

### His Panic Issues

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According to his correspondence with Walter Benjamin from the 1930s, Theodor Adorno was, in collaboration with the composer Ernst Krenek, assembling a collection of his writings on music that was provisionally titled, *Great Pan is Dead*. This title was suggested by Gretel Adorno, and perhaps because Krenek was unsuccessful in finding a publisher the collection never appeared as such. Its epigram was derived from a collection of Stefan George's poetry, entitled *The Seventh Ring*, a detail shared with Benjamin in apparent ignorance of the fact that Benjamin had himself cited the same lines in his "Stefan George in Retrospect" from 1933. Precisely why the unrealized collection bore the title proposed by Gretel Adorno is suggested by Benjamin's even earlier observation about the George circle that, among other things, it exhibited a "contempt for music" (378).

Unpacking this gnomic suggestion will require thinking a bit about Pan himself (or itself). In Philippe Borgeaud's short but exhaustive study *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, he carefully weaves together a web of classical sources that illuminates why Pan, an early avatar of what Foucault later called pastoral power, could signify excessive desire, panic or possession, and music. Panic, apparently, has a predominantly military provenance in that it refers to sudden sounds that alarm a troop, suggesting the imminent arrival of the enemy. Although sound here is key, music emerges more specifically in Borgeaud's reconstruction of the story, whose functions (narrative constants) are strewn over many texts, of the encounter between Pan and Echo. Stripped down to its functions, the story couples excessive, violent desire and music by having Pan's attempted rape of Echo end in her being swallowed by Gaia. At the anodos a type of reed springs up, reeds that Pan tramples, but which once broken off become pipes through which a stubborn wind, Boreas, blows, causing the rocks to echo. Pan's syrinx, his pipes, derive thus as a compensation

for a civilizing frustration of a rapacious drive.

In Adorno's riposte to Benjamin's essay on art and technical reproducibility, "The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," he pithily defines music as: "at once the immediate manifestation of impulse, and the locus of its taming" (270). Since he goes on to invoke Pan directly, it is plain that he is formulating here precisely what might be characterized as the panic aspects of music. Given that his own thinking about music stressed its distinctly dialectical properties, what Gretel Adorno's proposed title might be said to capture is the death of an account of music that both rooted it in nature and stressed its compensatory, that is affirmative or Apollonian (to invoke Nietzsche), character. To be clear, Adorno was not imagining his collection as one in which music's relation to Pan expires, but rather as a set of propositions about music through which its relation to social, indeed gendered, violence is grasped as part of its historical nature. From this angle, accounts of music that underappreciate or ignore its dialectical character—and the point stands whether one agrees with Adorno's reasoning or not—are accounts that are panicked by those who insist on it. One might even propose that Adorno imagined his own relation to Western musicology as a bit like the sudden sound that panicked, in this case, a troop of scholars absorbed in producing an account, maybe even a theory, of music for which he had contempt, an account of music that had to be "hated properly" (52). These are his panic issues, the matters Adorno invites, even urges us to consider when trying to think about "reality" in the absence of sound.

David Castillo and William Egginton write:

It does not escape us that in order for these very lines we are now writing to have any potential impact we will depend on exactly the same mechanisms provided by the very medialogy we are attempting to elucidate. That said, what is certainly not enough is to double down on truth, as if the ills of today's medialogy were an effect of relativism instead of its opposite, fundamentalism. (*Medialogies* 215)

This, as its authors go on to clarify, is the "what would Cervantes do?" (WWCD) moment of their text, the moment at which the question of how to gauge the political force of its analysis is posed with acute reflexive clarity, and it is the moment upon which I wish to dwell. Of interest here is not primarily the matter of whether Castillo and Egginton (C&E) are correct about relativism (as with monotheism, what gives fundamentalism its urgency is the very relativism it deputizes itself to manage), nor even the so-called performative contradiction of

calling for change in and from the very place where change has been neutralized or simply pre-empted in principle. Instead, it is here that the text—in attempting to stand on the rickety supports of its own deixis (these very lines we are now writing)—invites its readers to ask less how might this analysis be constrained by its debts to the circuits of medialogy, but in what ways are these debts expressed in the very terms of the analysis?

This strikes me as the more pressing matter because what C&E have to say about, for example, the *okupa* (occupy) movements has been said before, and without recourse to the concept of “inflationary media.” In the absence of a more sustained account of how the structural possibility of resistance might be indexed either to the elaboration of a new politics, or linked, through such an elaboration, to the sort of revolt that might institute, if not a post-capitalist mode of production (“true” communism?), then a mode of governance attuned to the logic of the common thought to manifest in the improvisations of Occupy, their question becomes rhetorical: of course their analysis is deprived of impact. But is this what also makes it real? Are C&E right about the new era of inflationary media precisely because their analysis of it is stripped of any potential impact? Relevant here is precisely the word “impact,” because as Anglophone advocates of the humanities will know, “impact” is one of the key ways in which the value of the humanities is calculated now, and calculated disadvantageously: that is, with reference to a standard the humanities typically fail to realize *a priori*. There is then an intriguing braiding of the critique of “inflationary media,” and the championing of the humanities in this text that circles menacingly in its margins.

But I roam. To return to my opening salvo and the matter of this text’s debts, let’s consider another passage from it. This occurs in chapter five when C&E are discussing Cervantes’s *El retablo de las maravillas*:

But something we didn’t mention earlier is that one aspect of the theater of marvels proves particularly challenging for at least one of the spectators, Benito, who just can’t bear the “musician” who positions himself in front of the audience to deliver the play’s music score “without instrument and without tune” (*sin citóla y sin son*). Despite the fact that by this point in the performance all members of the audience have resolved to act as if they see the marvels of the tableau even as they have come to realize that there’s nothing there, the overwhelming presence of the fake musician playing air rabel (a bowed stringed instrument evoked by the musician’s name, Rabelín) is extremely hard to stomach for Benito, who urges the musician behind the curtain in rather forceful and threatening terms. What Benito is getting at, what he is yelling at the musician about, is some version of this: If I am going to pretend here, you cursed musician

(músico aduendado) need to do a better job holding the sham together! Incidentally, the name of the musician is not only a direct allusion to the instrument he supposedly plays, rabel, but also a well-known colloquialism for “ass,” which no doubt provides a humorous wry image of the exhibitionist nature of the marvelous tableau. (55)

Several matters, at once philological, philosophical, and political, deserve comment, but all will be bent to the task of considering what I have characterized as the debts accumulated by C&E in writing about inflationary media from within its second era.

This is one of only a handful, and a small handful at that, of direct engagements with sound in this study. There are references made routinely to dialogue on either stage or screen, even song lyrics, but the sonic (as opposed to phonic) character of these events is fully subordinated to an analysis premised on an essentially visual account of what constitutes the “world picture” brought into “focus” by the second era of inflationary media. More specifically, there is virtually no discussion of music, its production, reproduction, or consumption in the historical sweep of this study, and this is despite the fact that, in the hands of “critical musicologists,” from Weber and Adorno to Kramer and McClary, the cultural and political work carried out by music in producing the modern subject, indeed the very subject at stake in contemporary medialogy, has been established with glass shattering clarity.

But this is not simply an “oversight” or “blindness.” In the passage cited from *El retablo*, what stands forth starkly, if in miniature, is the way music potentially complicates the space of theatrical representation. The reason Benito is so exercised by el músico aduendado is because the discrepancy between dubbed sound and invisible acts cuts into the very logic of theatrical representation. Music is supposed to be heard without being seen (acousmatically as Schaeffer and Chion have insisted), and here the music is seen without being heard. More than an inversion, in the tableau, a tableau in which the visible is re-framed by the conceit of the imaginary if not the invisible, Benito’s insistence (in front, by the way, of the Governor) that the musician get behind *un repostero* (a curtain, or more like a drape emblazoned with a coat of arms) produces a howling fissure between his irritated speech and a sound whose silence would echo identically on either side of an invisible partition. Benito puts the matter thus: “Métanle también detrás del repostero; que, a truco de no velle, daré por bien empleado el no oílle” (Let them also put you behind the drape; that, in exchange for not seeing you, I will put not hearing you to good use). Here the panic produced by the invisibly inaudible music arises from its distinctive role in otherwise sustaining a specular logic of representation—the sham—a matter that would suggest that the highlighted phrase, “sin

cítola y sin son” be better rendered, without *cítola* (cítole) and without sound, but also, as a calque of the colloquialism, “sin ton, ni son,” that is, “without rhyme or reason.” Sound here inflects reason and does so in a way that ought to remind us that when telling the story of “rationalization” or “modernity,” and especially when trying to think of the political potentialities of this story, we shush or banish music at our enormous peril.

WDCD? That is, what did Cervantes do? In *El retablo*, one is confronted with an allegory about the tension between sound and spectacle. And given that C&E imagine themselves in the position of contemporary pícaros (rogues) and think of their intervention as “Cervantine,” it is striking that their way of framing that intervention, through the concept of medialogy, is so “photological,” that is, oculocentric: “Modernity’s basic mode of framing, then, is the stage.” Here is how, in their introductory chapter, they set up the coordinates of their account of the medialogical frame whose second iteration they are proposing to analyze: “In the first age of inflationary media, the invention of movable type and the development of a vibrant print culture, the rapid spread and use of perspective in painting and architecture, and the rise of an urban mass theater institution conspired to provoke a crisis of reality” (1). Setting aside the theological motif of conspiracy—the *deus absconditus* (idle god) who inscrutably pulls all strings—this passage sets out the template for what follows. Indeed, the discussion of *El retablo* slots handily into this evocation of theater. Its themes are as familiar as they are both Occidental and preoccupied with vision. Perhaps this helps explain why it is often hard to discern whether what is at stake in this discussion is “reality” (whether “le Réel” [the Real] in the Lacanian sense, or “matter” in the Leninist sense), or the concept of “reality,” two rather different, even if related, things. It is often much easier to see how medialogy has “unmoored” (a rich evocation in a Cervantine context) the latter. A question of perspective indeed.

To put the matter directly, this principled and careful study unfolds as a play in which a theory of reality (how to read it) is staged as if directed by Benito Repollo, coached, however improbably, by Lee Strasberg. In this photological space, sound, music, and noise all provoke panic. They hopelessly complicate the illusion of disillusionment. Of course, one might protest that C&E simply don’t have the relevant training, nor can they be expected to (well, you can’t do everything). And this is of course sensible and true. However, in a study that culminates in highly political charged formulations like, “in the conditions of the new medialogy; the individual is an unanchored island of solitude” (209), this sort of rationalization becomes difficult, if not impossible, to accept. If, as they elsewhere deplore, “I can make my own reality” (67), then one defends the pronounced limits of one’s “reading of reality” by appealing to one’s individual intellectual competence with extreme caution. Here then is the analytical debt paid to the current iteration of “inflationary

media,” in its starkest form. If the political challenge put before us by contemporary medialogy bears on the fundamental individuation of our relation to “reality,” then any theory that projects individual constraints—for example, expertise in one way of thinking the fundamental logic of the present versus another—as instances of grasping a real world that escapes other, maybe even anti-intellectual, observers, is medialogical theory. Not a theory of medialogy, but a theory formulated on terms congenial to medialogy and thereby deprived of the distance that might secure its critical sounding. Perhaps then the quietude on the political event or events that might re-moor reality follows.

Cha-cha-cha. Don’t run. Dance, or at least stop and listen carefully. Sound “itself” may dissipate.

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