

TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY, manuscript PARSE

Abstract

In my presentation I will discuss my project of a score-based music with the tentative title, Techniques of Ecstasy. I will give a brief introduction to the notion of ecstatic techniques and their (possible) use in my music.

The presentation will use examples of artists and philosophers that in different ways realize part of my project – both in a contemporary perspective and as traces in archaic, ritual cultures. Commonly a search for an immediacy of expression is in centre, where the distance between semantics and semiotics is minimized.

The final part of the presentation will turn the focus to my practice on sound: a method which seeks to harmonize between a descriptive and prescriptive notation; where body, space and instrument (sound) occupies the only focus of attention.

MANUSCRIPT

I am currently pursuing an artistic PhD in composition at the Academy of music and Drama at Gothenburg University. My project has the tentative title “Techniques of ecstasy”. Despite its evocative title, the project takes place essentially inside of the domain of notated, instrumental music, essentially **my music**. Ecstasy is understood – at this point – with a very wide and flexible understanding. Ecstasy in the field of music is possible to define in various ways. Oftentimes, musicology or anthropology creates a distinction between trance and ecstasy. Where the former relies on extrovert, musically or performance-oriented displays, the latter is rather associated with meditation or introvert practices. In the former we find for instance the Shamans of Siberia or the dervishes of the middle-east, in the latter our own monastic tradition or for instance, Tibetan-Buddhism. In this presentation I will not focus on the distinction between them, rather I will view and handle them as part of a similar expression, which is essentially a disclosure through a heightened perception or – as history teaches us – a method of shaping and interpreting the world for its people using a ritual framework. The expression relies on the acknowledgement of a ritual dimension, but treats its medium as an – and this is the KEY – as an immediate expression.

My aspiration is a method of composition, or a method on sound, in which the notion of “ecstatic techniques” and its implied manifestation as an immediate expression occupy the central role of investigation.

Therefore, during this short presentation I will roughly give you the outline of my projects theoretical, but also inspirational frame-work. Toward the end I will play – instead of talking about - an excerpt of a cello solo. It will hopefully breath some music into the dryness of words.

I begin with describing briefly 3 inter-connected concepts:

- 1. Ecstatic techniques**
- 2. Language**
- 3. Body**

So,

- 1. Ecstatic techniques (or some words on ritual)**

Religio-historian Mircea Eliade describes the techniques of the Shaman as “archaic techniques of ecstasy”. They involve movement, sound, words, space. They are essentially a communal act, they narrate, they improvise, but they cannot be reduced to the western concert practice. There

is a stage, but the “real” one does not exist in our physical world, and although it is represented – and can be described and interpreted by the gaze of a western tradition – a conventional description of it – in my opinion – can only touch upon its magic.

The “ecstatic techniques” are used as an intermediary – liminal – condition: **“to die, to go beyond, to pass from one condition to another”**¹. It is a liminal practice which is achieved within the framework of a specific ritual.

The rite explains or interprets, in a communal setting, the world. It functions or resembles what philosopher Giorgio Agamben described – paraphrasing Heidegger – as the original structure of art. That is, the qualities of art’s origin which with the rise of the aesthetic and its separation of form and content, made the function or necessity of art concealed and forgotten.

In Finnish scholar Anna-Lena Siikala’s dissertation “the rite technique of the Siberian Shaman” she analyses a set of field studies of Siberian rituals. What she manages to make lucid is the similarities in form, that the rituals over a wide-stretched area have in common, thereby, but also in other regards confirming Mircea Eliade’s seminal book on “Shamanism”. In Eliade’s book as well as in Siikala’s dissertation the shaman is a figure, who in order to be perceived as a “true” shaman, in early years must display certain pathological traits or tendencies. Hysteric fits, epilepsy or schizophrenia are all signs of potential shamans. The hyper-sensitivities of these persons are associated with being able to communicate or at least sense the supernatural. Eliade insists that the shaman through his or her training is given the tools to control this disposition. That is to say: the shaman is not possessed, but in control of the psychological instability and takes advantage of the heightened sensibility.

To return to Anna Lena Siikala’s dissertation: she goes on to summarize the techniques of the Shaman to 11 common principals. They paint a complex portrait of the shaman: a figure which is as much priest, healer, actor, poet, dancer and musician. The shaman is the human being, the tribe, the spirits, the demons etc. and he or she is continuously shape-shifting in between them. I quote three principles, just to give you an idea:

1. **The framework of the shaman's technique of ecstasy is similar to the basic psychic mechanism on which hypnosis is founded [...].**
5. **The shamanic trance or the shaman's altered state of consciousness then comes into being, as generalized reality orientation disappears, along with an increase in the intensity of the rhythmical, gradually accelerating sensory stimulus and role-taking directed at the supranormal.**
9. **Not even in the deepest trance does the shaman's reality orientation completely vanish; supported by the scheme of the séance, he retains his contact with the audience.**²

Essentially the shaman is an artist who is in, to once again include Giorgio Agamben, in touch with the *original function of art*, that is a person who shapes, explores, explains the reality through an artistic practice. The pathology of the Shaman is clearly reminiscent of a poetic vein, a quality which through the training of the Shaman becomes a balanced and refined sensibility, to quote a testimony of a member of a Buryat tribe of Siberia:

¹ Rouget, *Music and Trance*, x.

² Siikala, Anna-Lena *The rite technique of the Siberian Shaman* (Helsingfors: Academia Scientiaru 340-341

That was how he became a shaman, after the sickness, after the torture. He had been ill for seven years. While he was ailing, he had dreams; he was beaten up several times, sometimes he was taken to strange places ³

Now, to the second topic, Language. Once again, Giorgio Agamben, I quote:

2. Language:

“It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed [...] considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion.”

Language (i.e. notation) shows a certain mode of thinking. What we cannot express in language, seem to *not* exist. Language therefore in itself creates a paradigm, which basically only is self-referential. To adopt an image of Wittgenstein: man exists in language like a fly trapped in a bottle: that which it cannot see is precisely that through which it sees the world. As a *response* Agamben coins the term *originary infancy* where he imagines a state where language does not yet exist. He borrows an idea from Nietzsche, where Nietzsche finds the possible solution to overcome metaphysics in the scream of the new-born child. Agamben acknowledges that with the infant there is no distance between the level of the sign (semiotics) or the meaning of the sign (semantics). In this sense the newborn communicates like the animal – it is immediate. For a moment it is in touch with a world where the scent of sound and meaning (or form and content) makes no sense to separate, but can only be understood as part of one bigger unity.

If language is a paradigm of thought, it means its narrative is defining thinking. To glance beyond its confinement is the task of music, of art. For Giorgio Agamben the solution exists somewhere beyond symbols, away from a semiotic or semantic realization of *existence*. An immediate experience of reality. As in Nietzsche’s “the cry of the newborn child”, as with Agamben’s depiction of the roar of the lion or the signals of insects, there is no interpretation, there is an immediate understanding on the basis of sound.

Now to the third preliminary topic:

3. Body

Man is oriented against the world. Even in its most crouched condition it remains exposed to the world. Through movement we perceive reality. Through the touch, a slight movement of the elbow – the flickering gaze of the eye. However, movement is always accompanied by an inner reflection, preceding or proceeding perception; as philosopher and mystic Simone Weil says: **“It is impossible to have the idea of shape without the idea of movement”**⁴ An eye, a hand – the pen or the imagination of the mind are all part of a movement in which the relationship between things give them identity. Without movement, the world is silent, music better than most illustrates this point, once again Simone Weil: **“Music doesn’t reside in any single note, but in a relationship: and yet it makes us weep. Man is made like that. Relationships touch his body”**⁵ In music, in art, we are placed in front of a mystery in which words are not enough. The body is not only a medium, but furthermore indistinguishable from the creative act. To quote director Peter Brooks, when writing regarding the workshop which Jerzy Grotowski that was held for Peter Brooke’s own theatre company: “I won’t describe the work. Why not? First of all, such work is only free if it is in confidence, and confidence depends on its confidences not being disclosed. Secondly, the work is essentially non-verbal- To verbalize is to complicate and even

3 Anna-Leena Siikala & Mihály Hoppál *Studies on shamanism* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1992), 31

4 Weil, Simone *Lectures on Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press 1978), 41

5 Weil, Simone *the Notebooks of Simone Weil* (London: Routledge 1956), 486

destroy exercises that are clear and simple when indicated by a gesture and when executed by the mind and the body as one.”⁶

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As a composer I work with sound. I come in touch with sound through the body, my body, the instrument, the space. *E.g.* I grab the instrument, beat it, caress, make it resonate. In the moment I retract, return to the desk, sound becomes an imaginative sign, a sign desperate to become a “reality”. It relates to what composer Pierluigi Billone says of the nature of sound and its relational qualities, the quote is a bit modified: **“By posing the question - what is a sound? - something appears in the dimension of sound. It begins to be recognized as *sound*. Not every vibration becomes sound, sound is not only an acoustic definition. Sound stands always for a revealing relationship. It reveals what a human being is in contact with, on what he depends for his balance, a rhythmical revelation in an extreme wide sense. “**

Now, going further

Sound artist Diamanda Galas is one who – in my opinion – in her ambition and work embodies an example of an immediate expression and the ecstatic techniques. She writes in the early 80s in relation to her vocal piece *Wild women with steaknives*:

“This music is concerned with [...] excessive behavior. An obsession, [...] within microseconds, coalescing one moment and dissolving the next, towards an ultimate dissolution, which is the soul’s own Implosion. You do not go to a hospital to inspire the recreation of your own Death onstage. You know it by heart. [...] An actor may simulate the desired emotive state through a skilled manipulation of external object materials, or he may use the raw materials of his own soul in a process which is the immediate, the DIRECT experience of the emotion itself. The second concern is felt by performers who, not just professional, are *Obsessional* performers.”

She continues to exemplify how her strategy is one of a reliance of extasis or as she puts it “States of severe concentration or trance states”. The threshold between the states is the virtuosity of her voice, directed and assisted with a rudimentary pre-choreographed, almost cinematic, situation. Essentially, she describes the form of the ritual, one in which sound, vocal sound, is the **“immediate representation of thought”**.

Her method is reminiscent, and probably inspired by – transferred to sound – of theatre’s enfant terrible, Antonin Artaud. Artaud who in his manifesto *Theatre of cruelty* envisage a new method of acting, which draws heavily on a personal interpretation of non-western ritual practices. A method in which tradition is abolished. In its place a theatre emerges in which passion rules reason, where passion is used as an act of resistance to **“our disinterested and inert idea of art”**. In Artaud’s first manifesto he writes:

“Abandoning Occidental usage of speech, [the theater] turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility.”

⁶ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, xii.

Language is seen as inadequate to express the human passion. Instead sound: howls, sighs, groans, comes to the foreground as a more possible liminal tool of reaching and expressing the innermost core of the human soul. Sound, understood in this sense, encapsulates the modern project of sound in general, but Diamanda Galas in particular.

Galas and Artaud both work with passion over reason, reaching for an “immediate” expression. They do it, essentially, as the Shaman – contained inside of a framework (choreographed, or formalized) which can be considered ritualized. Their expressions rely explicitly on intuition, on improvisation.

Considering the artist and the shaman as interchangeable is for sure a generalization, however it puts my PhD- project title, ecstatic techniques, in perspective. And gives a certain insight into the aspiration of searching for a method of sound inspired by not only its implicit technical consideration, but proposes a practice which harmonizes its evocative, mysterious and elusive associations with a practice existing inside of a modern project of sound.

TOWARD A METHOD

Is it possible, then, to devise a method of sound inspired by the notion of techniques of ecstasy and the immediacy of sound?

Let us remember the obsession of Diamanda Galas, how sound is not an activity, but a state of being. If sound is not a mere activity but a state of being, what does it imply in terms of method? It merges the body, the instrument and space as one. The sound orientation begins to form itself as a holistic experience. I quoted Peter Brookes earlier when describing the work of Grotowski as a *way-of-life*, thereby also acknowledging the inseparability of life and the vocation. A notion, that in our tradition alludes to monastic principles. In the convent or cloister the activity of the monk or nun is indistinguishable from the life. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it lacks trajectory. Agamben writes in his examination of the Franciscan monastic life: “The great novelty of monasticism is not the confusion of life and norm [...] Rather, it is the identification of a level of consistency that is unthought and perhaps today unthinkable [...] and in which both *rule* and *life* lose their familiar meaning in order to point in the direction of a third thing. Our task is precisely to bring this third thing to light.”⁷

I end with another quote, this by the 12th century mystic, nun, composer, botanist and inventor of language, Hildegard of Bingen. After that I play an excerpt of my cello solo à Sibyl – mone, which relates to the glossolalia and visions of Hildegard of Bingen and that hopefully – if not today, at least when I reach the end of my PhD will illuminate the first steps towards a method: “Those words that I see and hear in vision are not like words that a human mouth utters, but like a glittering flame”.⁸

⁷ Agamben, Giorgio xii the highest poverty

⁸ Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen’s Unknown Language*, 35.