lyre,
Lamenting the dead in the evening garden,
Who are you at rest beneath high trees?
Lament rustles the autumn reeds,
The blue pond,
Dying away beneath greening trees
And following the sister's shadow;
Dark love
Of a wild race,

¹ Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*. Ed. Hans Weichselbaum (Salzburg, Wien: Otto Müller, 2020), 125.

From which the day rushes away on wheels of gold.
Silent night.

Beneath dark firs
Two wolves married their blood
In stony embrace; a golden form
The cloud vanished over the little bridge,
Patience and silence of childhood.
Encounter again the tender corpse
By the Triton pond
Slumbering in her hyacinthine hair.
That the cool head might shatter at last!

For always a blue deer follows,
An eying form beneath dusking trees,
These darker paths
Waking and stirred by nocturnal euphony,
Gentle madness;
Or the string play sounded
Swollen with dark ecstasy
A the cool feet of the penitent woman
In the stony city.²

² Will Stone, (trans.), *Surrender to Night: Collected Poems by Georg Trakl*. Selected and translated by Will Stone. London: Pushkin Press, 2019, 182-83. Trans. modified.