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I want to pose some questions about the alignments and connections between a series of terms and oppositions operative at the inception of abstraction. The central term, of course, is “abstraction” itself, or “the abstract.” I want to pose these terms against their traditional antitheses, “representation” or “the figurative,” but also against the more basic notion of “the concrete,” in order to ask: Within the context of early modernism, what did “abstraction” mean, or what did it mean “to abstract”? And what was the trajectory of this departure from the world of ordinary objects, the depiction of which we call “representation”? Must abstraction have meant a movement toward the ideal or the spiritual? Or might it also have meant a relationship to the material or the real, conceived as that which underlies and conditions the world of representation? I’d like to test these connections and alignments by focusing on the role played by music and sound in “the invention of abstraction.”

It is a commonplace of art history that the pictorial abstraction emergent in the first two decades of the twentieth century drew considerable inspiration from music, that the “emancipation” of music from text in the late eighteenth century and the dominance of “absolute” (purely instrumental) music in the nineteenth provided some of the key conditions of possibility for visual modernism’s drive toward a nonrepresentational art.¹ Announced in 1877, Walter Pater’s famous claim that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” would be echoed by visual abstractionists from Frantisek Kupka to Gerhard Richter.² As a non-mimetic art, music came to be seen as the very model for aesthetic autonomy and the aesthetics of pure form. In the work of painters such as Vasily Kandinsky and critics such as Roger Fry, this autonomy was often construed in spiritual terms as establishing an ideal aesthetic dimension that transcended the dreary quotidian world. Kandinsky and others supported these spiritual aims with a discourse of synesthesia, which attempted to hitch relatively more earthbound hunks of canvas and paint to the seemingly immaterial and transcendent flights of music.

1. See, for example, John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language: Departure from Mimesis in 18th Century Aesthetics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Karin von Maurer, *The Sound of Painting: Music in Modern Art* (Munich: Prestel, 1999); and Judith Zilcher, “Music for the Eyes: Abstract Painting and Light Art,” *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*, ed. Kerry Brougher et al. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), pp. 25–86.

2. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (New York: Modern Library, 1919), p. 111. Asked by Benjamin Buchloh about his abstract paintings in a 1986 interview, Richter replies: “I’ve always seen it as something musical. There’s a lot in the construction, in the structure, that reminds me of music. It seems so self-evident to me, but I couldn’t possibly explain it”; to which Buchloh responds: “That’s one of the oldest clichés around. People always have resorted to music in order to save the foundations of abstract painting.” Gerhard Richter, “Interview with Benjamin Buchloh,” *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 1155.

However, alongside this orthodox modernist discourse on music ran a very different one. In the early 1870s, Nietzsche celebrated music not for its capacity to elevate the listener above the ordinary world and its representations but for its ability to plunge him or her into the cauldron of forces and intensities that constitute that world.³ Nietzsche does not champion music for its ideality or purity of form. On the contrary, he affirms it as the most deeply and richly material of the arts. For Nietzsche, music does not surpass the visual arts in abstraction; it undergirds them in concreteness. Or rather, it supports a different conception of abstraction: not a transcendent but an immanent abstraction. Music makes sensuous what Deleuze and Guattari call the “abstract machines” inherent in matter, collections of forces that are “real yet nonconcrete, actual yet non-effectuated.”⁴ That is, music makes evident not pure and essential forms extracted from the objects of ordinary experience but the differential, intensive forces that materially generate them.

Five years after Nietzsche published his book on music and the artistic impulses of nature,⁵ Thomas Edison and Charles Cros inaugurated a technological revolution that fundamentally altered how sound was understood. No longer the emanation of an ideal and metaphysical interiority, speech and voice became products of external mechanical contrivances that reveal the technological character of vocalization in general, the production of sound as a physical rather than a spiritual fact.⁶ The capacity of the phonograph to record not only articulate sound but any sound whatsoever dispersed music and speech within the broader field of noise.⁷ No longer figured symbolically as ratios and inter-

3. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), and my “Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 495–513.

4. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 511. This phrase marks a change in Deleuze’s conception of abstraction. It is a variant of a formula (derived from Proust) by which the early Deleuze often characterized the virtual: “Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.” (See, for example, Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], p. 208.) In this early work, Deleuze clearly associates abstraction with a Platonist conception of transcendence, which his notion of the virtual aims to undermine. Deleuze’s adoption of the term “abstract machine” in his work with Guattari signals his formulation of an alternative conception of abstraction: an immanent abstraction “opposed to the abstract in the ordinary sense” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 511). On these two notions of abstraction, see also John Rajchman, “Abstraction,” *Constructions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 55–76.

5. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, chapter 2.

6. In 1878, Thomas Edison gleefully described the phonograph to a newspaper reporter: “This tongueless, toothless instrument, without larynx or pharynx, dumb, voiceless matter, nevertheless utters your words, and centuries after you have crumbled to dust will repeat again and again to a generation that could never know you, every idle thought, every fond fancy, every vain word that you choose to whisper against this thin iron diaphragm.” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 1878, p. 1, available at <http://www.phonozoic.net/n0031.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

7. See John Cage, “Future of Music: Credo” (1937), *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1961), p. 4.

vals, sound was now figured physically as frequency and vibration. As Friedrich Kittler puts it, the symbolic domain of voice and music gave way to “the noise of the real.”⁸

Gillian Beer and John Picker have noted the profound effects of this new sonic discourse on the rise of literary modernism.⁹ But what resonance, if any, did they have within visual modernism, which seems, rather, to have drawn continuous sustenance from a conception of music and sound that had become philosophically and technologically outmoded? Hal Foster has noted that the discourse around early abstraction constantly swung between the poles of idealism and materialism.¹⁰ Yet its treatment of sound remained resolutely idealist, tied to notions of purity and transcendence.

Even in the music that paralleled visual modernism, the new conception of sound was not wholly apprehended. The world of noise opened up by the phonograph surely influenced Arnold Schoenberg’s move toward atonality, which, however, soon gave way to a rigorously formal serialism. The Futurist painter turned composer Luigi Russolo, who declared his intention to dispense with musical sounds in favor of the noise of the world, found himself musicalizing this material via a new set of musical instruments that would “give pitches to these diverse noises, regulating them harmonically and rhythmically.”¹¹ The same is true of Pierre Schaeffer, who, at the other end of modernism, criticized the “abstraction” of traditional music (*musique abstraite*), which operated with a restricted set of pitches and through the detour of a system of signs, in favor of what he termed *musique concrète*, produced entirely by the phonographic recording and editing of worldly noise. After numerous experiments, Schaeffer declared in a late interview: “It took me forty years to conclude that nothing is possible outside do-re-mi. . . . In other words, I wasted my life.”¹² Of the early modernists, it was perhaps only Edgard Varèse who affirmed the new sonic culture, taking inspiration from physics, chemistry, geology, and cartography, and abandoning the term “music” in favor of “organized sound.”¹³ Varèse not only reconceived musical structure by analogy with physical and chemical concepts, he also held a deeply materialist conception of sound and music as vibratory and electrical matter that was in line with

8. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 14.

9. See Gillian Beer, “Wave Theory and the Rise of Literary Modernism” and other essays in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Denis Hollier, “The Death of Paper, Part Two: Artaud’s Sound System,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 27–37.

10. Hal Foster, “1913,” *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), pp. 119–20.

11. Luigi Russolo, “The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto,” *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), p. 27.

12. Tim Hodgkinson, “An Interview with Pierre Schaeffer—Pioneer of Musique Concrète,” *ReR Quarterly* (1987), available at www.timhodgkinson.co.uk/schaeffer (accessed August 29, 2012).

13. See Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 17–21.

Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian. Yet, despite his prominence and connections with the visual arts (notably Dada), Varèse's materialist trajectory was not pursued until the 1950s and '60s, with the emergence of Cage and full-blown "sound art."

More broadly, I suggest that this association of modernism with a predominantly idealist and formalist conception of music and sound is, in part, responsible for the refusal or inability of postmodernist critical and art-historical approaches to deal with the sonic arts. The conception of music as, at best, an autonomous formal domain and, at worst, a domain possessed of spiritual pretensions did not suit the critical discourses that arose in the 1960s. Yet it seems to me that the materialist alternative made possible by the audio technologies of the late nineteenth century and followed by Varèse, Cage, and others is equally anathema to the theories of representation and signification that have dominated critical discourse over the past half century. Such a materialism challenges the residual humanism and idealism of theories founded on a conception of language and discourse that, in line with the oldest European metaphysics and theology, grants humans an ontological uniqueness and elevation above the rest of nature, conceived always only as a correlate of the symbolic order. Along with the early abstractionists, I suggest that music and sound can once again provide a model for the other arts. Yet, instead of form and transcendence, this model is one of matter and immanence. Instead of asking of an image, text, or sound what it means or represents, we ought to ask what it does, how it operates, what changes it effectuates, what forces it channels, and how it affects bodies conceived not as signifying subjects but as themselves collections of material forces.¹⁴

I began with a set of questions that I'd like to reiterate and expand in an effort to suggest a way of pursuing some of the suggestions I have laid out too briefly here. What is "abstraction" and "the abstract" vis-à-vis the visual, the musical, and the sonic? What is the relationship between "the abstract," on the one hand, and "the ideal," "the concrete," and "the material," on the other? Did the materialist technologies and ontologies of sound that emerged in the late nineteenth century affect pictorial abstraction and visual modernism in any important way? With their interest in noise, the temporality of sound, and the physical force of bodies, did the Futurists perhaps come closest to the conception of sound laid out by Nietzsche, Edison, and Varèse? And can any historical relationship be drawn between the "materialist" interests of some early abstractionists and the sonic materialism that emerged in the late nineteenth century?

14. For an argument along these lines, see my "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism," *Journal of Visual Culture* (August 2011), pp. 145–61.