

The Composer as Ideologue

Cesare Casarino has written of the *production* of Communism as “the symbiotic articulation of a revolutionary time and a revolutionary body” [Casarino and Negri 2008; 234-5]. My work, both as a composer and theorist, is concerned with the cultural aspects of this production, particularly in regards to composition as a sub-practice within the much broader social practice of music.

Something I find very striking in Casarino’s phrase is the dynamism it captures: politics is foregrounded here as something inseparable from instances of lived expression, and its form is understood in part as a particular construction of time. What I want to do is offer a consideration of ideology in light of this, of its constitution through embodiment and practice, and connect this with music composition understood as a site of the production of intensities embodied as affections and perceptions.

Politics is the practice of dissent. A space or duration is actualised as political when dissent is produced as perceivable, affecting, or conceivable; and energy is invested to sustain its becoming as part of a culture in transformation. Any such actualisation is predicated on desire, manifest, for example, as a collective investment in an idea of a future. This production is double-edged: not only must dissent be voiced but ears must be formed able to hear it. I will return to this.

Affects and percepts describe intensity as it exists *for* a body. The distinction between affect and percept lies in *how* intensity is embodied. For example, intensities in a certain spectrum — say, the spectrum of visible light for a human — are contracted by the eye, affects are contracted by feelings. I follow Teresa Brennan here in understanding a feeling as a sort of organ, as what we feel with and not as what is felt (“the things that one feels are affects. the things that one feels with are feelings” [Brennan 2004; 22]), which also immediately foregrounds the possibility of affect that is embodied but not experienced. Affection describes the work of the feelings, as perception describes the work of the eyes, ears or skin.

Organs are formed and reformed in the embodiment of intensities. This liminality of organs seems easy enough to grasp as regards feelings, transient albeit habitual structures which contract chemical and electrical information; but consider the skin of a cellist’s fingertips, or a slapped face, or a cirrhotic liver. The intensities embodied by the organ become the memory and a history of the organ. One could say the body is sensible because it has formed such organs in response to and continuously modulated by the intensities of other bodies. Amplifications and transpositions of this memory, as a conscious experience for example, are a function of the biological complexity and also the *social complexity* of the body affected. Affection and perception inform consciousness but do not in any way depend on it, neither do they depend on a brain. For the rest of this paper I will be concerned with affection and perception in beings which have both, and which in fact have developed self-consciousness. Self-consciousness remains at present the condition for the highest degree of social complexity, and is a further embodied ideological structure which overdetermines the percepts and affects informing it.

Mike Dunford describes the effect of this overdetermination concisely when he writes: “All perception of phenomena is unified by ideology and therefore political.” [Dunford quoted in Gidal 1989; 34]. In this paper I am, in part, discussing the *process* of that unification.

The production of *experience* can be understood as the integration of perception and affection for the subject by means of culturally specific performative practices organising bodied sensation and its memory, constructing a specific relation between becoming-subject and world. I call these discourses. Practice is the mechanism by which ideological imperatives are embodied. Although perception, affection and memory are not exclusive to self-conscious, or even to social beings, experience is.

II

What explicitly links intensities for bodies and ideologies for cultures is mnemotechnics, in both a dynamic form as practice and sedimentary form as object. All technics may be described as mnemotechnics insofar as they are a materialization of information, for example: a flint axe is both the memory of its production and template for its reproduction, another less anthropomorphic example would be animals depositing spoors to define a territory. The further development of brains and the production of consciousness both depend on this externalisation, which is both artefact of and catalyst for the transition from a distribution of natural beings to a collectivity of social subjects.

Different cultures produce different eyes, skins, and feelings. Channelling intensities to different social concerns and purposes. Culture is the practice of cathecting intensities as well as the materialised history of that practice. Organs are formed and reformed in and through practice: the transmission and transformation of cultural knowledge. They are embodied ideological structures. Our very ability to recognise our body as that of a certain social subject, as consisting in a certain delimitation of intensities, organisation, and containment *is* an ideological effect: a fusing of a set of ideas of functionality with the flesh of being through the labour of practice (and labour here should be understood as meaning action upon the world which transforms it, thus it includes play, erotics, etc.). The body becomes the animate material structure reflecting and reproducing, but also modulating, those ideas. Voloshinov emphasises the symbolic aspect of this, whereas I have so far focused on the indexical:

“Every ideological sign is not only a reflection, a shadow, of reality, but is also itself a material segment of that very reality. Every phenomenon functioning as an ideological sign has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, color, movements of the body, or the like. In this sense, the reality of the sign is fully objective” [Voloshinov 1986; 11]

It is important not to conflate the always multiple, conflicting ideologies of a culture with a culture itself, not least because a culture, more broadly, encompasses the history of those conflicts as material structures, even as the actualization of those traces in the constructed present is ideologically overdetermined. This is part of the reason why an aspect of dissent often involves finding what is latent in a given history.

To summarize: by ideology I mean those practices and structures by and in which a culture is manifest for the subjects currently producing it. Culture consists in a distribution of energetic investments as mnemotechnic objects and practices. Our becoming with these objects and through these practices is how consciousness of something — which is again becoming *with* that something — is possible. Ideology is, and describes, *how* it happens. Knowledge and reproduction of how culturally specific practices are practiced, it both describes processes and is the sedimentation of those processes. This happening is a constitution of time.

III

In her afterword to the English translation of Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Susan McClary notes that:

“Italian music was, in fact, banned in [Louis XIV's] France, clearly for ideological reasons; but the documents comparing Italian and French styles refer not to politics directly, but to matters of orderliness, harmoniousness, and tastefulness (French [. . .] good taste versus Italian noise).” [McClary in Attali 1992; 155]

Consider “orderliness, harmoniousness and tastefulness” as ideological expressions of the experience of specific distributions of energy. For example, tonal harmony invests only certain regions (considered here as sets of ratios between frequencies) of the audible spectrum, both through the grammar of its construction, but also through a set of structural determinants (temperaments, for example). Or consider that rhythm is difference for a consciousness produced in that very construction of a punctuated duration. These filtrations and punctuations of energetic flows cathect organs for their reception, reproduction, and transformation. This is how ideological structures are encoded as musical practice which like any practice finds its *reason* in embodiment.

I want to emphasise that I'm not privileging sound as an aspect of the experience of the social practice of music. The conflation of the experience of music with the experience of organised sound in certain conjunctures, or sound organised by certain conjunctures, is a historically fairly recent shift away from music understood more as a practice, or as both practice and interpretation of text. The energetic investments I describe are equally present in, for example, a measure of notation where the eye is immediately struck by the density, sparsity or rhythmic tension of notated events.

The practice of composition is labour on the grammar of that practice itself; a grammar which is not a formal grammar, but one which is transformed by the composer, who is a historically informed specialist in the understanding, manipulation, and articulation of that grammar. Grammar understood here as a system for describing and articulating a structure of differences. Intensity may be understood as the physical correlate of difference.

Composers manipulate data, and this manipulation, and perhaps the very concept of data as that which is given, is only afforded by mnemotechnic objects and systems. The practice of composition is a type of direct labour on the structure of differences, the material sedimentation of which constitutes a mnemotechnic object.

A composer is a cognitive labourer who produces cultural capital, changes in the index of the sensible, and the present: the active constitution of time.

The *index of the sensible* is the potential, considered as capacity, to implicate and express distributions of force embodied as affections and perceptions. Composers articulate affects and percepts and in doing so change the index of the sensible for bodies subject to those productions. Implication and expression correspond to the passive and active aspects of what a body can do, which returns us to a further, more explicit consideration of affect.

Spinoza's *Ethics*, a landmark work in what would now be called affect theory, captures in its title the political nature of the affects, insofar as they increase or diminish the subject's capacity for action, afford expression or repress it. In the social practice of music, this ethics is encoded in mnemotechnics gestural, objectified and textual, and expressed in performative acts that further modulate the sensibility of bodies and constitute temporalities.

From Spinoza, often as read through thinkers such as Deleuze or Massumi, we get the idea of affects as what a body can do, but this doing needs to be thought dualistically, and, I would argue, alongside some additional definitions of affect: and the first of these is as a material change: not as any effect or experience of change, but as the change itself. Secondly that change is always a registration upon a body of alterity, a presencing of otherness. Thus affect is inherently social.

Alongside the presencing of alterity at the level of embodiment, we have the dualism I mentioned, which is Spinoza's distinction between the passive and active:

Affect is what a body can do, because the body passively enfolds or involves those affects transmitted to it. These passions may decrease the potential of a body to act, or increase it. And affect is what a body can do, as expressive or as active. The expressions of one body are always initially passions for another body. Expression is the adequate comprehension of passions, action is their transformation.

For a body to express an affect adequately is for it to comprehend what it has in common with that affect. This is an act of reason, it is therefore attentive, which is — among social individuals

— a desiring relation. This reasoning is the basis of the constitution of a time and a space greater than any individual body; of the creation of a commons. Action is the articulation of what the formation of common notions — bodies in affinity — reveal as possible. Such transformation is the labour by which social individuals produce themselves as historical subjects, as opposed to continuing to exist as natural beings. But also, think of an immune system producing antibodies in response to a vaccine. I include that example merely to emphasise that the notions of reason and comprehension are not to be thought of as exclusive to certain kinds of bodies.

There is an essential temporality to affect. We may speak of the instant when intensity meets body, but its bodying and expression, affect and affection, is a dispersion of that intense instant into a making of time. Materiality constitutes a delay, which is not a function of time, but a timing function, by which the instant becomes distributed. Physical and psychical systems are filters of the instant. *Filter* is used here in the strict signal-processing sense of a delay network producing a change in energy distribution and phase. Guattari phrases it like this:

“Affect is the process of existential appropriation by the continuous creation of heterogeneous durations of being” [Guattari 2013, 204]

While affect for a living body constitutes as a duration which must extend along the unidirectional time-line of being-toward-death for the body affected, it is exactly *in* such constitution that the formation of common notions becomes possible in which time may be recast as active structuration through the formation of liminal organs and the production of discourses, rather than as mere measure of finitude; that breaks with the thinking and living of time as so much fixed capital to thinking it as collectivized duration. (And that recasts music as a social practice, or death as a social relationship rather than an individualised demolition.)

Making or attempting this distinction, which affords an understanding of existential time as potential and plastic rather than uniform and marked, is a political act of a social subject, a change in the representation of the distribution constitutive of the polis in the form of dissent from unification under the same temporal episteme. Michel Serres captures the political necessity of distinction among temporalities, and of constitution of time as a form of dissent, when he writes:

“what never was can happen with time, what can no longer happen was able to be. I saw in the days of my youth things that seem impossible to those making ready days when I shall not see incredible things. Time is the positive infinitude of possible determinations.” [Serres 1995; 115]

Different understandings of time are produced through social relationships sustained through practices and objects. If embodiment is always ideologically overdetermined, as I have been describing, this does not make the relationship between ideology and its bodied subjects any less

dialectical. Despite material representations to the contrary, power, manifest as an ideology in dominance for example, does not pre-exist its own becoming, rather it becomes through repetition, that is to say through practice. the necessarily social subject is active simultaneously in both the reproduction and transformation of ideology.

IV

It is possible to be invested by ideologies and live that investment on an unconscious level. It is equally possible to be a conscious ideologue *and* do critical — in the dual sense of negative and essential — work on the production and reception of ideology which results in changes to that production and reception. The conscious ideologue attempts to articulate a practice *for* a particular idea of the social; this does not prescribe an inherently conservative articulation, but an articulation appropriate to the development of that idea.

Art is a disciplined and reflexive practice of creation that produces intensities for bodies in ways which change what a body can do, which put the microtone in the ear or the red in the eye or which structure a different consciousness of duration; which cause ears and eyes to invest differently. Such sensitization is, in its very tendency toward differentiation, a progressive politics of the body in absolute opposition to the brutalization of the body as so much Variable Capital. And, consubstantial with this, it is a condition for an attentiveness to and a potential solidarity with a multitude of dissenting voices. The communist vision of relations of production encapsulated in the phrase “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” [cf. Marx 1971; 18] implies a proliferation of both abilities and needs as an aspect of an increasingly complex, nuanced social construction.

This would also be a social construction in which the practice of an art like composition would assume a different, perhaps unrecognisable form. The value of such production in the present conjuncture, to which this vision stands opposed, lies in precisely this push toward differentiation, understood both in terms of formal construction as well as the production of affects and percepts which effectively radicalise bodies by augmenting what they can implicate and express. To be clear, this is not in the nature of some sort of aesthetic education, but of a functional increase in potential. So coterminous has the concept of potential become with exploitation, in everyday phrases such as ‘not living up to’ or ‘exploiting’ potential for example, that we need to recall its radical meaning as force: Potential is not the known that one can live up to or exploit, but the energetic condition for transforming a system. This returns us to politics as dissent.

Capitalism, as a system of economic organisation, requires very little of the social subject, although what it does require will amount to that individuals life. And it is exactly a definition of life which is the point of struggle here. Capital is not interested in complexity, development, culture, or sociality except insofar as they lead to the production of surplus value. The becomings possible between humans and machines, or indeed humans and humans, do not concern it. Thus,

for example, in Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx can write of the “absolute contradiction [. . .] between the revolutionary technical basis of large-scale industry and the form it takes under capitalism” [Marx 1990; 617].

A composition, even if it consists of nothing else, consists in and of durations, constituted through the production of affects and percepts. This production of the temporal episteme of the composition is also the existential time of the subjects produced in conjuncture with the composition. This production is lived as changes in the index of the sensible, and understood through conscious experience informed by those changes. The relationship between the temporalities of the composition and that of the subject is dialectical: the subject, woven in their retensions and protensions, is never simply given in conjuncture with the composition, any more than the composition, in its necessary temporality, can be an unproblematic, wholly defined, object of consumption. It is in constructing these problematics, usually as a mnemotechnic object, that composers may be said to produce the present. Or a present. Politics, at its most unimaginative, is a struggle for the actualisation of one stillborn present at the expense of others. Revolutionary politics distinguishes itself as the struggle for the present as point of departure from which new forms of time may be constituted.

Chris Halliwell, Feb. 2015. <http://www.erasurestrategies.com>

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