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The deconstruction of history, music and the autonomy of art in the post-modern aesthetic

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Abstract

‘Post-modern music’ is an epistemological category which was created with the aim of drawing together and describing several contemporary tendencies which contradict the aesthetic premises that used to maintain modern art. As other terms that mark out our artistic vocabulary (neoclassicism, etc), this category is creating debates and a spread of different approaches and nuances. Opposite the globalizing definitions which bring up a new post-historical age, this article considers post-modernism as an aesthetic paradigm which is depicted by some specific conceptual and operating coordinates. In this way, what is being studied is the deconstruction that these expressions carry out in both the historical accounts and the concepts of pure music and autonomous art which appear in modern music.

Key words: postmodern music - modern music – deconstruction – post-historical era – intermedia practices

Introduction

In his work After the End of Art, Arthur Danto sets forth the hypothesis of a crisis in the historical narratives that served as the backbone for the evolution of modern art and the appearance of a new post-historical space in which the defining concepts of art, as it was understood in the modern era, cease to be operative (Danto, 1999).

Danto cites the emergence of the notion of art in the Renaissance, and from that he distinguishes between three different stages in our understanding of art: [1] An initial Vasarian narrative (valid approximately from the Renaissance until the late 19th century) in which art was envisioned as depiction and its development entailed gradual advances in the technical ability to depict reality more accurately. In the second stage, art concentrated on exploring and experimenting with the technical potential inherent in each medium (painting, sculpture, etc.), due in part to the emergence of new mechanical media that reproduced reality with a precision that the fine arts could never replicate (photography, cinema). Danto characterises this second stage via Clement Greenberg’s narrative on modernist painting, and he makes it dovetail with the emergence of the museum as a modern institution in which the fine arts are measured and evaluated according to formal criteria. The historical evolution of this narrative meant a gradual streamlining of the rhetorical elements coming from other art forms and a quest for the essential underpinnings of each medium (hence painting abandons its illusionist resources to create depth, and focuses on exploring the possibilities inherent in its two-dimensional space).

The last stage is the one corresponding to a post-historical era in which the fine arts are no longer limited to rendering these restricted historical narratives and instead open up a plural space where a multiplicity of trends blossom, including realistic, formalistic, etc. To Danto, in this post-historical stage, the issues related to execution are relegated to secondary status, while the spotlight hones in on the artistic artefact itself and the accent begins to fall on the reflexive and speculative aspects, that is, on the philosophy of art (in light of the impossibility of distinguishing a Pop Art artefact from other everyday consumer products, the issue of execution becomes secondary and the speculative reflection on what is art becomes more prominent).
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Danto’s vision bears parallels with the reflection elaborated by Martha Buskirk (2003) about contemporary fine art. This author points out the dissolution in the traditional category of genre (related to the narrative of Vasarian realism) and the more modern category of medium (related to Greenberg’s narrative), when classifying and defining numerous contemporary art proposals. However, Buskirk tries for a more detailed analysis of the problems that arise in the practice and discourse of these current trends, going beyond this post-historical stage that Danto vaguely theorises by means of a pluralism and a reflexive and philosophical status that is somewhat diffuse and indeterminate. The transfer of the artistic problem of the subject to the context in which it falls, the hybridisation of conventions belonging to different genres and artistic media, and the problematic status of artefacts as original products clearly differentiated from anything resembling reproductions or copies are just some of the issues that Martha Buskirk addresses in her specific examination of certain contemporary art proposals.

The reflection on a paradigm change, in which numerous categories of art from the modern age are invalidated, has likewise been transferred to the realm of music. Musicology also echoes different theories that prognosticate a depletion of the historical narratives that had served as the milestones in the evolution of modern music. The new musical expressions fall within a post-modern stage whose definition is, for the time being, utterly ambiguous and problematic.

One solution when describing this post-modern music has been to create a list of disperse stylistic features that contrast with the ideal of enclosure and formal coherence that characterised modern musical works. Jonathan D. Kramer (2002), for example, posits a transfer of certain marked characteristics of post-modern architecture to the realm of music: eclecticism, fragmentation, the appearance of discontinuities and contradictions, the use of materials from the past and from other cultures, recourse to a double code and to irony and so on.

However, there are also other approaches that go beyond this disperse list of stylistic features and strive to offer a more global vision of the post-modern stage. This is the case of Beatrice Ramaut-Chevassus (1991), who in her work *Musique et postmodernité* defines post-modernity as a global trend that has been expressed in composition since the late 1960s and that consists of a return to communication and narrative by recovering pre-existing musical materials and languages (belonging to the past or to other traditions). This stance entails a bold rejection of the values of abstraction and intellectual aridity that had characterised the integral serialism of the post-war era.

As Gianfranco Vinay (2001: 275-294) points out with regard to the perspective developed by Ramaut-Chevassus, this type of globalising definition runs the risk of becoming a “nebula” trapping authors who have throughout their lives shown a loyalty to the principles of modern music (the case of Boulez, for example). Characterising the phenomenon of post-modern music via stylistic features such as discontinuity or via a trend towards recovering the musical languages of the past may give rise to confusion, given the fact that numerous enshrined creators of modern music, such as Mahler, Berg, Debussy and Stravinsky, present fragmentary forms and reuse pre-existing musical material.

In my opinion, the perspectives wielded up to here pose two main problems. The first is that the majority of these theories on post-modernity fall into an excessively restricted characterisation of modern music. This would practically be equivalent to a closed text endowed with full internal consistency and to the narrative of the historical progress of material, that is, to a process that immerges itself in the pathway of abstract formalism and calls for the music to be stripped of all its traditional rhetorical components. This vision of modernity bandied about by Ramaut-Chevassus, as well as by other authors who put forth similar arguments, is derived from certain dogmatic approaches hailing from a prominent school of high modernism: the integral serialism of the Darmstadt School.

Likewise, we could point out that in the realm of the fine arts, Arthur Danto takes the restricted characterisation of Clement Greenberg to narrate the evolution of modern art. Greenberg’s vision of the development of modern painting is somehow a historical perspective constructed...
expressionism and its after-effects in post-pictorial abstraction. But what happens with all the musical and artistic expressions that do not fall within this historical vector oriented towards the culmination of the works of abstract expressionism or musical serialism? According to this restricted, formalistic vision of modern art, must we understand that neo-classical trends or simply any expression on the margins of this necessary historical progress are the antechamber to post-modernity or the portent of a post-historical stage?

Restricting the evolution of modern music to this pathway laid down in relation to the historical progress of the material, which Fubini (2004:19-28) declares revolves around the Wagner-Schoenberg-Webern-Darmstadt axis, entails an impoverishment that denies the existence of alternative approaches that are critical of certain totalitarian trends in modern music, but that have nevertheless striven to redirect it without necessarily relinquishing its principles. This is the case of Adorno’s “last stage”, in which he formulates a new vision of modernity (taking Mahler’s music as the model) that is compatible with reusing material from the past.

The second of the problems referred to above derives directly from the first. If modernity is viewed as a type of unifying, totalitarian cultural discourse, post-modernity would represent the salutary values of freedom and pluralism. However, viewing post-modernity as a free, indeterminate space outside the restricted boundaries of the orthodox modern narrative, or alternatively as a broken sack in which “anything goes” or “anything is possible” is not a positive definition of a new paradigm. A conception of post-modernity as a vague, undefined terrain would fit within a limited interpretation of modernity.

The category of post-modernity seems to have emerged as an attempt to conceptualise certain recent trends that belie the aesthetic suppositions on which high modernism lay. However, how can we articulate this category with the purpose of making it functional on an epistemological level? Is it a style, an aesthetic paradigm or a new era? Heralding a new global post-historical stage is, to my mind, a somewhat hazardous feat. Can we truly claim that any contemporary artistic or musical expression participates in a spirit that denies the modern conceptions of history, the discipline of music or art? Might there not currently exist a multitude of musical expressions that are still operating within these coordinates? Nor is it very clarifying to claim that we are in a post-historical stage if we do not explain how this deconstruction of modern assumptions works in the artistic expressions more precisely and specifically (hence Martha Buskirk’s analysis is a necessary, indispensable complement to Danto’s theories).

The perspective I developed in my doctoral thesis (Kaiero: 2007) strives to conceptualise post-modernity as a new aesthetic paradigm that has its own operative and conceptual coordinates, a paradigm that we have derived based on the premises that accompany the development of experimental music and certain ideas and concepts coming from post-structuralist thinking. This, however, is not tantamount to saying that we view post-modernity in terms of style. My vision of experimental music is not as a style, a current or a given school. In my opinion, experimental music represents a new aesthetic paradigm that deconstructs the principles on which the practice and discourse of modern music lay and in which the most diverse array of stylistic proposals find their place. Likewise, Schoenberg’s atonality and Stravinsky’s neo-classicism represent two divergent stylistic trends that nonetheless share the same aesthetic premises, that is, specific ways of thinking about the work, the discipline of music or the artistic realm that are clearly modern. An utterly diverse range of stylistic proposals fits within post-modernity (such as the inexpressive, Zen-like austerity of Cage’s music and the dramatic baroqueness of Carles Santos), and yet in all of them we can decipher the same underlying logic, certain ways of using and thinking about the practice of art. Establishing these conceptual and operative coordinates is nothing other than a tool that allows us to make a more detailed analysis, that provides the keys to interpreting and thus understanding these artistic phenomena.

Our approach to the phenomenon of post-modern music, thus, is not that of a style, nor that of an era, rather that of an aesthetic paradigm. A paradigm that currently coexists alongside ways of understanding and making music that are still modern and that, for the time being, we think would be premature to enshrine as the most representative of our day and age (if we analyse...
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institutionalised modern practices\(^{(7)}\). A paradigm in which the invalidation of the categories of autonomous work of music, of a universal historical tradition, of pure music (autonomy of the different artistic media) or the very autonomy of art, fall within a discourse and specific strategies of deconstruction. These conceptual and operative coordinates must be clearly differentiated from the others that we find in alternative modernity.

This is because there is a critical modernity that rejects the closed nature of the autonomous work of art, as well as the necessary narrative of a one-dimensional historical progress in the material\(^{(8)}\). This alternative current sets forth an open concept of work in which the autonomy is questioned while it is maintained and strives to reformulate a new historical continuity that is compatible with reusing materials from the past. These approaches are a far cry from the conception of non-work (deconstruction of the identity of the work) and historical non-narrative (deconstruction of all fundamental historical tradition) that post-modernity upholds. In this sense, critical modernity does not invalidate the concepts of work of music or historical narrative; it simply redirects them.

In the sections below we shall try to set forth how the aesthetic paradigm of post-modernity handles this deconstruction of the historical narrative, of the discipline of music and of the autonomy of art\(^{(9)}\), concepts on which the practice and discourse of modern music lie.

The deconstruction of the historical narrative

We shall begin by taking into consideration Vattimo’s reflections (1998: 9-20) on the concept of post-history. To this author, the discourses of modernity revolve around a historical sense oriented towards an endpoint. The tension feeding this historical dynamic is the recovery of the foundation-origin. From the standpoint of post-modernity, however, there is no original meaning, no ultimate truth which we should re-appropriate; hence there is a disarticulation from this teleological vector of the historical narrative. The experience of post-history is precisely that of a hazy ramble revisiting the pathways of historical missteps, valuing the richness of their innumerable fables and fictions.

These two conceptions of history and post-history can also be reflected in the fields of art and music. Within the modern conception of music, historical evolution represents headway oriented at discovering the foundations of the nature of sound (similar to how in painting it is aimed at reencountering its very essence), yet also at the recovery of the original true meaning of the music tradition inherited.

One of the cornerstones of this evolution arises around the narrative of the historical progress of the material. This narrative suggests historical headway that is aimed at an appropriation and gradual rational elucidation of the components of the sound material. History is conceived as scattered through different stages that gradually take over one another: each stage conserves the contributions from the previous model and simultaneously goes beyond them by generating a new, more global system which accounts for a higher number of aspects of the nature of sound that previously had not been reflected and still remained imperceptible or outside our unawareness. This is how to Schoenberg and Webern, the chromatic scale does not represent anything other than a historical advance through which the relationships between distant harmonics (dissonances) are now expressed rationally and understandably\(^{(10)}\). The history of music is viewed as a succession of stages in which the sound material is developed in increasingly rich and complex constructions (monody, polyphony, counterpoint, harmony, etc.) and in increasingly global and more comprehensive sound systems (modality, tonality, serial system). The conception of a progress in the material was formulated by the proponents of the historical necessity of serialism, for whom the legitimate arc of contemporary music was situated in the vector that led from Wagner to the Darmstadt School, passing along the way the authors of the Vienna School (chiefly Schoenberg and Webern).

This logic of constant betterment assumes first an openness to exploring new virgin sound territories, yet it also entails an abandonment of the resources already used and systematised,
which come to be viewed as obsolete formulae that cannot be used for a new creation. Once
tonality systematises one type of harmonic relationship (in Webern’s opinion (1982: 30), those
corresponding to the closest harmonics), the composers aims to exploit dissonance as an
expressive resource that has not yet been entirely rationalised. Dodecaphonism “neutralises”
this expressive value of dissonance and systematises it as a new constructive value. This is
when composers (of post-Webernian serialism) resort to exploring the parameters that still
remain to be systematised: rhythm, timber (what could be considered the most sensual and least
rational parameter) and others. This logic implies a gradual purging of all the traditional
components that made up the musical language, a tabula rasa that imposes a ban on re-using
resources from recognisable languages belonging to the past (like the explicit ban on using
triads in atonal music). As an upshot, the musical language is increasingly reduced to an
experimentation and abstract formalism that empties it of the expressive and symbolic
dimension that characterised the traditional material.

In the late 1960s, exhaustion at this blind fervour in a progress of the sound language began to
have an effect on a group of serial composers who expressed a need to go back to using
pre-formed, recognisable musical materials (from the past, from other musical traditions, etc.).
As mentioned above, some musicologists claim that this is when the historical vector of
modernity became diluted and when we fully entered post-modernity. These musicologists set
forth a type of dichotomy between a formalist, abstract modernity and a figurative, narrative
post-modernity. However, it is necessary to point out that the attitude shown by these serial
composers is due more to a criticism of the postulates of this totalitarian, restricted conception
of progress than to an abandonment of the historical dimension of modernity.

It is also around this time when in view of the aporia and dead end to which the latest
experiments in post-war serialism were leading, Adorno strove to formulate an alternative route
for modern music by taking as examples Mahler and Berg, two composers who are
characterised by the reuse of “regressive” material [11]. The modernity of these composers lies
not in their use of new language resources but in an original reworking that makes it possible to
“rescue” the underlying expressive and symbolic dimension of worn material from the past.
Breathing new life into the languages of the past is an alternative route for modern music that
other authors such as Debussy and Stravinsky have also taken. Compared to the wear and tear
on the pre-existing musical materials and their coagulation into precise, stereotyped meanings,
this historical continuity calls for a re-appropriation of the original meaning of these languages
in order to open them up to generating new perspectives and interpretations [12].

The historical headway of this alternative modernity is fed by a desire for to revitalise and
constantly re-appropriate an original true meaning of the tradition. Proof of this lies in the
numerous expressions that set different proposals for renewing the musical language against
each other. In them, each one defended the fact that the evolution present in their language was
backed by a truer and more faithful interpretation of tradition. The controversy between
Schoenberg and Stravinsky was quite telling in this respect (cf. Messing 1996: 139-149).

Schoenberg bandies himself as the legitimate heir to the great European musical tradition
(which he practically identified entirely with the arc of German music), the only one to have a
true, profound, inner understanding of its essence. Thus, he envisioned his revival of the
musical language as the only legitimate way to give continuity to the historical tradition, the
only one that follows its necessary, immanent evolution. In Schoenberg’s eyes, Stravinsky was
nothing more than a parvenu, a musical outsider coming from a peripheral tradition, that of
Russia, who was only able to articulate a formal, “frivolous” and superficial game using models
from an alien tradition that he never really came to understand. His music leads to a dead end
that, as the tradition is not revitalised, makes its historical continuity impossible.

Stravinsky launched similar accusations against his antagonist. The Russian composer viewed
Schoenberg as the epigone of a romantic movement that had twisted the historical legacy by
steering music into a dead end. His neo-classicism, on the contrary, called for a return to the
foundations, a more faithful re-appropriation of the music of the past with the goal of spurring a
modern-day renewal of the musical language [13]. Both composers, then, accused the other of
belonging to an “apocryphal tradition”, that is, of having an erroneous interpretation that twists
Within this modern historical evolution, every movement criticises the representation of the tradition contributed by the movement immediate preceding it and strives to offer an interpretation that is more faithful to this original meaning. This dialectical development thus entails a type of continuity within the discontinuity, that is, a contradictory succession of interpretations that contrast heavily with each other and that nevertheless hark back to the same fundamental identity (the axis that provides continuity). The tradition is viewed as a reference that is subjected to a reflexive re-elaboration, gradually becoming enriched with new nuances and interpretations. Each proposal to renew the musical language thus implies a re-reading of the tradition, which fosters the opening of new perspectives, of new pathways.

Going back to this reuse of pre-existing musical materials at the end of the 1960s, if we examine the reasons bandied about by authors such as Berio, Zimmermann, Nono and Stockhausen, we would agree that they all fall within the coordinates of a modern aesthetic. In them, the authors allude to the need to recover identity and collective memory by recovering materials belonging to a musical tradition that they view as their own. These musical materials from the past, either literal quotations of known works or melodic or harmonic twists on previous styles, constitute precisely the testimony of a shared identity that has come down to us in the guise of ruins and fragments. Hence, these composers devote themselves to re-joining these disperse sound fragments into new formal totalities, with the purpose of rescuing an original identity that has been relegated to oblivion.

Let us compare this approach with John Cage’s in *Cheap Imitation*, a piece composed in 1969 which Pritchett (1993) wields as a symbol of his return to composition and the use of pre-existing materials. Cage takes as the foundation a composition by Satie, *Socrate*, and he leaves the time structure in terms of lengths and the layout of the rhythm virtually intact while substantially altering the pitches, obeying the dictates of the *I Ching* (Book of Changes). This musician does not make use of this pre-existing material to re-elaborate its underlying meaning in a new way. Rather Cage retakes this model as devoid of meaning and manipulates it on the level of writing, following the dictates of randomness with the purpose of producing a new text that has nothing to do with the original.

According to Ramaut-Chevassus’ perspective (1998), this trend to reuse pre-existing material by both experimental musicians (Cage, minimalism) and European avant-garde musicians heralded the entry into a new post-modern age that contrasts with the sound abstraction that had characterised music after 1945 (abstraction that appeared not just in integral serialism, but also in the experiments in minimalism and indeterminacy). Nevertheless, this new approach to the languages of the past is different in each case because European “post-serial” music includes a modern historical continuity, while experimental American music is more like a post-modern deconstruction of any conception of unified, universal tradition. This post-modern paradigm dilutes the presence of a true sense of the tradition, which is constantly re-appropriated, generating new perspectives and new interpretations. In its place, it revisits pre-existing repertoires and languages with the purpose of de-sentimentalising the original meanings of these materials and reusing them to produce new musical texts that retain nothing of an original, essential message.

Experimental music, in this sense, is closely bound to the reading-writing strategies formulated by Derrida. These procedures flee from this modern strategy oriented at reproducing and reinterpreting an original content in a new way. On the contrary, they are productive (as opposed to reproductive) strategies in which the fundamental identity of a reference text is de-sedimented, decentred or de-limited, creating a proliferation of peripheral and independent interpretations. Derrida’s deconstructive strategies from the recognition of the structure of oppositions articulated by a reference text, and later they undertake an inversion and displacement of this same structure. In this way, the terms are de-localised as they lose their position within the main structure that gave them a function and a meaning. These terms thus displaced come to be viewed as marks without identity susceptible to taking on multiple, varied meanings according to the new combinations in which they participate.
musical elements belonging to a tonal work. Let us examine, for example, the case of John Cage’s *Hymns and Variations* (cf. Books 1993). In this piece, Cage takes two hymns by William Billings as his reference texts. The tonal structure of these hymns is centred by provoking the elongation or reduction of certain notes from the harmony, following the dictates of the *I Ching*. The sound elements are displaced, thus losing their purpose and meaning that they had in relation to this harmonic scheme, and, once freed, they are recombined in new harmonies that emerge accidentally. In this way, the central structure articulated by these hymns is completely diluted, and Cage makes use of the centred, marginal and peripheral elements to produce a new, radically different text. Experimental music has developed a variety of different reading-writing strategies that are also aimed at this proliferation of peripheral meanings and a dissolution of the original message: a reference musical text may be dislocated by means of randomness, but also through repetitive procedures or by decoding the text via interpretative codes coming from outside the musical medium.

Another major resource contributing to this deconstruction is the insertion of contaminating grafts from other texts, that is, what Derrida called intertextuality (cf. Ulmer 1985: 131-142). This strategy generation a play of re-sendings between an unlimited chain of texts that ends up decentring and destroying the hegemonic meaning of the reference text. However, it is necessary to distinguish this procedure from a modern montage, which brings together quotes from other texts in relation to a fundamental idea. Unlike the annotated nature of the modern work (the book), the post-modern text projects an unlimited chain of substitutions, a dissemination or continuous postponement that displaces us from one text to another, making it impossible to determine an ultimate meaning.

Nor do textual grafts correspond to the concept of musical quotation at work in modern musical montages. Quotations are “fragmentary integrity”, a musical entity bounded and defined in the guise of a melodic, harmonic or rhythmic idea that represents the original work or style (the principle of the *pars pro toto*) as an excerpt. These quotations are projected jointly in order to generate a new meaning while conserving the otherness and particularity of their original meaning. The sound excerpts used in post-modern intertextuality, however, are actually peripheral, “irrelevant” or marginal passages that ignore the fundamental identity of the works from which they come. As can be seen in certain practices by DJs or certain electronic montages in experimental music, these peripheral passages serve to connect one text to another in a continuous fashion, within an unlimited branching that makes it impossible to articulate a bounded totality with an ultimate, transcendental meaning.

One paradigmatic example of this post-modern intertextuality can be find in the *Europeras* that John Cage composed in the mid-1980s (cf. Fetterman 1996: 167-187). In these pieces, Cage creates diverse collections of materials related to different components: extracts from arias and from different orchestra parts from operas (musical part), actions defined in an English language dictionary (theatrical action), images of composers, singers and even cartoons (set) and costumes extracted from a historical costume encyclopaedia (costume). Cage makes use of the randomness procedures of the *I Ching* to amalgamate these materials, giving rise to unheard of, accidental combinations. He also composed a libretto, randomly joining different extracts from the main plot lines of different operas. Far from any kind of synthesis that would join the fragments belonging to the opera tradition with the purpose of spurring a re-creation of its fundamental identity, John Cage’s *Europeras* propose a decentred tour through the history of European opera, a deconstruction that disseminates this unified tradition into a branching of dissociated and particular interpretations. In fact, as Cage himself claimed, his intention was precisely to generate a discourse in which each spectator could create his or her own particular, independent interpretation of the history of opera.

**The deconstruction of the autonomous music field**

With the invalidation of the historical meta-narratives that served as the backbone to modern art, what takes place is the deconstruction of another category: the concept of pure music. Music as a category that affects the autonomy of its expression, striving to decouple itself from its
traditional servitude to the word, is a creation of the modern aesthetic. Within Clement Greenberg’s narrative about modern art, each discipline tries to divest itself of everything that is accessory and external (from the contamination from other artistic media) with the purpose of concentrating on an experimentation of its own intrinsic potentialities. As we saw before, one vector of the historical evolution of modern art centred precisely on this purist quest for the very essence of each medium. Music, too, tries to cleanse itself of any external rhetorical contamination, stressing the organisation of sound as its most essential expression.

The post-modern aesthetic, however, undertakes a deconstruction of the autonomous field of music that paradoxically is done by an extreme attainment of the modern project. It is precisely this purist quest for musical foundations that ends up leading to a de-articulation of the field of music established in modernity. Let us apply here the same logic that, according to Vattimo (1989: 131) defines Nietzsche’s philosophy: the extreme attainment of the modern project, characterised by a continuous regression in the quest of the primary cause, ends up ultimately leading, in this philosophy, to the dissolution of any foundation and to the postulation of the absence of any origin. In Rubén López Cano’s opinion (2004), Cage also takes the purist proposals of modernity to their ultimate consequences by freeing music from any rhetorical and symbolic dimension and reducing it to its most essential nature: the simple emergence of sounds over time. This extreme reduction of music to sounds and time implies, however, a dismantlement of the autonomous music field.

The regression to sounds freed from any desire to express or construct anything leads to a new paradigm centred on pure listening, and hence to a type of “sound art” where diverse expressions that overflow the narrow limits of musicality are encompassed, such as sound landscape, sound installations, and the like. Temporality is another factor that ends up rupturing the existence of a musical essence.

From the of his career, Cage has taken time as the basis of his music and set up a container of time brackets where the sounds emerge accidentally. However, it is precisely this reliance on time brackets that allows him to expand the music towards a new type of theatre he calls ‘happening’. These time containers do not gather just sound but also visual actions performed with the purpose of producing them. Cage thus realises that the time essence does not belong exclusively to the music: all the disciplines of art constitute processes that take place in space and time. Hence, he envisages the theatre as a natural space for the encounter of different sound, visual, verbal and other processes that take place simultaneously. Concerts themselves could extend beyond the narrow scope of music and come to be viewed as theatrical events encompassing not just sound but also visual and choreographic processes.

This is how the radicalisation of the autonomy of music leads paradoxically to the utter denial of an autonomous music. Music is ultimately reduced to its fundamental components, sound and time, but these two elements play an ambiguous and peripheral role that might lead to the definition of different artistic disciplines. One of the main characteristics of the post-modern aesthetic consists precisely of cultivating expressions that are situated in this gap “between” different media or disciplines.

However, intermedia practices have nothing to do with a modern synthesis of different means of artistic expression in a “total work of art”. Modernity upholds the creation of an autonomous music that affects its own means of expression, while it also suggests convergences with other disciplines within a global art field. This dialectical mediation between different artistic languages could be approached from two different orientations. The concept of a “total work” from a spiritual content that is embodied “top-down” in different artistic media, establishing a hierarchy between them according to their aptness for representing this fundamental idea more or less adeptly. However, there is yet another modern orientation that rejects this type of totalitarian synthesis. This one upholds a “materialistic” conception that from the particularity and autonomy of each artistic medium and encompasses the possibility of establishing a “bottom-up” convergence in order to shed light on a diffuse global meaning. When Debussy sets symbolic poems to music, for example, he envisions the music and text as two autonomous languages, two parallel dreams that, nonetheless, associate with each other to evoke an imprecise meaning.
Far from all mediation or synthesis, *intermedia* practices[^21] suggest a space of interference in which the de-articulation of the autonomy and identity of each of the disciplines does not lead to the creation of a more global entity (such as a “total work”). The goal is not to synthesise the different arts into a higher whole, nor to at least create a dialectical balance that joins them, rather to operate in the realm of non-definition, of non-identity, that is, in the “between” disciplines. This hybridisation or cross between different artistic media seeks a decentring and dissolution of all fundamental reference content, as it is a global message or meaning belonging to each discipline (like a musical idea, etc.).

Let us focus on examining some expressions linked to performance and conceptual art (such as Fluxus’ events, the *etceteras* produced by the Spanish collective Zaj, or the shows by Carlos Santos that are the heirs to this approach), in which interference is generated between the visual and sound media[^22]. One common practice in *intermedia* strategies consists of taking an element (an instrument, a material, etc.) belonging to one specific medium and projecting it onto another different medium where it is manipulated and decoded via alien procedures and codes. Traditionally, the relationship between the different disciplines consisted of transferring and preparing a given message to a new sensory code: in translating, for example, a musical idea into visual codes. In the case we are currently examining, however, a single shared meaning is not what is expressed via two different sign systems. What is transferred from one realm to another is precisely the same text or signifier without any type of adaptation mediating this transfer: if we transfer a score directly to a plastic medium, this text will be interpreted via visual codes.

This is a type of manipulation that, just like the deconstructive strategies of Derrida’s reading-writing, operates at the level of the signifier. In this way, a text or musical signifier is taken and transferred to another context, where it is read through procedures or codes belonging to a plastic medium, that is, through “wrong” or “erroneous” interpretation filters. This reading-writing strategy deconstructs the underlying, original meaning of this text (the musical idea) and sheds light on new marginal, peripheral meanings that had previously gone totally unnoticed.

Some examples from Carles Santos[^23] and two *intermedia* experiences by Fluxus artists will serve to illustrate how this principle works. In a sequence from Santos’ *La conversa* (one of his conceptual film productions), there appears a tape recorder from which a voice emanates that reads a score based on visual codes, describing it as if it were a painting (“we see five lines. Above the top one there is (…)”). This reading, using an “erroneous” filter, utterly deconstructs the meaning or reference musical message and focuses solely on the visual appearance of the score, a secondary, marginal feature which we had never noticed before. Likewise, in many of his shows, Santos deconstructs the strictly sound-based meaning of orchestral and piano performance by decoding them from the standpoint of a theatrical event. The undisputed star of his productions, the piano, usually appears taken out of its usual context of reference (the discourse and practice of music). The piano may thus be projected as a visual fetish that takes on the rank of a lovely sculpture. On numerous occasions, the piano is “improperly” manipulated using produces from outside the medium of music, such as when a dancer goes around it, contorting herself from a theatrical and choreographic perspective. This action possesses a visual project, yet at the same time it also produces incidental, fortuitous sounds that go beyond the domain of musical discourse.

Just like in the de-collage processes of Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell (cf. Ariza 2003: 75-81), Santos tends to generate unpredictable sounds based on processes of the physical transformation, destruction or manipulation of the musical objects (in *Ricardo y Elena*, for example, a heavy object falls on top of the piano, producing a crashing cluster). We can also find this principle in the different artistic manipulations to which a vinyl record may be subjected. The Hungarian artist, Knizak, for example, misshapes the record by subjecting it to a heat source, while Christian Marclay creates a sound collage by gluing together pieces of records by different artists. Meanwhile, Ian Murray generates cuts in the surface of the record and Arthur Kopcke pours drops of glue over it (cf. Ariza 2003: 94-103). In both DJs’ practice of scratching and in different experiments performed by Fluxus artists, this manipulation dilutes...
the original recorded musical message and produces peripheral, fortuitous sound events. In all these practices, we can observe the same principle of producing an unexpected sound result thanks to the interference of an action or reading filter belonging to another artistic medium.

Summarising what we have set forth up to now, we could claim that interference or hybridisation between different artistic media is one strategy aimed at deconstructing a reference musical message or idea and focusing our attention on all the peripheral and “external” aspects that had gone totally unnoticed until then. These practices thus stress the non-sound dimension of the musical actions and elements (such as the visual appearance of a score, a piano or an orchestra performance), while they also make us take heed of the sound produced by artistic media outside the realm of music (such as the sounds generated by a choreography). In this way, the modern ideal of an autonomous, pure musical language that is fully alienated from the rhetorical resources belonging to the other artistic media is radically questioned and deconstructed. In this post-modern aesthetic, the practice of music is presented as essentially made up of aspects linked to other media (visual and choreographic elements, chiefly). At the same time, the sound, far from being the exclusive, distinctive patrimony of music, is viewed as an element that also participates in the practice of other artistic disciplines.

The end of art?

The post-modern aesthetic also undertakes a deconstruction of the autonomous realm of art by musical experiences that are situated in the gap between art and life. The conception of a field of art that is bounded by the social context to establish an autonomous sphere with its own independent legislation is a creation of the modern age. Habermas (1988) dates this emergence from the late 18th century, when the substantial reason expressed in metaphysics and religion was split into different realms that developed independently: knowledge (science), the regulatory realm of ethics and law, and the field of aesthetics (24). According to Habermas, the purpose of the modern project was to emancipate these areas from the world of traditional life so that they could more fully evolve and develop. However, this emancipation should not effect the creation of a culture of experts that impoverish the realms of collective experience to the point of diluting them in the marketplace. The intention was to be able to reflexively develop the collective experiences bequeathed by tradition (their component of knowledge) according to the different specialised, independent parcels in order to later enrich and nurture worlds of community life that remain the totality of reference. The worlds of shared life are then viewed as an objective, “natural” and fundamental referent, the basis on which different autonomous, partial discursive fields are developed that imprint an evolution on their contents.

The modern aesthetic thus proposes a dialectical mediation between a discourse and autonomous practice of art and a global social sphere that acts as the “natural” context of reference. The values of everyday use that provide the reference identity of things (common sense) lie in this “natural” context of the worlds of shared life. The autonomous sphere of art is projected as a realm of representation which is devoted to re-elaborating these contents from a formal, aesthetic perspective. Both settings are painted as clearly different and defined by a praxis, functions and values that are clearly distinct from one another. When an object shifts from one context to the other, it becomes re-elaborated and redefined according to the new values; thus the artistic endeavour transforms everyday objects into artistic objects.

Despite undertaking a subjective formal re-elaboration, within modern art the artistic object still preserves the reference to original values of use coming from the worlds of life. This re-presentation of the modern aesthetic may take place through an also-classical facet in which the artistic object reflects social values as a fundamental, ultimate reality. However, there is yet another alternative facet that is more progressive (which would correspond to certain principles from the avant-garde movements) in which the artistic re-presentation is aimed at questioning and showing the partial, constructed nature of this reality, of these socially established values, in order to point towards a utopian horizon of emancipation where the truly universal, objective values have yet to be fulfilled. When the avant-garde becomes politicised, this artistic
Within the post-modern paradigm, however, there is no notion of an objective social framework (either conceived as an instituted social order or a utopian idea of worlds of life freed from any oppressive rationalisation). This conception is somehow the result of an evolution, one that is “perverted” according to Habermas, of the project of modernity (cf. Habermas 1988 and 1989). Achieving this project entails the risk that with the development of different particular and specialised discursive realms, the objective reference of worlds of shared life end up being diluted. This logic is expressed in the evolution of a certain arc of modern art (the one culminating in the serial works of high modernism) which becomes enmeshed in increasingly arbitrary, subjective formalising, leading to a gradual loss in the reference of common values. As mentioned above, there are certain approaches that strive to redirect this situation within the modern project by recovering and rearticulating a shared identity.

The post-modern paradigm, however, takes this logic to its extreme by denying the existence of an original referent, of this stable primeval world that gave us the being of things, the reality that defined the function and essential meaning of objects. In its place, it postulates a proliferation of incommensurable plays of language: different perspectives or cultural re-presentations that do not refer to any ultimate, fundamental values. The values of use and everyday meanings shift thus to be viewed as just another play of language, similar to the one in the field of art. This vision can be seen clearly reflected in certain expressions of conceptual art, in which what is stressed is the absence of a primeval, fundamental definition of the objects. Kosuth, for example, presents a single object from different perspectives: the photographic image of a chair, its verbal definition and an actual chair. The artist alludes to establishing a hierarchy between an original base identity (the actual chair) and the remaining representations, so that he views the actual chair, the photo and the verbal description as three different definitions that operate on the same level, without any of them being able to claim primacy as the fundamental value that serves as a reference for the others.

Far from being a global, objective referent, social space is thus envisaged as a conflictive, performative field in which the different discourses interfere with each other and struggle to impose their particular point of view. The dominant discourse in the media would deploy the adorned beginning that takes on the function of reality. However, unlike modern criticism, post-modernity believe that the media do not aim to hide and twist a fundamental reality, rather to impose a single, agreed-upon point of view as to what is real and truthful, and to exclude all the others.

In the modern paradigm, each area is clearly delimited by a discourse and a set of practices that grant a value of use and a specific definition to the objects falling within it. An object that originally comes from one specific realm can shift to another as long as it is re-elaborated and redefined according to the practices in this new context (this is how an everyday object can be re-elaborated on an artistic level). The post-modern paradigm, for its part, abandons these delimited areas and places itself in the interstice separating them, that is, in a border area in which there is constant interference between the different plays of language or realms of discourse. The opening of this space of interference triggers a constant displacement of the objects that circulate from one discourse to another (in a direct transfer, without the need to be re-elaborated), shedding the meaning surrounding them in the original context and becoming signs lacking a fundamental identity which can be constantly redefined according to the play of language in which they emerge. The object thus represents a type of found sign without a specific identity, which, when entering one realm of discourse, is necessarily interpreted by granting it a function, a value and a meaning (as Deleuze points out, the meaning is not an origin but a result).

This interference between different plays of language leads to both a constant redefinition of the identity of the objects and a displacement and reshaping of the areas of discourse. The example of an objet trouvé such as Duchamp’s celebrated urinal (which precisely constituted an early expression of this post-modern deconstruction of the autonomous sphere of art) can serve to better illustrate this concept. The entry of a urinal in the museum space poses an interference between the interplay of everyday and artistic language. This everyday object is directly projected into the space of art without any type of adaptation or re-elaboration of the artistic
practice mediating. This interference thus leads to a dissolution of the original identity of the urinal, which is redefined as an aesthetic object with another value of use and another essentially distinct meaning. But this entry of the urinal requires not only for this object to be endowed with an aesthetic function and identity, but also for the field of art in its role as an interplay of language of discursive area to be redefined. The urinal as an “artistic object” offers an explanation of both what a urinal is and what an artistic product might be. In this way, not only is the identity of everyday objects deconstructed and left hanging (after that, we could begin to wonder whether the urinal in our bathroom should be used for urinating or for being viewed as a beautifully-proportioned sculpture), but the coordinates and habitual practices in the realm of art are also dislocated and point to the need to be totally overhauled (and we then comes to wonder what art is).

Experimental music and the “new sound behaviours” derived from it (sound landscape, sound installations, music happenings and performances, etc.) clearly express this same type of outlying experience. The sound signs chosen display a problematic condition as musical objects, either as objects belonging to a traditional repertoire of formulae or as new sound acquisitions coming from the outside which have nonetheless been painstakingly re-elaborated, musically speaking. The sounds in a sound landscape, for example, do not have their own specific identity and can be valued as either everyday or musical elements depending on the subjective point of view of the person identifying them. From an opposite direction, ambient music also suggests a similar disjoint, given that this background music which is confused with the sounds in the environment can be understood as a piece of music or background noise depending on the circumstances and the predisposition and competence of the people listening to it.[28]. In each person, even at any given time, different points of view may predominate so that there is a displacement and ongoing redefinition of the identity of these sounds. Likewise, the boundary between art and life is constantly being shifted, and consequently so is the definition between what may be and what is not music.

In the post-modern paradigm, music and art are not envisioned as an autonomous, delimited field endowed with an essence and stable principles that define what art IS. Rather it is viewed more as a movable perspective in constant transformation, as unstable terrain whose principles are constantly being questioned and reconfigured. The question of art is thus viewed as a problem to be submitted to constant interrogation. This speculative value emerges from the time when what confers ‘artiness’ on a product ceases to be its elaboration or execution and becomes the standpoint from which it is viewed. The accent no longer falls on the characteristic values of the modern paradigm, such as praxis and formal production (the artistic trade) and the receptive facet, that is, the poles of perception and interpretation, take over the limelight. As Danto aptly pointed out, art no longer resides in the elaboration of an artefact rather in a new conceptual and reflexive dimension in which art revolves around a practice of creation and assigning meaning.

Finally, we have to ask ourselves whether this dissolution of the modern coordinates of historicity, of the autonomy of the discipline of music and the practice of art, has been wholesale. After all, post-modern artistic expressions paradoxically fall within institutions and practices of modern art that they constantly deny yet simultaneously affirm. The musical pieces by John Cage, for example, despite the artistic dissolution of the concept of modern author and of work-object, nonetheless rely on the same institutional and commercial mechanisms that they criticise, as they are performed in concert halls as autonomous works belonging to a certain musician (the copyright refers to Cage as the author and copyright owner of a specific work). The attainment and continuity of a historical vector is denied, yet somehow the experimental musicians re-elaborate a new genealogy of modern music (establishing an axis of continuity that ranges from the futurists to post-modern expressions), thus conceiving a historical tradition that legitimises them and additionally tends to regard these deconstructive strategies as the most fundamental expression of contemporary artistic thinking compared to modern symphonic practices, which they regard as out of place and utterly obsolete.

However, there is a principle that the new sound behaviours seem to have effectively questioned: the concept of an autonomous musical discipline. This is proven by the fact that the majority of these expressions no longer fall within modern musical institutions, nor are they part...
of the usual discourse of musicology. Hence it is still hard to pigeonhole them and this dilemma is only partly solved by the welcome they have received in fine arts spaces (museums) and in general discourses on art. The autonomous institution of art, for its part, has not yet been radically questioned. This paradox is reflected in the ambivalent status of an *objet trouvé*, let us once again use Duchamp’s urinal as an example, which denies and criticises the very institution of art at the same time that it is kept inside the museum (and by extension remains within an aesthetic discourse about a history of art, etc.) as a work of art. The majority of post-modern expressions that deconstruct the notion of modern art are still being produced and projected within the setting of these modern art institutions: museums, theatres, exhibition or recital halls, and even all sorts of outdoor venues that although they fall outside these physical confines are still conceptually painted as spaces having undergone artistic intervention. Hence, we cannot venture to talk so much about the end of art as a new post-modern aesthetic paradigm.

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**Notes**

[1] With regard to the devout images present in former days in the Christian West, from Roman times until approximately 1400, Danto claims: “This does not mean that these images were not art in the broadest sense, rather that their artistic status did not lie in their elaboration, given the fact that art had not yet truly appeared in the collective consciousness.” (Danto 1999: 25).

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[4] The notion of montage that Jean-Paul Olive (1998) applies when analysing the output of these four composers precisely implies these two dimensions of a fragmentary form and of the re-use of pre-existing musical materials.


[6] Anne Boissière (1999) studies this last stage in Adornian thinking from his last philosophical writings (*Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*), from his new positing of a *musique informelle* and from Adorno’s analyses of the works of Berg and Mahler.


[9] In this article, we have omitted an examination of the post-modern deconstruction of the concept of work of music. If you wish to see it, please see the chapter entitled “La música experimental como estética postmoderna” (“Experimental music as post-modern aesthetic”) in Kaiero (2007: 210-266).


[12] This historical continuity would correspond to the approach wielded by Anne Boissière with regard to the Adornian concept of the evolution of musical material (Boissière 2001).

[13] To further explore the meaning that his neo-classical return to models of the past has taken on in creators such as Stravinsky, Picasso and De Chirico, please see Messing 1996: 81-85.


[15] For a description of these deconstruction strategies, please see the sections entitled “La estrategia general de la deconstrucción” (The general strategy of deconstruction) (125-131) and “La doble práctica de lectura y escritura” (The double practice of reading and writing) (149-165) in De Peretti (1989).
Michael Nyman (1999: 160-171) proffers numerous examples from minimalist English composers (Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs, etc.) in which a musical reference text is dislocated by introducing repetitions and randomness.

We back our claims with the different definitions gathered by Ramaut-Chevassus in her doctoral thesis (Ramaut-Chevassus 1991: 10).

On this subject, please see Elie During’s examination of electronic music by DJs (During 2002: 49).

In his 1952 piece entitled Water Music, Cage inscribes both visual and sound actions within this container of time brackets, such as pouring out a glass of water, etc.

We back our claims with the different definitions gathered by Ramaut-Chevassus in her doctoral thesis (Ramaut-Chevassus 1991: 10).

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In his 1952 piece entitled Water Music, Cage inscribes both visual and sound actions within this container of time brackets, such as pouring out a glass of water, etc.

On this subject, please see the chapter entitled “Le refus de la synthèse des arts” in Boissière (1999: 177-199).

One artist who was a member of Fluxus, Dick Higgings, posits a division between “multimedia” art, which is an amalgam of different disciplines, and “intermedia”, which is located between the different means of expression (Cf. Nyman 1999: 79).

For an analysis of this type of intermedia expression, please see the chapter entitled “Fluxus: música conceptual y experimentación intermedia” (Fluxus: Conceptual music and intermedia experimentation) in Ariza (2003: 75-81), and the catalogue entitled En l’esperit de Fluxus (1994).

For a description and analysis of Carlos Santos’ music shows, please see Ruvira (1996).

Habermas takes this idea from the sociologist Max Weber.

On this subject, please see Lunn’s work (1986) on the link between Marxism and modernism. Also, please see the section entitled “Un debate sobre el realismo y el modernismo” (A debate on realism and modernism) in the same work to further examine these two conceptions of classical realism and the avant-garde.

To more closely examine this vision of post-modern thinking, please see Lyotard (1987) and the chapter entitled “La apología del nihilismo” (The apologia of nihilism) in Vattimo (1998: 23-46).

Please see the chapter entitled “El pensamiento y su afuera (crítica de la imagen dogmática)” (Thinking and its outskirts [Criticism of the dogmatic image]) in Zourabichvili (2004: 14-32).

Please see Eno (2004).

**Bibliography**


