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Flusser's Sonic Modernity

“[P]ure music is the greatest contribution of the Modern West to humanity’s treasure. Much greater, I believe, than science and technology.”
– Vilém Flusser, “On Music.”¹

Music, and “pure music,” like most other concepts in the Flusser universe, have their own set of idiosyncratic meanings and inflections. The quote above reveals the special place music has in his conceptual-political-philosophical agenda. For many of those familiar with Flusser’s work this might be confounding. It is, however, a comparable gesture to his oft-overlooked dramatic unveiling of music in “Chamber Music,” the penultimate chapter of *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Into the Universe of Technical Images) in which he dramatically declares that “everything to do with ear and mouth, sound and word” will no longer be held “as secret” followed by his enthused elaboration of audiovisual images (Flusser 1985: 183).² Many Flusser scholars have treated sound and music as peripheral aspects of his work and focused on photography and visual modes of communication; this is not unreasonable, for music and sound come into focus only occasionally within his writings. However, given these indications of a significant status endowed to it, further exploration remains worthwhile.

This essay appraises Flusser’s conception of the sonic with regards to his broad “communicological” theorisation of societal and corresponding epistemological changes in media and communication.³ Paying particular attention to two lectures linked to the quote above, a characterisation of the sonic in Flusser’s understanding of modernity is proposed. I make a two-fold argument: on the one

¹ Lecture 15 in a series delivered at the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy, São Paulo, 1965, entitled *The Influence of Existential Thought Today* (013IPEA). See Flusser 2012a.

² The full quote from the chapter “Kammermusik”/“Chamber Music” reads: “As the reader has surely noticed with surprise and displeasure, I have eliminated everything to do with ear and mouth, with sound and word, from my considerations. I have kept the ‘audiovisual’ character of the emerging universe of technical images a secret. I am namely convinced, that it is only now that the moment has come, to talk about this” (Flusser 1985: 183).

³ As Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo surmise, from Flusser’s communication theory, or “Communicology” (German: Kommunikologie), can be understood that, “Communication is an artificial, intentional, dialogic, collective act of freedom, aiming at creating codes that help us forget our inevitable death and the fundamental senselessness of our absurd existence.” (Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo 2011: 83).

hand, Flusser falls into well-trodden tendencies of twentieth-century humanities scholars which overlay the binary division between the visuality of modernity and the aurality of pre-modernity criticized by sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne as the “audiovisual litany” (Sterne 2003: 13),⁴ encapsulated by Flusser’s more famous media theory contemporary Marshall McLuhan’s notion of “acoustic space” (Carpenter and McLuhan 1960; McLuhan 1988); on the other hand, Flusser’s very understanding of modernity and its relation to the sonic, indicate a different set of concerns. I suggest Flusser’s rendition of a sonic modernity to be one which de-stabilises rather than re-stabilises liberal Western humanist modernism and instead pushes towards a liberatory ideal of an epistemological undoing, a political critique of the present which is evident in the sonic in particular ways.

The Sonic in Flusser

Although mentions of music are often sparse and easily overlooked, writings on music in Flusser’s oeuvre are nevertheless found continuously from the early 1960s through the late 1980s. As Rodrigo Maltez Novaes—translator of numerous of these early works—has noted, ideas which drive Flusser’s essays and lectures from 1960s in Portuguese in Brazil are reformulated and adapted to its audience by the time of his better-known later works in the 1980s written in German and published in Europe.⁵ Flusser had a sustained affection for music evident from his brief sojourn as a jazz writer in London after fleeing the Nazi invasion of Prague in 1939 (Wagnermaier and Röller 2003: 29), to comments by his daughter Dinah Flusser who divulged of her father’s penchant for Baroque music, Indian ragas, and post-war electronic music (Goh 2014, 2). Contemporaries to Flusser such as Dietmar Kamper have lamented the missing aural and oral dimension of his work, linked to a neglect of the body as an object of analysis (Kamper 1999). Kamper, as well as others of Flusser’s interlocutors and scholars succeeding them, did not pay much attention to this. His contemporaries probably did not know about the few lectures on music in the 1960s and mentions of music in his early book *The History of the Devil* – these were unpublished in English until the mid-2010s – however neither has much attention been given to the sonic aspects in his better-known published German texts from the 1980s such as aforementioned chapter “Kammermusik” (Chamber Music) of *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* or “Die Geste des Musikhörens” (The Gesture of Listening to Music) which appeared in *Gesten* (1991). A 2014

⁴ Cf. Sterne 2008, 2011.

⁵ See the extensive translators’ introductions by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes in all recently translated works, such as Flusser 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014.

special edition of *Flusser Studies*, “Music and Sound in Vilém Flusser’s work” (2014) sought to highlight an otherwise under-analysed facet of Flusser’s work.⁶

However, how Flusser understands the sonic and modernity to interrelate has not yet been thoroughly interrogated. These lesser known two lectures from 1965 in São Paulo – “On Music” and “On Modern Music” demonstrate not only that Flusser’s thought engaged directly with “music” in the sense of works by classical, avant-garde musical composers and popular music, but also that “music” and the “sonic” form part of his conceptual framework. As Rainer Guldin’s work has shown, music, mathematics, abstraction and computation have a particularly pronounced relation in Flusser’s media theory; his conceptualisation of music has a purchase on his understanding of modernity: the modern worldview has enforced an opposition between music and mathematics which Flusser takes to be deceptive.⁷ Understanding how and what the sonic – through Flusser’s references to music – inflects onto his understanding of modernity, and thus how it fits with his larger communicological theories, will be vital in appraising how Flusser’s sonic modernity configures within his larger body of work.

Sounding Modernity’s Groundlessness

It is apparent from the outset of the lecture “On Music” that Flusser wishes to depart from the common understanding of the word “music”. In a sentiment repeated on other occasions, he states: “The word ‘music’ is Greek and was originally ‘*musiké techné*,’ that is, the art of the Muses... This original use of the word ‘music’ proves that music in the current meaning of the term was held as the art ‘*par excellence*,’ a kind of model of the arts” (Flusser 2012a: 1). He prepares the listener for a foray into the “philosophy of music,” decisively maintaining a playful ambiguity to what degree music is meant in the sense of vibrations in the air as “organized sound” *or* in the sense of the “art of the Muses.”

Flusser’s contempt toward industrialism for having disrupted the “natural” and “festive” rhythms of life is unmistakable: “Music is the purest articulation of festivity... music always reveals the sacred aspect of reality... [but] It is no longer the bird’s song that wakes us up in the morning, but the

⁶ This special edition of *Flusser Studies* was edited by Marta Castello Branco, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes and myself. We brought together scholarly work on the topic for the first time and attempted an overview of published and unpublished writings by Flusser on music, sound, listening, hearing, acoustics known to-date. See Castello Branco, Goh, and Maltez Novaes 2014.

⁷ “Mathematics is, therefore, for us moderns generally the opposite of music, it is a loosening up [Auflockerung], refinement [Verfeinerung], thinning [Verdünnung], an objectivation of language.” Trans. by Rainer Guldin from Flusser 1996: 178. Qtd. in Guldin 2014.

baker's motorcycle. The syncopated rhythms of machine levers, of motor pistons, and of typewriters' keys mark our life" (Flusser 2012a: 2). He refers to music and dances in nightclubs as "cretinous and empty...refuge holes against the boredom of a life without aim" (Flusser 2012a: 2). There is a melodramatic pathos to Flusser's disgruntlement, one which might be seen to resemble the anti-modernism of cultural conservatives who similarly used sonic indicators to praise pre-modern society's naturalism such as nineteenth century US American writer Henry David Thoreau in "Walden," whose ideas were echoed in the "acoustic ecology" movement led by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer in the 1970s.

Yet, in typical Flusserian style, his position on the sonic nature of modernity is far from straightforward. Elaborating upon the loss of "the sacred" caused by the advent of modernity, Flusser proposes that "pure music" due to its non-representational nature is to be understood as the articulation of the structure of thought itself, "Music is the expression of itself. It is something completely independent of the doubtful world in which thought finds itself" (Flusser 2012a: 3). Flusser's philosophy of music is clearly heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, evident in the stringent preservation of the duality of the world as will and representation. Where for Schopenhauer, music is suggested to be able to express the "essence of things...Will itself," for Flusser, pure music on account of its supposed non-representationalism similarly is bestowed with a capability of containing "the sacred." Thus, music articulates the mathematical structure of thought and offers a refuge from the supposed trappings of figurativism. Extending the definition and meaning of "music" according to his initial statement, Flusser repudiates the premise that art *alienates* and proposes instead that pure music, as the art-of-the-muses, both abstract and concrete (depending on the "point of view" – Flusser 2012a: 3), "pure music is the very return to sanity" (Flusser 2012a: 5). "In a situation where we have lost our faith in nature, and in that which transcends, it is through music that we come into contact with that which may become one day the new reality. The progress, of which we participate, and which points to a fusion between mathematics and music, and that will have as a result the overcoming of science through its transformation into abstract art, started, historically, with the Renaissance, in which non-representative music emerged." (Flusser 2012a: 6)

In "On Modern Music" Flusser expands on his argument, diagnosing the response to an increasingly noisy industrial world either "to shout and overcome the ambient noise" or "to seek refuge in hermetically sealed places" (Flusser 2012b: 1). Shouting music, according to Flusser, is akin to commercially-produced background music found in cinemas, nightclubs, and restaurants. He is nothing short of scathing: "it generates the illusion of meaning" (Flusser 2012b: 2), yet it reveals an overarching tendency towards nothingness and escapism, "It is the inauthentic attempt to sacralize the profane.

Music in this sense of the term is a surreptitious confession of the absurd reality in which we find ourselves. And it is therefore the very articulation of this absurdity” (Flusser 2012b: 2). Flusser pinpoints this music as symptomatic of “groundlessness,” a notion he examines thoroughly in his philosophical autobiography *Bodenlos* which links his journey of exile, migration and the loss of home to discovery and creativity (Flusser 1999). The assessment of this particular condition must therefore be read in conjunction to sentiments powerfully expressed by Flusser in essays such as “The Ground We Tread,” which grapples philosophically with the aftermath of the Holocaust and twentieth century fascism (Flusser 2013b). It is this empty music which signifies the contemporary groundless condition of modernity Flusser wrote in, it symbolizes only the “shreds of a sense of lost reality” (Flusser 2012b: 3).

Contrasting his discernible disdain for this “shouting music,” Flusser construes of “hermetic music” in a more favourable tone. He takes as his example post-war experimental electronic music of German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. Stockhausen’s early works “Studie 1,” “Studie 2,” and “Gesang der Jünglinge” – although they remain unnamed – are unmistakably referenced in mentions to magnetic tape manipulations of sounds of bells, locomotives, and voices reciting Bible verses. Flusser enthusiastically describes this “revolution” as an “attempt to geometricize music...to endow it with all four dimensions of time and space” ((Flusser 2012b: 3). This is used to exemplify what Flusser had previously mentioned in which pure music is the “articulation of thought.” Flusser’s statement reinforces a sentiment that this music is futuristic, and that currently society has not yet “learnt to listen to electronic music” before turning to his analysis of traditional music in which he identifies a similar structure (Flusser 2012b: 4). He adamantly proposes that Baroque and Renaissance music due to its acknowledged mathematical basis is: “the perfect articulation of pure music” (Flusser 2012b: 4). Nevertheless, although hopes are placed upon the “hermetic music” he describes, some reservations are expressed in this gesture of retreat, echoed elsewhere in his writings about the Hegelian dialectic between the public and private spheres in which one’s inner and domestic life is opposed to one’s external societal affairs.

The Romantic tone Flusser takes in descriptions of pure music – such as the close of the essay “On Music” with a short verse by German Romanticist Wackenroder depicting the yearning for solace found in sounds – is echoed in the later utopic hopes he places in the power of imagination of audio-visual images in “Chamber Music” (Flusser 2012a: 6). Yet, in his communication theory, he purports

to argue “against” a Schopenhauerian model.⁸ It is apparent within Flusser’s conception of how the sonic manifests in modernity that the fortunes and pitfalls he identifies in his writings more broadly have corresponding sounding elements. In the next section, I will address how Flusser’s sonic modernity both re-articulates and yet simultaneously deviates from the larger tendency of an audiovisual litany in twentieth century cultural theory.

The *Crisis of Linearity*. Beyond Dualisms

Flusser’s communicological model is a theory of the history of media communication he developed and finessed over decades from earlier language philosophy writings of his first published book *Língua e Realidade* (1963), continued across various essays and courses (such as *Nossa comunicação*/“Our Communication” in *Natural:mente* [1979/2013a]), brought together as a book manuscript in the late 1970s under the title *Umbruch der menschliche Beziehungen*/“Mutations in Human Relations” (Flusser’s own English language title) and later in guises including *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (1983), *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder* (1985), *Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (1987), *Krise der Linearität* (1988), and the unfinished *Menschwerdung*, the lattermost Flusser was working upon at the time of his death in 1991. New media theorist Sjoukje van der Meulen has placed Flusser’s body of work intellectually and historically between the early twentieth century Jewish German cultural critic Walter Benjamin and the Canadian media and communication theorist of the post-war period Marshall McLuhan, an insightful and pertinent thesis when addressing Flusser’s sonic modernity (van der Meulen 2010).

Although Flusser’s thesis in many ways replicates the media-determinism of the more famous works of McLuhan and his fellow Toronto School protagonists Walter Ong, Edmund Carpenter, and Harold Innis in the 1960s and 1970s, Flusser’s intellectual gesture is distinct. Where the editor of Flusser’s German language publications Andreas Müller-Pohle has stated that *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* was ultimately a book about ethics and van der Meulen draws convincing parallels between Flusser’s media-onto-epistemological and Benjamin’s political-aesthetic cultural criticism (van der Meulen 2010: 197; 188), it is this persistent ethical invocation that Flusser thrusts upon his reader, which is not only present throughout his works, but can also be seen to manifest in the sonic in the essays explicated above.

⁸ Flusser summarizes Schopenhauer’s model and purports to argue against it in the aforementioned penultimate chapter “Chamber Music.” See: Flusser 1985: 137.

Flusser's and McLuhan's approaches share substantial features. Flusser's "crisis of linearity" describes a step-by-step model from the four-dimensionality of space-time, to the three-dimensionality of material objects, the two-dimensionality of image-making, the one-dimensionality of linear writing and into the zero-dimensionality of digital code. It can be—albeit somewhat crudely—overlaid with the McLuhanesque model of pre-Euclidean acoustic space, visual space, post-Euclidean acoustic space, or the oral-literate-electric schema (McLuhan 1988). Both models, with different emphases, suppose a pre-historic oral and aural-oriented society, followed by a visually-dominated modernity epistemologically determined by written language and galvanised further by the invention of print technology, in turn superseded by an electronic or digital age.⁹ Sterne's critique of the "audiovisual litany" encompasses a larger tendency in twentieth century cultural theory which can be most exemplarily articulated by McLuhan and his colleagues. A set of binary divisions between a certain set of characteristics of seeing and hearing conflate a historical era as purportedly dominated by that mode is conflated *with* these sensory modes.¹⁰ Most stereotypically this is found in assumptions around "modern man" [*sic*] being reliant on visuality as well as associated with intellectual distance, reflection and objectivity, whereas "pre-modern man" was instead reliant on aurality and associated with immersivity, collectivity, and subjectivity. As Sterne clarifies, these broad and deep-rooted conceptions of music as immaterial, transcendent and mystical are aligned with Romantic conceptualizations of music, and consequently hearing becomes idealized in imprecise ways. This is a critique which can plausibly be aimed at Flusser's Schopenhauerian valorisation of music as non-representational and sacred.

However, I would like to uphold that Flusser's sonic modernity differs from McLuhan's acoustic space of the "electric era" of the twentieth century for at least two reasons. First, unlike McLuhan's acoustic space as derived from Ong's notion of orality, which Sterne argues occludes its Christian spiritual agenda and tacitly implies a progressivist narrative *from Jewish to Greek to Christian* culture, Flusser's persistent questioning of what it means to be Jewish throughout his work (evident in the posthumously published essay collection *Jude Sein* [Being Jewish – 1995]) is premised on an understanding of the origin of Western culture to be constituted dually by Judeo-Christian *and* Greek traditions, which stand in complementary and conflictual relation to one another. As Guldin outlines, in

⁹ In previous work I have analyzed how Flusser's communicological theory, in particular based on the key text "Crisis of Linearity," relates to sound and listening. I challenged his macro-philosophical thesis, which centers around a step-by-step model of stages of predominant communicational methods and corresponding shifts in historical consciousness, for its reliance on visuality for its analysis, and expanded on it with an attempt to *think through sound* within it (Goh 2016).

¹⁰ Sterne lists, for example, some of the following commonly associated contrasting characteristics: "hearing is spherical, vision is directional; hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object; hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces." (Sterne 2003: 15).

light of the eradication of Jewishness from Western culture Flusser was witness to, he can be read as promoting, “a Jewish theory of communication” which “is less concerned with making ideas visible, and more with listening to the voice of the other and responding” (Guldin 2018: 2). Rather than perpetuating a binary division between seeing and hearing across historical eras, it places them in a mutually-dependent relation, in modernity too.

Second, there is substantial deviation between the emancipatory rhetoric of the electronic age of McLuhan’s “acoustic space” and the more cynical hope bestowed on Flusser’s zero-dimensional digital consciousness of audiovisual images. McLuhan’s description of transformations in media-historical communicational modes plays into a Romanticism for the return of a simpler age represented by “tribal man,” which relatively arbitrarily is determined by the attachment to auditory sensory faculties, “Audile-tactile tribal man partook of the collective unconscious, lived in a magical integral world patterned by myth and ritual” (McLuhan 2006: 230). McLuhan unmistakably celebrates the return to acoustic space and its immediacy which literacy has supposedly divorced us from; he constructs a particular idealized vision of a non-literate “traditional” society.¹¹ As Sterne outlines, the Toronto school’s historical ascendance functioned within larger Canadian cultural narratives of white settler rule which sought to legitimize the domination over Indigenous peoples by those of European-descent. In contrast, Flusser’s permanent cultural and linguistic voyage – his “groundlessness” which was expressed intellectually in four languages is testament to a minoritarian subjectivity in which cultural values are ultimately shifting, infinitely mutable, and essentially in flux. The tacit and seamless construction of nationhood and selfhood embodied by the Toronto school does not remain undisturbed in Flusser’s model, which in contrast is haunted by the legacies of totalitarianism. The role of the sonic in the form of voice and listening is rehearsed again in his political philosophy in which he advocates for an “ideal” society where communication is a mixture of “dialogue” (where communication is central) and “discourse” (meaning conditioned by dominant ideologies).¹²

Flusser’s pitch for the emergence of new epistemologies in *Crisis of Linearity* can be understood as deeply cynical and perhaps even bleakly implausible. His description of what the different stages of abstraction offer, are seemingly predicated on an inordinate hope placed on the *neue Einbildungskraft* (new imagination, or new power of imagination), as he states in the concluding paragraph of the *Crisis of Linearity*: “The intention of the thesis presented here was not to promote a telematic utopia founded

¹¹ For example, the penultimate sentence of McLuhan’s “Five Sovereign Fingers Taxed The Breath” reads: “We are back in acoustic space. We begin again to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us” (McLuhan 1960: 208).

¹² This can be found for example in the posthumously published *Kommunikologie* (2007). Summarized in Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo 2011, 89–91.

on digital codes. It is *not very probable*, that the crisis which historical occidental culture is currently in, could really be superseded by such a utopia when the alphanumeric code loses its dominance... The crisis of linearity, the first phases of which we are currently experiencing, is above all a challenge to us: we should mobilise the newly emerging power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) in order to overcome the crisis, within us and around us.” (my emphasis, Flusser 1988: 40)

Flusser’s invention of a *neue Einbildungskraft*, which is at times emphasized to simultaneously be a *musikalische Einbildungskraft* (musical imagination) united by mathematics because “composition and computation are synonyms” is fundamentally formed by its ontological, epistemological and cultural groundlessness.

Often read as an enthusiastic technological utopian of the digital age by media theorists, these interpretations disavow the dark irony of a writer who sought throughout his life to make sense of his intellectual inheritance a Jewish migrant who lived on after his immediate family perished in concentration camps. Flusser was frank about the periods of his life engulfed with suicidal thoughts.¹³ Insofar as Flusser can be considered Benjaminian in his conviction about the mutuality of aesthetics and politics, the ontological distinction between traditional and technologically-produced images and the potential of these to manipulate the masses as van der Meulen demonstrates, the fork in the paths of their respective lives as Jews under the Nazis – of life and death – is well known. It is this defiant optimism which emerges in his work in various ways. The utopian sentiments evident in the crisis of linearity as epistemological treatise, which wield the sonic to espouse an ardent iconoclasm, transpire triumphantly from the constraints of existing sensory-epistemological modes. The *neue Einbildungskraft* Flusser covets is not arbitrary; it is evidence of Flusser’s persistent doubtfulness towards “Western” cultural norms which remain in a complex dialectic throughout his writing.

Conclusion

Flusser’s sonic modernity is engrained with this cynical hope and impassioned urge for epistemological and cultural transformation. Although the gesture of creating a convenient straw person of the sonic or auditory is certainly evident in Flusser’s romantic devotion to “pure music,” I maintain that this fundamental premise of this gesture is itself not politically or ethico-philosophically similar to that commonly found in twentieth century humanities work, such as McLuhan’s notion of “acoustic space.”

¹³ See Flusser 1999 and Finger, Guldin, and Bernardo 2011.

Although Flusser's invocation of the sonic is even less well-known than McLuhan's, and in many senses performs similar functions – therefore meaning some similar criticisms can be made of Flusser as have been launched at McLuhan – the unstable ground from which Flusser's thought emanates manifest a persuasive and pressing ethical drive in which political and philosophical undoing take precedence.

In closing, Flusser's lecture on Hearing Aids helps to demonstrate how his particular notion of a sonic modernity exemplifies the malleability and flexibility of political “views” and, consequently, the epistemological implications of new confluences between sensory perception and technological innovations. Wryly humorous in typical Flusserian style, Flusser jokes about his own physiological partial deafness and relation to his hearing aid asserting that it has, somewhat counterintuitively, enabled him to “see better.” Amidst multiple wordplays which allow semantic oscillation between the German words related to seeing and hearing – “politische Ansichten” (political views) and “politische Hoerigkeit” (political obedience – in which the German word for hearing “hören” appears in the word “Hoerigkeit,” related to “gehörchen” meaning “to obey”), and the political nature of “Stimmen” (meaning both “voices” and “political votes”), Flusser seeks to alert his audience to the pre-programmed sounds and noises around them. He suggests that “you, just like me, too have hearing aids. But your devices are less visible than mine, and were given to you for free” (Flusser n.d.: 3). This leads him to conclude, “I can – better than you – see through (*durchblicken*) my hearing aid. And, therefore, I can hear better than you” (Flusser n.d.: 3), while alluding to totalitarian tendencies of twentieth-century fascism. As a cynical metaphor for a far-fetched political freedom, Flusser inordinately heaps hope onto hearing aids, in a comparable way to the unlikely epistemological and political transformation he heaps onto a musical-mathematical-computational-driven world of a sonic modernity, namely one which can transform due to its “new (power of) imagination,” the thesis he repeatedly ascribed to the emerging digital age he was witness to. Thus, the tone struck by Flusser's sonic modernity is one both hollow due to its groundlessness, yet filled with the pressing hope for urgent political action.

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