

# *Archephonai:* The Dangers of Music

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## I. Prelude: *Archephonai*

On October 12-13, 1990, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and in the first year of the George H. W. Bush's presidency, inside the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in NYC, Diamanda Galás performed her album, *Plague Mass*. Stripped to the waist, at some point covered in a blood-like substance, in front of the altar, she utilized her powerful (capable of multiple-octaves) voice, to deliver a series of interconnected songs, quoting excerpts from Leviticus, Psalms, Revelations, and singing in English, Spanish, Italian, and French, as well as exploding in a series of melodic and fast logorrheas similar to glossolalias, mixed with hysterical laughter and cries, to the accompaniment of ritualistic sounding drums and a deep chorus responding to, and resonating with her echoing words and cries – an example of Galás' style as Susan McClary describes it: "ear-splitting volume, a broad spectrum of bizarre timbres, the semiotics of extreme anguish, and a structure that builds intensity through sheer repetition."<sup>1</sup> While the particular historical context of the performances is essential to the work (Diamanda's brother, Philip-Dimitri Galás, had died 5 years earlier of AIDS-related complications, and she had just been arrested, the year before, at the *Stop the Church* protest in St Patrick's Cathedral), it is difficult not to see and hear in the lyrics, music, and the inextricability between the two – expressing a demand and lament to finally be heard – Rilke's description of the

finding of “die Melodie des Hintergrundes” (the melody of the background) in “Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge” (Notes on the melody of things):

XXXVI. For this insight is close to the meaning of a religion: that as soon as one has found, once, the melody of the background, one is not clueless in his words and opaque in his resolutions. Being part of a melody is a carefree certainty in the simple conviction, that is to say, the right to possess a determinate space, and to have a determinate duty in a wide work, in which the smallest is worth as much as the biggest. Not to be supernumerary [*überzählig*] is the first condition of the conscious and quiet unfolding.<sup>2</sup>

The musical background raised by Galás in *Plague Mass*, through her identification with Satan as the adversary (an identification she had performed already before, in her 1982 album, *Litanies of Satan*), allowed PWA (people with AIDS), that is to say, those condemned by the Church and the government to both death and eternal punishment, to not only find their voice (a cry, a complaint, a prayer, and a curse as male-diction), and thus their proper part in a universal melody or the melody of the world (the music of the cosmos, and not only of chaos), but also to reclaim their territory as neither supernumerary nor excessive individuals (*überzählig*). Thus, anticipating Deleuze and Guattari's discovery that, through the ritournelle (refrain), music is essentially linked to territories (deterritorializations and reterritorializations), Rilke announced in this short text the essential topological aspect of music, its affirmation and circumscription of a space for those – all of us – who are part of the universal melody. But what does this relation to the territory or topology mean in terms of universality, if music – to fulfill its role as art as prescribed by Rilke—must work “wo alle – *Einer* sind”<sup>3</sup> (where everybody – are *One*)? What kind of space is this? How is it constructed? (Is it constructed or does it preexist?) And what are its potentials and concomitant dangers, especially since, as Deleuze remarked (both with and without Guattari), music gives one the desire (*envie*)<sup>4</sup> and/or the taste (*goût*)<sup>5</sup> of death, making us, thus, want to die?

In *Mille plateaux*, at the beginning of the “devenir musique” subsection of the *Devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible* plateau, Deleuze and Guattari confess that, while it is difficult to say when exactly does music start, its proper content is the refrain or ritournelle. The relation between the two, however, is not a simple container/content where music would just be different phenomena, made of diverse ritournelles organized according to various patterns. It is rather a relation of resistance or conjuration between the

two. In their words: “The refrain is rather a means of preventing music, averting it [*conjurée*], or forgoing it.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, because the *ritournelle* is “essentially territorial, territorializing, or reterritorializing, music makes it a deterritorialized content for a deterritorializing form of expression.”<sup>7</sup> In the next plateau, *De la ritournelle*, their description of this relation involves a variety of spaces, as well as a complex musical topology of forces. To give a simplified version of it, we could say:

1- At the (not necessarily chronological, since, as we said, for them, we do not really know when music starts) beginning, there is chaos as the “milieu of all milieus.”<sup>8</sup>

2- Rhythm appears the moment there is a “transcoded passage from one milieu to another”<sup>9</sup> or communication between milieus.

3- A territory takes place as an act, not necessarily a space. It is “the product of a territorialization of milieus and rhythms.”<sup>10</sup>

4- From here, the topology is described in terms of forces, even if it does not lose its spatial or dimensional aspects. For example, “The attribution of all the diffuse forces to the earth as receptacle or base takes place only *at the deepest level* of each territory.”<sup>11</sup>

These forces can be “Forces of chaos, terrestrial forces, cosmic forces,”<sup>12</sup> all of which are already involved in the *ritournelle* (as the proper material of music), and they imply their three basic elements as spatial: chaos, the Earth, and the Cosmos – even if, ultimately, their separation or real topological distinction is unclear, especially when considering the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of *chaosmos*,<sup>13</sup> which underlines the absolute immanent character of their ontology.

5- Finally – as if following Derrida’s intuition of the role of the centre in any structure in “La structure, le signe et le jeu” – there is another, singular space: the place of exception, situated both at the innermost of our self (“an intense center at [the] profoundest depths [of the territory]”),<sup>14</sup> and at the utmost outside, or farthest *elsewhere*, the space or place lost and/or to be found. This place/space is the *Natal*, the “ambiguity [*équivoque*] between the territoriality [*territorialité*] and deterritorialization.”<sup>15</sup>

This last aporetic and paradoxical space or place links Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of music with two other contemporary French thinkers, who thought and wrote some of the most insightful philosophical and literary texts on music in the late XXth century: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Pascal Quignard. In his 1996 text, *La haine de la musique*, following the traditional trope according to

which our first sensations, in the womb, are of hearing, Quignard explains the intense and dangerous powers of music as a consequence of this originality and potential primacy. According to him, these “original music/sounds,” or what I would call “*archephonai*,” make us not only the children of the incomprehensible noise we heard in the womb (“We come from this noise. It is our seed”)<sup>16</sup> but also – and essentially – perennially obsessed with this temporality and musico-archeology, living on its pathetic urgency: “We live in pathetic temporal urgency. Temporal means continuously originary. / Continuously obedient.”<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, Lacoue-Labarthe sees music as an *a posteriori* attempt to clarify the suffocation or deadening of sound in the womb:

(...) music has as a goal to *clarify* the (maternal) suffocation of sound. In the mother’s womb, the child is, doubtlessly, not distinct from the body of his mother: there is no space, no distance. If he listens, that makes him react immediately: move, have a movement, be *moved* [*ému*], in a strong sense. What I mean is that if music exists, it is in order to find again this first, very first emotion.<sup>18</sup>

As we can see, this is a strange spatiality (“there is no space, no distance”) or place, where a *topos* is necessarily defined or (re)created by its exceptional temporal condition: the *first* place. It would seem, thus, that if music has a distinction among the other arts, it is this *originary* inextricability or perennial confusion of temporal and spatial dimensions, an indistinction given or perceived each time as a matter of origins, or a question or performance of one’s own most sacred, private, intimate personal origins, or original sounds: *archephonai*. In this way, it is precisely this essential connection to our origin(s) that gives music not only a direct link with our own death (through the analogy between the time/space before we existed with the time/space afterwards), but also with the others’ death, and ultimately, with destruction, annihilation, and terror. Or as Quignard puts it: “Terror and music. *Mousikè* and *pavor*. I find these words to be inextricably linked – however allogenic and anachronistic they may be in relation to each other. Like the sex and the cloth that covers it.”<sup>19</sup>

## II. Wagnerian Dangers

On May 18, 2011, at a press conference in Cannes for the release of his latest movie, *Melancholia*, Lars von Trier got into a bit of a scandal after answering a question from a reporter about his interest in German culture with certain humour that was not well understood, saying that he “understand[s] Hitler,” and that he was a Nazi (meaning, that he was from German ascendancy). Anybody

familiar with his work, as well as his biography, and sensible to his dark humour, would have understood the joke, together with the shock of those without that knowledge or humour.<sup>20</sup> Von Trier's discovery later in life that he was the biological son of a German (throughout his childhood he had thought that his real father was his mother's husband, Ulf Trier, of Jewish origin) was not the first time he had to confront a complex fascination with German culture. In a previous interview (1984), he had denounced the European or Western hypocrisy of trying to completely stay away from anything that had to do with the Nazis, since "the Nazis have had an instrumental influence on the European culture that they, too, come from,"<sup>21</sup> and during the filming of *The Element of Crime* (1984), he would play Wagner on set, trying to create a kind of "happening." As we know, some of his best films, *Melancholia* and *Epidemic*, are not only musicalized with Wagner's music, but they could even be seen as reinterpretations or visualizations of Wagnerian oeuvres [i.e., the character of Lars (played by von Trier himself) in *Epidemic* could be seen as a kind of Parsifal or Tannhäuser figure, while Justine (Kirsten Dunst) in *Melancholia* could be seen as a version of Isolde singing a *Liebestod* not only for Tristan but for the whole world]. As we know, Wagner's name and music have for a long time been a synonym or metonymy not only of German but also of Nazi culture.<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, Hitler's and the Nazis' fascination with Wagner, as well as his overt antisemitism, give enough historical and anecdotal reason to create the connection. But, what about philosophically, or ontologically? If there is indeed an essential connection between Wagner's music and Nazism or fascism, how is it constructed? What are its forms, and especially its necessity? And, more importantly, what are its dangers?

In *This is Your Brain on Music*, neuroscientist and musician Daniel Levitin explains why he, together with many people, mistrusts – and, according to him, are right to do so – Wagner:

Even when music doesn't transport us to an emotional place that is transcendent, music can change our mood. We might be understandably reluctant, then, to let down our guard, to drop our emotional defenses, for just anyone. We will do so if the musicians and composer make us feel safe. We want to know that our vulnerability is not going to be exploited. This is part of the reason why so many people can't listen to Wagner. Due to his pernicious anti-Semitism, the sheer vulgarity of his mind (as Oliver Sacks describes it), and his music's association with the Nazi regime, some people don't feel safe listening to his music. Wagner has always disturbed me profoundly, and not just his

music, but also the *idea* of listening to him. *I feel reluctant to give into the seduction of music* created by so disturbed a mind and so dangerous (or impenetrably hard) a heart as his, *for fear that I might develop some of the same ugly thoughts*. When I listen to the music of a great composer I feel that I am, in some sense, becoming one with him, or letting a part of him inside me. I also find this disturbing with popular music, because surely some of the purveyors of pop are crude, sexist, racist, or all three.<sup>23</sup>

Here again, the personal and historical context of Wagner and his music appears as reason enough to shun it, and surely, reading Primo Levi's and Simon Laks' testimonies of the use of German music in the camps and the effects of this music in the memory of the survivors after the war, makes one tend to agree with Quignard's opinion: "The Nuremberg tribunal should have ordered Richard Wagner to be beaten in effigy once a year in the streets of every German town."<sup>24</sup> However, besides the potentially dangerous associations of art and a "disturbed" mind, or "dangerous" heart, made by Levitin (could not the same terms have been – and probably were – applied by the Catholic church and church goes to Diamanda Galás' *Plague Mass* performance, as well as to the *Stop the Church* protest?), this description of the inherent danger of Wagner's music makes it, not only almost magical, but also almost invincible. According to this description, the seduction of Wagner's music would be, ultimately, irresistible, and just listening to it would immediately – as if by contagion—impregnate the listener with "the same ugly thoughts" Wagner and the Nazis' had (anti-Semitism, white-supremacy, etc.). Another thing that makes this description troublesome – while not completely inaccurate – is its amalgamation of Wagner's music and its concomitant dangers, with what Levitin describes as "popular music" and its own dangers – an amalgamation or linkage that has been constantly made when Wagner gets blamed for being the originator of mass music and spectacle, as in this statement of Lacoue-Labarthe concerning the establishing of Bayreuth: "The truth is that the first mass art had just been born, through music (through technique)."<sup>25</sup>

As we know, beginning with Nietzsche's *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, and continuing with Adorno's texts on Wagner ("Fragments of Wagner," *Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler*, and *In Search of Wagner*), and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Musica Ficta*, Western philosophers have followed Nietzsche's diagnosis, and tried to explain Wagner's music's dangers as well as the reasons behind its historical (and potentially renewable) deleterious effects. The two most notable exemptions to this rule are Slavoj Žižek (if we consider his work as solely or completely "Western," a question highlighted by Slovenia's complex

role in Western, European, and Slavic history) and Alain Badiou. In his study *Five Lessons on Wagner*, the latter one sees in this Western European philosophical judgment of Wagner a certain accusation or almost scapegoating of Wagner as the foil for an “agenda” describing what modern art should be. The traits that this agenda prescribes, and that Wagner does not follow, are:

1- “(...) the notion of high art must be dispensed with.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, sobriety and impoverishment are the remedies against any attempt at totalization (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), and while a collaboration between the arts is possible, it should be done always according to “fragmentation, detotalization, experimentation.”<sup>27</sup>

2- There is no rigid boundary between art and non-art. According to Badiou, in Lacoue-Labarthe’s case, this is noticeable in his theory of the contemporary poem as a “becoming-prose of the poem,”<sup>28</sup> or as a conception of the essence of the poem as a “making itself impure.”<sup>29</sup>

3- Finally, there is a renunciation of “the immediate form of the sublime,” or, in other words, “the renunciation of effects.”<sup>30</sup> According to Badiou, the aim here is “to produce the effectless effect” or what he calls the divorce effect, “a divorce between the artist subject and the putative public subject.”<sup>31</sup>

If, following this agenda, Wagner and his works must be rejected philosophically and artistically, and not only because of the context of his music and his own intentions, it is – according to Badiou – not only because of his failing to have these traits, but also, and especially, because of his incarnating the kind of art that is the exact opposite of these traits: totalization, high art (as opposed to low, and non-art), sublime effects wilfully produced on the public, etc. After this description in the first lesson of the book, based on Badiou’s reading of Lacoue-Labarthe’s of Wagner in *Musica Ficta*, Badiou examines Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* in the context of his other work on Wagner (lesson two), analyses the relation between philosophy and music in Wagner (lesson three), reopens the “case Wagner” and its accusations (lesson four), and finally, examines *Parsifal* as an attempt to make a ceremony possible, and through it, an event (lesson five). All in all, Badiou’s lessons are not exactly an attempt to defend Wagner or to oppose it to the analyses of Adorno, Nietzsche, Lacoue-Labarthe, or Heidegger. They are rather an explanation of how some of the traits that these philosophers believe art should have (and Lacoue-Labarthe does write in *Musica Ficta* about the impossibility for any form of art to *not* be

political)<sup>32</sup> are already present in Wagner's work: an exaltation of a non-dialectizable difference [given "in the objective reality of suffering"<sup>33</sup> for Badiou], impurity [Badiou raises the question if, through its new eroticism, Wagner was not "the first great *pagan* of music, the first to impurify music, to strip it of its natural purity"],<sup>34</sup> a non-totalization [for Badiou, what we have with Wagner is "greatness uncoupled from totality"],<sup>35</sup> a discontinuity "concealed behind the overwhelming appearance of continuity,"<sup>36</sup> a genuine experience of *waiting* not subsumed to any arrival (this is Tristan's waiting for Isolde for Badiou, because the fact that she ultimately arrives is irrelevant to his wait, since he dies immediately afterwards), and a non-identity driven art, since Wagner's characters go through a "plasticity of metamorphosis"<sup>37</sup> because, in his work, "*dramatic possibilities are created through the music.*"<sup>38</sup> At the end, Badiou does not reject these prescriptive traits of modern art (developed after the lineage Hölderlin-Nietzsche-Heidegger-Adorno-Lacoue-Labarthe), but rather changes them into five rules he sees in Wagner:

1. *Creating a possibility*: "showing, *as it is occurring*, how a new subjective possibility can emerge (...)."<sup>39</sup>
2. *The multiplicity of hypotheses*: the greatness of art resides in the multiplicity of its possibilities.
3. *Tolerating a split subject in the present*: because, for Badiou, "art has to do with the question of the subject in a non-illustrative way, the question of the actuality of the presentation of an irresolvable split"<sup>40</sup> must be raised.
4. *The non-dialecticity of resolutions*: this is Badiou's attempt to portray Wagner's resolutions as not necessarily enacting a sublation of difference, while not accepting completely a logic of interruption or "arbitrary stopping."<sup>41</sup>
5. *Transformation without finality*: Badiou proposes a certain immanent transformation, similar to Deleuze and Guattari's immanent becoming. Here, transformation is not dictated of pre-determined by a transcendent or discursive (story) command, but by the music itself.

In this way, if Badiou ultimately does not reject (or at least not completely) the "agenda" for modern art laid down by Hölderlin-Nietzsche-Adorno-Heidegger-Lacoue-Labarthe, etc., while, contrary to Levinas and many others, he is happy to display his love of Wagner's music, it is because he thinks that having those traits or rules allows Wagner to bring forth the ultimate possibility that Badiou gives to art in his own philosophy: the opening to the event. As Badiou sees it,

this possibility takes place, ultimately, in Wagner through his failed attempt to inaugurate a new ceremony in *Parsifal*. Through this attempt, even if Wagner did not accomplish the ceremony—and thus, the event—at least he showed a certain way forward. “In this sense, *Parsifal* is prophetic in its own way: Will an event occur that will make a ceremony possible?”<sup>42</sup>

### III. Intermezzo: An Event.

On the night of September 26, 1980, a poster bearing a strangely provocative symbol appeared on the walls of the Slovene industrial city of Trbovlje. The symbol was a simple black cross, accompanied only by the word “Laibach.” A second more explicit poster bore a scene of mutilation, an assailant removing the eyes of a victim with a knife. This, too, bore the word Laibach. The posters were intended to promote an exhibition and concert by the group bearing this name, and were its first public act.<sup>43</sup>

For anybody not familiar with Laibach and NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*), it would be difficult to understand the magnitude and continual potential of such an event not only for European, but also for world history — as the recent documentary (*Liberation Day*, 2017, dirs. Morten Traavik and Ugis Otte) of the band's visit and concert in Pyongyang in 2015 can show: the first visit of a Western band to North Korea. Notwithstanding the extra-significant cultural and historical context of their history and particular geography (the name of the band, Laibach, is the German name of the city of Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia), it is their open and variegated use of Nazi and Communist aesthetics that have called the most attention. In a similar way to — although with a bigger complexity of meaning and structure, given not only their multimedia, collective approach, but also their mix of Communist and Nazi aesthetics elements with Slovenian folklore — what has happened with the German band Rammstein [and more recently with their lead singer Till Lindemann, who performed this year, 2021, a Russian folk song, “*Lubimiy Gorod*” (Beloved Town) at Red Square, accompanied by a military band, an event which was streamed live on Russian TV], it is the utilization of totalitarian and fascistic aesthetics, as well as of an impulse-driven, or drives-full music reminiscent of marches and mobilizations, that has brought forth the question – ever since the first appearance of NSK and Laibach – : “are they really fascists?” as a question asking not only for permission to support their art, but also and especially to enjoy it. The two immediate typical answers or reactions have been – and continue to be, when people discover Laibach and NSK for the first time – either a) yes (and you

should stay away from them, they should be cancelled, etc.) or b) no, because what they are doing is criticizing, through irony, those systems. In a series of texts, Žižek has expressed how these two alternatives neither explain Laibach's mechanisms nor the event it and NSK have brought into world history.<sup>44</sup>

In a parallel way with the band's and art group's evolution, Žižek's own description of their event has changed throughout the years. In an early text, from 1987, "A Letter From Afar," Žižek describes Laibach's mechanism as an exposure of nationalistic and regionalistic phantasms, and through this exposure, as a reversal of our innermost core, from treasure to excrement:

What, then, is NSK doing? Actually, it is constantly doing one and the same thing: it draws attention to the fundamental phantasms, the phantasmatic myths and constructs on which our national identification is based. But it does this in such a way, through a whole range of alienation processes (the montage of heterogeneous, incompatible constructs; the reiteration of the phantasmatic construct in its literal imbecility, in the exposed shape that must remain hidden in everyday life, etc.), so that we are able to achieve distance from these phantasms. This, our innermost core of pleasure, our precious treasure, our *agalma*, becomes, all at once, a repulsive, sticky core, an "infinite nightmare," the embodiment of excessive pleasure, like (if we may use one of Cankar's similes) dates that suddenly change into disgusting excrement.<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, what Žižek saw Laibach doing – at this moment and through this strategy – was going beyond the Enlightenment mentality of "appeals to reason' and calls for patient reflection and dialogue,"<sup>46</sup> and rather enacting a confrontation of our "infinite nightmare,"<sup>47</sup> through which we could "strike our opponent to the quick, at the core of his pleasure."<sup>48</sup>

A couple of years later, he wrote two subsequent texts, "Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" (1993) and "The Enlightenment in Laibach" (1994). In the first one, he described how the cynical distance toward public values that one assumes in a subversive artist, might ultimately be not a threat to the system, but rather part of its mechanism. In the second one – in a move reminiscent to Lacan's later development of the notion of the *sinthome* – he focused rather on Laibach's liberation or enactment of Lacan's "floating signifiers."

And this is Laibach's operation: Through their spectacle they dissolve the ideological field. The ideological elements refuse to be articulated, they

find themselves in an empty space, floating as an un-connected series of Ones, permeated with limited, senseless enjoyment: over here pieces of Nazism, over there pieces of Stalinism together with pieces of the Slovenian national mythology, torn out of their context, scattered around in the senseless network, where everyone remains the One, without the point of suture, which could fix the meaning.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, in what seems like a perverse version of Rilke's melody of the background, here every-One could find their place in the melody. But this is only possible precisely because, ultimately, there is no melody, just a series of Ones in continuous sense-less enjoyment. However, after this operation, the possibility to get rid of totalitarianism (or fascistic impulses), demands that we must, "through reversal, identify with it (...)." <sup>50</sup> However, Laibach's more melodic albums composed after this text, like *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, or *Iron Sky*, as well *Party Songs* – where they play the North Korea song Arirang (아리랑), or their albums with classic and popular Western songs like *The Sound of Music* or their Beatles' covers album *Let It be* – might complicate this "free floating" strategy, or perhaps they show instead how the melody of the background, in which we all, potentially, have a part, is made or exposed precisely through such an undecidable medley or potpourri as Laibach's oeuvre. In other words, of a series of disparate, yet sometime harmonious ritournelles.

#### IV: Two Kundrys

At the end of *Five Lessons on Wagner*, in an analysis of *Parsifal*, Badiou summarizes the subject of the opera as "the great question of the possibility of a new ceremony raised at the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>52</sup> As he is closing the argument of his book – which encapsulates an essential idea of the aporias of modern art from the XIXth century onward – he locates the impossibility of the modern-art ceremony in *Parsifal*'s most prominent female character and body: Kundry. This change and exchange [Kundry for Parsifal as main hero(ine)] is drastic, but what is most important for us is how Badiou links both Kundry's aporetic, compound character,<sup>53</sup> and the equally difficult incarnation of her voice, with a protean quality characteristic of modernity (and modern democracy)<sup>54</sup> that would make the ceremony – at least a purely immanent one, without any trace of transcendence – impossible. The significance of this role of Kundry as representative of modernity or modern art is highlighted even more by the way Badiou ends the paragraph, with what seems a resigned, if not dejected concluding sentence (a sentence that, paradoxically, reminds us –

performatively – of Kundry's own dejected silence at the end of Act II). Here is the full paragraph:

The idea that, with reference to an impossible ceremony, in its stead, something like dereliction occurs, is without question an essential theme of *Parsifal*. Kundry can in this sense be regarded as the opera's heroine. Kundry is no doubt the one who knows that, in the end, it is impossible to decide. Her extraordinary musical virtuosity – her undecidable vocal range (the well-known problem concerning whether she is a mezzo-soprano or a soprano), her remarkably jagged musical line, the amazing variations in pitch she is capable of producing – all this perhaps suggests that we are dealing with a historical mutability that renders a ceremonial approach unworkable or at any rate undecidable. *This may just be the way things are.*<sup>55</sup>

From then on, follows Badiou's conclusion, which presents itself as a repetition of an invitation that *Parsifal* extends to us: an invitation that Badiou paraphrases through a Mallarmé line inviting us “to intrude into future celebrations.”<sup>56</sup> But why exactly is Kundry and her complex, both silent and sonorous, body, the center of *Parsifal*, and thus – apparently – of Wagner's whole project and its promise?

In a fascinating article examining Nietzsche's famous diagnosis of Wagner as a hysteric in the context of the period that saw not only Nietzsche's descend into silence, and the writing of *Parsifal*, but also the birth of psychoanalysis (and with it, of the notion of hysteria), Elisabeth Bronfen shows – like Badiou – how Kundry is, indeed, the real center (navel) of *Parsifal*:

By way of closing, let me briefly point out Kundry's function as the navel of Wagner's operatic phantasy scenario, knotting together the various protective fictions, with a *belle indifférence* to the resolution of each, analogous to what Freud calls the navel of the dream. Uncannily resonant of the iconography of hysteria installed by Charcot, she is repeatedly introduced as a body without will, speaking the desires of those who animate her.<sup>57</sup>

In the next pages, she goes on to examine these roles and fictions, and how her body, identity, and voice(s), serve as mediums for the different characters in the opera, i.e.: her animalized body “enacts in tormented agitation the tale of Amforta's wounding”;<sup>58</sup> “she also turns into Parsifal's medium, speaking for him about his origins”;<sup>59</sup> she transforms herself, in the ceremony at the end of Act I,

into “a paralysed body seeking the quiet of death, speaking from another site” (158), while her hysteria infects Titurel and Amfortas, and Parsifal as well, who, at the end of the act, “falls into a convulsive heart attack followed by paralysis, now, like her, a medium representing on his body the desire of the Other.”<sup>60</sup> Given these symptomatic presentations of Kundry, and the aporetic fantasies they reveal, she too, like Badiou, sees in *Parsifal*, and in “Wagner’s hystericism”<sup>61</sup> in general, a future as a possibility for the listener to take. However, this possibility resides not in a ceremony, but rather in a choice between two fantasies: 1) what she calls “the psychotic foreclosure of difference,”<sup>62</sup> where “the wound is healed only by the spear that smote it,”<sup>63</sup> and 2) “the hysteric’s resilient and resourceful enactment of deferral, which includes a knowledge of traumatic enjoyment even as it preserves the protective demarcation of a psychic gap.”<sup>64</sup>

If the ethical and aesthetic choice is between these two options, where the second one carries the promise of a future, it is because Bronfen’s notion of hysteria also carries a reversal of – or rather a renewal of earlier – Freudian psychoanalysis. Here is how Bronfen explains it:

I want to suggest that hysteria be understood as a strategy of representation that makes use of multiple self-fashionings even as these are constructed over but also shield from radical negativity — the traumatic kernel at the core of all systems of identity, the originary trauma [*Urverdrängung*] upon which all later repressions, phantasy work, and symptom formation feeds—without ever directly touching it. In fact, I would like to resurrect Freud’s initial theory of the *traumatic* rather than the *sexual* aetiology of hysteria.<sup>65</sup>

Taking a cue from Bronfen’s attention to the historical and cultural contemporaneity of the birth of psychoanalysis, hysteria, and Wagner’s opera, and following too her movement back into a notion of hysteria based on trauma, I would like to end by considering two contemporary “Kundrys” or hysteric artists, who so far have developed most of their work in the context of the #metoo era: Kristin Hayter and Dorian Electra. I believe that by both, comparing their work and their uses of “floating signifiers” with each other – and with those of a band like Laibach – and by looking at them through the philosophical conceptions of music we saw at the beginning, we can gain a rich understanding of our own musico-philosophical post-opera, post-Wagner, and post-Bowie landscape. [Because, perhaps Critchley is right, and David Bowie is, if not the greatest modern artist we had, at least the one who might

have given us (permission to have) the “greatest pleasure”<sup>66</sup> – and through this gift, might have changed our hysteric music and art].

### 1) *Kristin Hayter - Lingua Ignota*

It is difficult to summarize or even briefly describe Kristin Hayter’s work, or one of her performances. With a vibrato reminiscent of Kundry’s undecidable voice between a mezzo-soprano and a soprano, screams like those of Diamanda Galás’ – although without the latter’s unsettling laughter – , and lyrics voicing or conjuring not only an opposing figure (Satan) but also hovering simultaneously over both sides of the Catholic moral divide (“All I want is boundless love / All I know is violence” (“I am the Beast”)), while performing in small venues with the audience crowded around her as she sings and screams, illuminating their faces with bright-white lights swinging from her arms, Hayter/Lingua Ignota brings into question not only the impossibility of a new ceremony, but also – pace Badiou – the question of said ceremony’s lack of transcendence. Even before considering the religious inheritance of her music, the question of a certain transcendence in her work is raised by the adoption of the stage name “Lingua Ignota,” which is, as we know, the Latin name of Hildegard von Bingen’s idiomatic divine language. Nevertheless, in a similar way to von Bingen’s complex theo-ecological and cosmological conception, Lingua Ignota’s “transcendence” is always already reabsorbed into the extreme empiricism of both her lyrics [i.e., her focus on the inseparability of flesh and world: “Who will love you if I don’t? / Who will fuck you if I won’t? (...) Everything burns down around me (...)” “May Failure Be Your Noose”] and her music, where the organ and piano are constantly drowned through the electronic noise of industrial and metal interference.

With her first records (*Let the Evil of His Own Lips Cover Him* and *All Bitches Die*) coming out in 2017, at the moment when the #metoo hashtag exploded in mainstream social media, and with lyrics and music addressing domestic violence, and even presenting the songs as “survivor anthems,”<sup>67</sup> and as clear-cut acts of revenge on her and others’ abusers, Lingua Ignota’s hysteric body, voice, and instrumentation straddle an unrepenting/repenting double bind that denounces and embraces a violence, at moments undistinguishable from beauty, recalling Quignard’s identification of music and terror. Utilizing and mixing, thus, two genres or musical traditions apparently incompatible, yet, in reality, perhaps very close,<sup>68</sup> Christian (Baroque and Neoclassical) and extreme metal, Hayter’s music, like Laibach’s, performs a suspension of signifiers (both musical and discursive). However, unlike Laibach, she does not sustain the suspension indefinitely. Instead, she identifies the violent and “sacred” drives

with the symbolic order (and the Imaginary as well: i.e., her chest is tattooed with the word “Caligula,” the title of her 2019 album) that permitted and somehow mandated the abuse of her and other bodies, as well as the silencing of both their desire and enjoyment. In this way, she creates a short-circuit in the identification of the community through a specific form of misogynistic and sadist enjoyment – as described by Žižek in his examination of Laibach – , by opening an identification with the enjoyments of revenge and righteous accusation. Performing such an opening through two very ritualistic music traditions, exposes the listener – hysterically, in Bronfen’s sense – to their own enjoyment of (their own) violence (or the violence of their own enjoyment) while witnessing its effects embodied, singing, speaking, and accusing them or with them. Clearly coming out of her own voice and vocal fries, such enjoyment appears as a direct eruption of the forces of chaos, always already territorialized, yet simultaneously deterritorializing the listener toward Deleuze and Guattari’s Natal, or place of exception and, phantasmatically, of origin, thus creating *archephonai* within their traditions (in this case, Christian or church music, heavy or extreme metal, etc.).

## 2) *Dorian Electra*

In a TikTok video from May 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, the artist Dorian Electra appears against a wall with a self-portrait of Rembrandt behind them (and what appears to be a bust of David’s head next to them), dressed in a white pirate shirt and a black vest, with their traditional make up – including the teeth with black painted spaces in between – , and their hair in three colours (black, green, and yellow), with the caption in front of them saying “dream aesthetic,” and says – chin resting on hand – as expressing a tired desire: “when you wanna be this...” Immediately follows a series of screenshots of different cinematic incarnations of the Joker (Heath Ledger, Jack Nicholson, Joaquin Phoenix, Jared Leto) mixed with screenshots of a tube of green hair dye, a Joker made out of clay, as well as two pictures of Dorian Electra themselves dressed in their campy Joker avatar. Next, she reappears in the same room, in a similar angle, this time with the hand extended, and says – still rather fatigued – : “But you also wanna be this...” Another series of screenshots appears, this time of “Trad Girl,” a female Wojak (an MS Paint illustration and meme) variation wearing a floral dress and blond hair, who has been used on 4chan posts in relation to traditional and conservative values.<sup>69</sup> The variations include a couple of photos of Dorian themselves dressed as “Trad Girl,” one where they are looking up, fully dressed, wearing a cross, another one where they are lovingly holding a bible, and yet another one where they are only wearing a bra (but still the cross) and looking

down seductively towards the camera; and finally, a photo of a classical American cherry pie. After this series, Dorian reappears and says again, this time pointing at the camera: "...But you also want to be this...", after which, a new series of snapshots follow with a traditional image of an Incel: fedora, trench coat, sword, and sunglasses. A couple of them show Dorian themselves, and others show a messy room with computers, food, and coffee mugs on a desk or the floor, implying an unemployed single man, probably living with his parents. After this, Dorian appears for the last time, a little exasperated with themselves and their conflicting desire – rolling their eyes and clearly pointing at the camera – and says "But you ALSO wanna be this..." The last series of screenshots follows, this time of traditional Fall pictures with white women in them, leaves falling around them, pumpkin spices lattes in their hands, etc., two of them showing Dorian themselves again, in this type of "White Woman's Instagram" persona.<sup>70</sup> These last photographs are stills from her video "F the World," where Dorian Electra is drinking coffee while picking apples (proudly showing their wedding ring to the camera), all the while happily smiling, and then progressively stripping (the smile turning "mysterious" or "seductive" at this point), until they end up twerking in very short "jorts," while holding to a ladder next to an apple tree.

For those who know Dorian Electra, these four avatars (Joker, Conservative Girl, Incel, Pumpkin Spice Latte Woman) are immediately recognizable from previous videos and collaborations. They embody Electra's exploration of internet culture and gender politics, especially as they explore the recent rise in "Incel" culture and conservatism. While complex, Electra's approach to these cultures is not devoid of empathy and understanding:

I'm telling you those cargo shorts are so comfortable," they say, laughing. "What I love about neckbeard fashion is that there's all these elements that are weird vestigial things of old masculinity, like the fedora and the sword and chivalry. You know, their whole thing is lamenting the crumbling of Western culture, which is weird coded stuff. [They're] saying that feminism is destroying 'our' way of life and that's why [they] can't get laid."<sup>71</sup>

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Dorian Electra's "hysterical" performances (in Bronfen's sense), especially as they actively investigate sexual and gender discourse, is the role and function of the Joker – which seems to be Electra's favourite avatar. In a recent Instagram Live story (late September, 2021), as Electra was discussing the possibility that their music could become a

“gateway drug” for Incels and other conservative males to becoming more progressive or accepting [perhaps some of them even leaving behind gender binarism (i.e., a viewer confessed in the comments having been an Incel before, and now having realized they were trans)] they were asked: “Why the Joker, though?” To which Dorian seemed puzzled for a moment, and then responded: “Why not?!”

Contrary to *Lingua Ignota*, where the extreme utilization of the hysteric voice leans towards a cry or a lament, Dorian Electra’s voice in their Joker, and other incarnations, is constantly laughing. In this way, they appear as the embodiment of Kundry’s Heriodas persona, condemned to laugh – and live – forever since she laughed at Christ’s wound at the crucifixion. They are, thus, the ultimate hysteric, in the sense of a subject disintegrating through its laughter the symbolic order and the paternal law. This laughter is not only performed by her avatars and through her social media performances. The music itself, a combination of video-game music (chiptunes), dubstep, electronic, future-pop, etc., ends up being part of the recent genre “cringe-pop.”<sup>72</sup> This genre, apparently inaugurated by Rebecca Black’s song “Friday” (2011) (a song of which she recently did a remix with Dorian Electra), is perhaps the most self-conscious attempt to produce music that cannot be exactly enjoyed, but that nevertheless gives us a non-moral jouissance. With its voice-modifications composing a certain pseudo-biological or organic short-circuit, the cringe – or abject-sensation – genre hystericizes the listener, up to the point of transforming them – or allowing them to perceive themselves – as forces in the middle of (their) becomings and fluxes. While some songs like Black’s “Friday” do this while – or perhaps, through – idiotically repeating a numbing ritournelle (“Partyin’, partyin’ (Yeah) / Partyin’, partyin’ (Yeah) / Fun, fun, fun, fun”), Electra’s lyrics are always self-consciously performing or utilizing conservative/incel-like ritournelles [“Yeah, I’m lightin’ you up / Throw you around / This is a conquest, a war is going down / I’m a gentleman / Take my gentle hand” (“Gentleman”); “I’m your edgelord, I’m your edgelord / I’m so edgy, wanna F me? / Okay, F you, I don’t need you / Pushing me right to the edge (ha) / We live in a society / That’s always lashing out at guys like me / They pushed me to the edge, you see / Never, never, never gonna come down” (“Edgelord”)], or ritournelles confirming Incels’ and conservatives’ fears [“My agenda / My freaky gender / Out here flexing in my / Rainbow suspenders / My agenda / Will infect ya / Out to getcha / It is my” (“My Agenda,” which features The Village People and Pussy Riot)], making them all into floating signifiers through the continuously-laughing, hysteric-pleasure they induce.

In this way, in its parody (or riff on) the now famous scene – that became an ambivalent meme denoting male secrecy or almost shared trauma – of Joaquin Phoenix' Joker saying, while looking down, "you wouldn't get it," Electra's underlying message seems to be: "you won't get it, because there is nothing to get." Ultimately, this strategy and message make *Untitled Magazine's* recent characterization of Dorian Electra as "sublime game-changer"<sup>73</sup> quite correct, if we understand this sublimity as a truly Kantian critical moment where our own nature gets revealed only in and *as its own* rhythmic disintegration. In other words, when we discover that our unique nature, as our *own* singular place, is only to disintegrate, rhythmically, into each other, the absolute other, the cosmos, the Earth, and/or all the forces in between, and that, in front of this discovery, we cannot [as one of Beckett's mirlitonade shows: "*en face, le pire, jusqu'à ce qu'il fasse rire*" (to face, the worst, until it makes laugh)]<sup>74</sup> not laugh – sometimes nervously, sometimes joyously, sometimes melancholily – at ourselves and our lack of tragedy.

### **V: Encore, Bowie**

To many of us, the (musical) discovery that, ultimately, behind it all, all appearances and discourses, there is nothing, and that this emptiness or lack can be a liberating moment, was given by David Bowie's work. Throughout his multiple avatars and several deaths, with a particular voice (that he never considered good) in constant search of a new genre and rhythm, through collaborations and regenerations, he was our favourite hysteric, and our deadly teacher. As Simon Critchley puts it:

We learned to follow him from illusion to illusion and in doing so grew up. Behind the illusion is not an ever-elusive reality, but nothing. Yet, this nothing is not nothing, as it were. It is not the void, rest, or cessation of movement. It is a massively restless nothing, shaped by our fear, notably our *timor mortis*, our fearful sickness unto death.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, this death and its fear, as we saw at the beginning, seem to be rhythmically connected with the beginning, and thus with the phantasy of an original listening in the womb, our *archephonai*. These "original sounds" explain that experience we get when we fall for a song, thinking we not only have heard it before, but that it had always existed for us, perhaps was even made – as *our own* original sounds, our own private, idiomatic ritournelle – only for us. Perhaps, this desire and originary musical fantasy, in its foretaste of disappearance, is the secret of music as Deleuze (and Guattari) saw it, the

open and loud dangerous secret of the desire and taste it gives to us all, of and for death.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 110-111.
- <sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Aufsätze und Rezensionen* (Berlin: Holzinger, 2016), 44, my translation.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1990), 168.
- <sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1980), 367.
- <sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 300; FR 368. From here on out, when available, the French original version of a text will be signalled by FR.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 313; FR 385.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 314; FR 386.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 321; FR 395, my italics.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 312; FR 384.
- <sup>13</sup> For an explanation of the chaosmos, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Différence et répétition* and *Logique du sens*. For a comprehensive study of it, in relation to Lacan's work, see Michael Brennan Barr, "Chaosmology: The Concept of Chaos and Cosmos in the Writings of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan." Master of Arts Thesis. SUNY Buffalo, September 2019.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 325; FR 400.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>16</sup> Pascal Quignard, *The Hatred of Music*, trans. Matthew Amos and Fredrik Rönnbäck (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 64; FR 63.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 122; FR 119.
- <sup>18</sup> Pascal Quignard, "Le chant des muses" in *Pour n'en pas finir* (Lonrai: Christian Bourgois, 2015), 43, my translation.
- <sup>19</sup> Pascal Quignard, *The Hatred of Music*, 13-14; FR 16.
- <sup>20</sup> It is kind of hilarious to see here the difference between Charlotte Gainsbourg's and Kirsten Dunst's reactions.
- <sup>21</sup> Lars von Trier, *Interviews*, ed. Jan Lumholdt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 42.
- <sup>22</sup> This common place linking Wagner with Nazism extends beyond academic or specialized writings, appearing even in pop culture. See, for example, *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* episode "Trick or Treat" (aired on October 7, 2001) where Larry David is scolded by another Jewish man for humming Wagner, and, at the end of the episode, takes revenge on this man and his daughter (who vandalized his house for not giving her and her other teenage friend candy in Halloween due to their age) by playing Wagner outside their house.
- <sup>23</sup> Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music* (London: Penguin, 2006), 243, except for *idea*, italics are mine.
- <sup>24</sup> Quignard, 219; FR 223.
- <sup>25</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*, xx; FR 19, translation modified.
- <sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Verso, 2010), 21.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> “One of the stakes of this book is to (...) show that no aesthetic or artistic practice, for fundamental reasons that derive from the determination of the very essence of art, can declare itself politically innocent. It is not the ‘everything is political’ of totalitarianism that destines art to be political. It is art itself, since it has been defined as such, in its highest ambition.” Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*, xxi-xxii; FR 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>41</sup> Idem.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>43</sup> Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>44</sup> This is a similar stance to Alewei Monroe’s in his comprehensive *Interrogation Machine*, where he presents Laibach’s and NSK’s work as a multifaceted event defying interpretation tout court.

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “A Letter from Afar” in *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, eds. Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, and Anthony Gardner (London and Ljubljana: The MIT Press and Moderna galerija, 2015), 174-175.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Enlightenment in Laibach” in *NSK. From Kapital to Capital*, 210-211.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>51</sup> A clear example of the dangers of such an identification is the work of Marilyn Manson. While with his first albums (*Portrait of an American Family*, *Antichrist Superstar*, *Mechanical Animals*) he and his band performed a similar critique of American totalitarianism and fascist tendencies through identification (i.e., the podium utilized in his *Antichrist Superstar* tour, where he performed the amalgam of theocratic, phallogocentric, and capitalist fascist drives of American culture), it is clear that his personal performance had gone beyond the state of free signifiers, into a solidified chauvinistic-fascist tendency in his private life.

<sup>52</sup> Badiou, 155.

<sup>53</sup> For a good overview of this composite character see <https://www.monsalvat.no/kundry.htm>

<sup>54</sup> This equation or at least connection between Kundry’s mutability and democracy is made in the following paragraph: “This would then imply that *democracy, by definition, is the failure of ceremony*” (ibid., 157). Badiou’s connection between ceremony and democracy here is more complex, but, unfortunately, I do not have the space to present it, nor to explore its complicated relations to music.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 157, my emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>57</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, “Kundry’s Laughter,” *New German Critique* 69 (Autumn, 1996), 157.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>66</sup> Simon Critchley, *Bowie* (New York: Or Books, 2014), 9.

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/apr/18/this-has-been-fantastic-revenge-metal-musician-lingua-ignota-on-surviving-abuse>

<sup>68</sup> For another example of the complex relation between Christian cultures and metal, see the documentary *Until the Light Takes Us* (2009, dirs. Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell), which explores the original anti-Christian motivations behind the church burnings in Norway in the 1990s by black metal artists. In this documentary, the closeness between the two traditions appears through the shared will to annihilate, where the perpetrators/artists are trying to create the most extreme and radically annihilating music they can, while accusing Christianity of having annihilated pre-Christian European culture. Here, their *archephonai*, or original sounds to be found, are – as they describe them – “necro.”

I want to thank here Tyler Williams for pointing out this documentary and these connections to me.

<sup>69</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trad-girl-tradwife>

<sup>70</sup> This last series is reminiscent of Bo Burnham’s song “White Woman Instagram” from his film *Inside* (2021)

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.them.us/story/dorian-electra-new-album-interview>

<sup>72</sup> To a comment in the same IG live story, where a viewer said that at first they had found DG’s music cringe, but not anymore, Electra replied saying that no, please, they always want to be cringe.

<sup>73</sup> <http://untitled-magazine.com/the-untitled-magazines-innovate-issue-collector-print-edition-releasing-globally-september-2021/>

<sup>74</sup> My translation.

<sup>75</sup> Critchley, 179.

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