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Make Music New Again:

Distance and Immersion as Aesthetic Categories

at the End of the Avant-Garde

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I.   Introduction

Widespread and symptomatic proliferation of technical media in our time not only expands the channels through which we communicate, but also accelerates this process of communication. In 1998, art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud named these channels "communication superhighways"[1] in his *Relational Aesthetics*, connecting artistic forms to aesthetic resistance against the perceived totalizing force of "the general mechanization of social functions"[2] at the onset of the digital age. His vision for a revived avant-garde has meanwhile become common in the visual arts as a way to create a "social interstice," or "a space in human relations which…suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect…"[3] In this model, the artwork expands to encompass the social reality in which it is embedded, or rather, that social reality no longer simply appears indirectly as metaphor: such works use the social fabric as material itself in an attempt to reform intersubjective relations in the gallery. It would seem that with this the 'situations' and 'happenings' of the mid-20th century are re-mobilized as sites of resistance to a world where "the social bond has turned into a standardized artefact."[4]

These claims should not be taken uncritically. The avant-garde striving for ever-new artistic territory, motivated by an emancipatory concept of material progress[5] has been shown to be paradoxical. Theodor Adorno, in his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*, argues that since through this process of material progress the categories, values, and status of art itself are unhinged by the "blind-spot" of newness[6], such attempts at emancipation through art

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[1] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 8.
[2] Ibid, p. 17.
[3] Ibid, p. 16.
[4] Ibid, p. 9.
[5] This attitude, against which Adorno argues, is philosophically grounded in Ernst Bloch's formulation of militant optimism, an active and even aggressive pursuit of the radically open categories of the possible that would push towards a utopian horizon, formulated in terms of concrete action. See: Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, p. 229-230.
[6] "The new is a blind spot, as empty as the purely indexical gesture 'look here'." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 20.

have failed. Here lies the aporia of avant-garde art: the fissure opened by the horizon of utopic possibility reveals that horizon as always-unfinished. An ultimate end withdraws from view and leaves art atrophied. This begs the question if an avant-garde is at all possible.

Although perhaps the overarching goal of the avant-garde, as art historian Peter Bürger defines it, to "organize a new life praxis from a basis in art"[7] was only achieved in a 'false' way[8], one can nevertheless find value in the possibilities individual works open. Even Clement Greenberg, in his 1971 critique of the avant-garde, admits of the insights won by works like Duchamp's readymades, which show, for example, that "die Kunst und das Ästhetische überschneiden sich nicht nur, sie sind ein und dasselbe."[9] Just as the past can only be viewed historically, that is, from our current standpoint with a historicizing eye, so too do new works of art change the value of past works. Once a work so strongly redefines categories of art, or rather renews art's categories of perception – no matter how brief the lifespan of that moment of newness – the perception of all other works, and therefore also future art production, adjusts itself accordingly. In this way, despite the ultimate and even necessary shortcomings of a utopian horizon, individual works of the avant-garde can be said to have been nevertheless successful in revealing significant new avenues of creation and thus to some degree redeeming their revolutionary-utopic goals.

The question I pose here, based on this exposition, is twofold: firstly, how could it be possible to, in light of the historical failures and alleged aporia of the avant-garde, not only locally through individual works, but globally as a coherent artistic attitude, redeem the mission of avant-garde art, and more specifically, redeem the 'newness' of New Music? In music, a 'relational' approach has only just begun to take effect as composer-performers

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[7] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.
[8] "...the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life." Ibid.
[9] Greenberg, „Gegen Avant-Garde," p. 399

increasingly rely on nonmusical material to highlight their ideas.[10] Yet this institutional 'lag' that often seems to plague music in comparison to the faster-moving institutions of the visual arts can be here advantageous.

As philosopher Christoph Haffter points out in his *Musikalischer Materialismus*, works which would pursue a more liberated form of sociality, like those championed by Bourriaud or theorized by his situationist predecessor Guy Debord, fall into another dilemma. If the capitalist critique of reification holds, if social interactions are indeed 'hardened' by hyper-standardized and efficient interaction models determined by productive forces, these models are so embedded in human subjectivity that the artwork cannot simply 'give space' for the audience to explore or create a loose frame for warmth or empathy to arise. This would do nothing to stop those unconscious behavior patterns from being reproduced.[11] A hope for a spontaneously arising alterity of social forms in the heavily institutionalized and thus itself formally hardened gallery space would from this perspective seem to be in vain.

Similarly, with three decades of hindsight, we can observe that the relational aesthetic outlined by Bourriaud has, in losing its novelty, seemingly forgotten about this dilemma entirely. An early example of the relational paradigm, *Les Ateliers Du Paradise* of 1990 by Philippe Parreno, Pierre Joseph, and Philippe Perrin[12], by curating and juxtaposing free-time activities like playing with toys, jumping on trampolines, bathing in a jacuzzi, or lifting weights, blends action, performance, event, and installation to not only transpose

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[10]Harry Lehmann posits the term relational music to account for an altered "Neue-Musik-Dispositiv" due to institutional and material changes at the onset of digitalization in the 1990s and early 2000s. One of the key elements of this change from past paradigms of New Music would be for Lehmann the degree to which "die außermusikalischen Relate in den Stücken ihre Alterität (also ihre Andersheit gegenüber der Musik) behalten." Lehmann, *Musik und Wirklichkeit*, p. 138. This differs greatly from Bourriaud's relational aesthetic, who would rather emphasize social spaces in the gallery as a formal principle.

[11] "Behandelt die Kunst ihre Teilnehmenden als Subjekte, so verobjektivieren diese sich selbst. Versucht die Kunst ihre Teilnehmenden an dieser Verobjektivierung zu hindern, so behandelt sie selbst ihre Teilnehmenden wie Objekte." Haffter, *Musikalischer Materialismus*, pp. 202-203.

[12] Documentation of *Les Ateliers du Paradise* can be found here: http://www.airdeparis.com/exhibitions/paradise.htm and https://performance-art.fr/fr/performance/ateliers-paradise.

multiple social spaces onto each other but also question the nature of free time itself, thereby gesturing towards the contradiction of self-objectification inherent in social art. Meanwhile, this subversion-of-fun-through-fun has been seemingly superseded by the "make friends not art" approach evidenced by at documenta fifteen, where "aesthetics doesn't matter anymore, ethics does."[13] The byproduct of such mainstreaming is that not only do its ideas and forms become diluted, but also that the literal interpretation of the social aspirations of the relational aesthetic liquidates the artwork in favor of political activism or social event. The avant-garde paradox again rears its head here: subjective reification inherent in the social processes embedded in arts institutions reclaims formal innovation motivated by social emancipation.

In music, we should desire more than simply repeating this neo-avant-garde story arc as it has been played out in a parallel discipline. Yes, the digestive process by which one-radical art becomes a harmless trend is the inevitable tension endemic to art's being in the world and perhaps ultimately unavoidable. I suggest, however, that if we re-evaluate the structure of the avant-garde itself, we can perhaps find yet-unexhausted ways of reformulating art's social dilemmas and utopic aporias that could, however briefly, cash in on the uncertainty of newness upon which real change is predicated. Or, if this is too much, at the very least open new avenues of creation that would by extension suggest corresponding possibilities of living.

On the other hand, proclaiming a law of diminishing returns that empties ideas as they become hardened in collective understanding – at least to the point where historical distance turns them into archaeological treasures – is not resignation. It is rather an assertion of the very force that makes newness necessary. Yet the pursuit of the new cannot be a mere seduction of novelty, as this would feed into the liquidation of values Adorno posits when, in the opening of *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes that for revolutionary art, "the sea of

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[13]Ravini, Sinziana. "Make Friends, Not Art: Documenta 15 is all about networking."

the formerly inconceivable...did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories for which it was undertaken."[14] Instead, if we find it prudent to actively navigate the aporia of avant-garde art and push against the acids of cultural digestion, there should be a clear and consequent vision put forward at exactly this gap between the utopian possible and social 'real.' If not, we risk embracing Bürger's formulation of the condition of the avant-garde, that "...social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society..."[15]

 This brings us to a second question. In order to examine how an avant-garde art could function today, we must define precisely by which mechanism avant-garde art functions. I propose this is a model of *aesthetic distance by means of disruption*. Concurrent to the revolutionary ideals behind the historical avant-garde, disruption is the aesthetic equivalent of a kind of structural noise along the channels of communication within and around the situation of the artwork. It not only blocks reception on the part of the spectator, but also introduces a sort of 'rawness' of signal from extra-medial material. It is no coincidence that early avant-garde attempts in music often feature actual noises or noise-like forms as primary material.

 Jacques Attali, in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* gives us the following definition of noise, defined in terms of communication flows: "... a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission...noise, then, does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed...noise is the term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal itself has a meaning for that receiver."[16] If we follow Bürger's analysis that the avant-garde arose originally as a counterbalance to bourgeoisie aestheticism, the description of avant-garde disruption as a kind of 'structural noise' would place the disruptive effect of a

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[14] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.
[15] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 27.
[16] Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, pp. 26-27.

particular technique on aesthetic convention as the noise which destabilizes communication between aesthetic object and observer within a system of traditional or bourgeoisie art.

My thesis is firstly that this structural noise that results in a disruption of reception in art, a sort of shock designed to break through to new perceptive territory as well as actualize the metaphorical rebellion against bourgeoisie taste and its accompanying social reality, also creates an estrangement that places the beholder at a special type of distance to the artwork. Secondly, I will argue that while disruption was a method of maintaining aesthetic distance in modernist art, in the face of what Fredric Jameson calls the "cultural logic of late capitalism," this strategy does not function any more. Finally, I will propose that an oppositional aesthetic value, immersion – like distance, a category latent in all aesthetic experience – which in the correct context could be developed to provide a possible answer to the concerns and failures of the historical avant-garde.

What follows is a theoretical discussion of the categories of distance and immersion both in their standard and critical application, as well as a speculation on what kind of aesthetic model emerges from their interpolation. Methodologically, it must be noted that this text is not a piece of research per se, but rather a theoretical framework developed in close parallel to my own experiences and insights developed from my practice as a composer. Thus, although I strive to be as consequent in my argumentation as possible, the efficacy of my thesis predicates on that of the musical works it is intertwined with. I follow Graham Harman's line of thinking in his *Object-Oriented Ontology*, where he advocates for aesthetics as the basis of philosophy, which would provide, rather than an empirically reproducible result, something like what in literature is called a critical lens, i.e. a specific frame for observing an object that can lead to important insights.

Since I am a composer engaging in theory, whereby the text is only one part in a larger chain of aesthetic cognition, in order to avoid simply making 'research-about-art' or 'art-about-research,' I seek here to weld these two forms of cognition (for the current purposes

coarsely simplified to 'art' and 'science') close together without confusing one for the other. This means conducting thorough observation and description of a phenomenon to create a stable background fabric (a theory, for example), against which a specific aesthetic formulation (an artwork) would exemplify and complicate. In short, the text formulates as clearly as possible a theoretical position which a musical work actualizes. However, due to the radically speculative nature of aesthetic thinking, the artwork cannot (and should not) literally explicate everything in the text, just as the text will (at least in the case of a good artwork) inevitably fail to totally explain the aesthetic object.

What results is a hybrid that lives between its contradictions. Theoretical ruminations and artistic ideas cross paths, inform one another, and exit out different doors. This text is intended to be read as a standalone document that formalizes a particular way of thinking about art in general and music in particular, but is predicated on many assumptions that are best seen in examples of my own work. Likewise, the artistic results presented alongside this text is designed to be first and foremost an autonomous work to be experienced directly, yet could not have been developed without the theoretical formulations developed in the following pages. Taken together, I believe it will become apparent that even from within the fog of the creative process, the genesis of an artwork is not purely subjective, arising rather in conjunction with social and historical forces, theoretical deadlocks, and the structures of human perception themselves. On the other hand, the theory presented here is not totally scientific, delimited rather by the scope of aesthetic experience from inside the process of generation itself, and thus unable to completely ascend to a claim of objectivity.

Bruno Latour reminds us in his *We Have Never Been Modern* that even scientific experiments themselves can be radically speculative, only becoming stable through procedural refinement and repetition before becoming reliable tools for common use.[17] I

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[17] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, pp. 85-88. Although Latour here is discussing the representations of knowledge as mediated by concepts of 'nature' and 'society,' the model he presents with such statements as "We still need to be told whether what is at stake is the air pump as a seventeenth-century event or the air pump as a

would add to this that aesthetic objects can have a similar genesis, seeming arbitrary, confusing, or even fail in their first instantiations, yet nevertheless have some effect, despite any inability to exhaustively pinpoint what that might be. The efficacy and validation principle of an artwork can perhaps be said to be that it is ceaselessly fascinating and yields great resources to those who pay close attention. This text can be seen as an attempt to not simply stabilize and refine that artistic 'experiment' as it is being devised, but also to extend its scope into other forms of cognition by partaking in the process of generation. The theory and the artwork have been developed together, in succession and alternation. It is precisely this process which distinguishes artistic research as a hybrid form that lives in the gap between art and science as such.

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stabilized essence of the eighteenth century or the twentieth century. The degree of stabilization...is as important as the position on the line that runs from the natural to the social..." Ibid, p. 85, nevertheless suggests a progression from speculative events that are witnessed to more stable abstractions held as knowledge in our mind.

I.   The Concept of Distance

A. Spatial Distance

Any difference can be construed as a distance between two points. The world can be thus mapped spatially on virtual as well as actual planes. As Gilles Deleuze describes, "purely actual objects do not exist…every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images…"[18] The close relationship between virtual and actual objects, a circuital symbiosis of perception in time present and time past that defines memory and produces images, is also what Adorno refers to when, in his Philosophie der Neuen Musik, he writes that "das 'Material' selber sedimentierter Geist, ein gesellschaftlich, durchs Bewußtsein von Menschen hindurch präformiert ist."[19] or that "kein Akkord ist 'an sich' falsch, schon weil es keine Akkorde an sich gibt, und weil jeder das Ganze, auch die Geschichte in sich trägt."[20] Like all things, musical material has therefore a double character in which the actual objects, seemingly present before us, continually reveal themselves to be predicated upon and constituted by the virtual, what in Adorno's terms would be called history or 'Geist' in these examples. For this reason, a discussion of distance in music is unable to dwell merely on actual or literal description of phenomena, and must instead trace the pathways between virtual and actual, between the seemingly immediately present and that which appears only indirectly through this immediacy.

Since space is a function of distance, it also follows that of interest for the discussion is not simply the acoustic space in which music sounds. This is the lowest order of the spatial phenomena in music that arise from distance-as-mapped-difference. Yes, entire genres of music and their corresponding sound types and forms are contingent upon the

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[18] Deleuze, *Dialogues II* p. 148
[19] Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, p. 38.
[20] Ibid, p. 40.

type of acoustic space they are meant to sound in. But these spaces are also not so easily separated from the social-historical processes that form them. Without recourse to the virtualities that appear through and are actualized in these spaces and their accompanying musics, one risks denying an overwhelmingly large portion of experience of the intertwining of close-appearing surface and that which floats around it.[21]

An order of musical space of higher complexity would be the mimetic representation of space through acoustic effects. In instrumental music this has primarily taken the form of creating a sense of foreground and background through loudness and timbre, sometimes enhanced by arranging musicians in novel spatial formations.[22] What electronic music has been able to more directly execute is a naturalistic reproduction of such effects using filters and reverberation to mimic or even directly capture acoustic spaces. More plastic and thus more fruitful to artistic creation than a simple focus on the spaces in which music sounds, this kind of representation is more receptive to bearing musical meaning.

The opening of the second act of Tristan comes to mind; here a mimetic acoustic effect takes on a special quality as waldhörner appear first loud in the foreground (Isolde: Hörst du sie noch? / Mir schwand schon fern der Klang[23]), then diminuendo to be quickly replaced at their quietest point with a string tremolo on a diminished chord (Isolde: Noch sind sie nah' / deutlich tönt's daher[24]). What is remarkable here is not the mere distance effect, but what media theorist Friedrich Kittler characterizes as the "akustische Halluzination," a "textuelle Oszillieren zwischen Naturgeräusch und Orchesterinstrument,

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[21] This is the same denial that Gyorgy Lukács criticizes as posing a semblance of 'Unmittelbarkeit' [immediacy] in his "Es Geht um den Realismus," which would fail to grasp the "innere Zusammenhörigkeit von Unmittelbarkeit und Abstraktion" and be decidedly anti-real. Lukács, „Es Geht um den Realismus," p. 204.

[22] Indeed, there is a long history, also before New Music, of spatial formations, from antiphonal choirs in Catholic music and Renaissance polyphony, to special events like Händel's *Water Music* up to Helmut Lachenmann's *Schwankungen am Rand*. Since what I aim for is not merely acoustic phenomena but rather metaphorical, virtual spaces, a discussion of these types of works is out of scope of this paper.

[23] Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*, pp. 109-110.

[24] Ibid.

Random Noise und Jagdsignal."[25] By juxtaposing the mimetic effect of horns oscillating through their natural overtones fading into the distance with a noise-like string tremolo on what was then still an unstable harmonic construction, Wagner mobilizes the representation of a real acoustic phenomena, ripe with cultural and historical associations, not simply to underscore the drama. More than this, the relationship between "der Herrschaft von Partituren und Partituren [von] der von Schrift,"[26] is unhinged, resulting in an anticipation of what media technology would later reveal: an interpenetration of, in Kittler's terms, the symbolic indexicality of the space of the natural world (the appearance of hunting horns), the curved lens of the imagination of the subject (the dramatic setting), and a 'real' of concrete acoustic phenomena (natural overtones and noise-like oscillation or tremolo). It is thus the virtualities of meaning and association that prove to be more fruitful to a discussion of musical distance than the concretely representative.

A more developed order of the virtual plane in musical space would be what philosopher Gunnar Hindrichs, in his Autonomie des Klanges, describes as "...der Raum, den [die Musik] in sicht hat."[27] He writes further:

"Wir sprechen von hohen Tönen und von tiefen Tönen. Wir bemerken, daß Töne steigen und daß Töne fallen…Wir reden von der engen und der weiten Lage eines Akkordes…Und von manchen Harmonien bemerken wir, sie seien weit voneinander entfernt."[28]

What is presented here is the harmonic space of music, probably the most historically developed aspect of music in the Western tradition. This space is, despite the tones being

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[25] Kittler, „Weltatem: Über Wagners Medientechnologie," p. 336.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Hindrichs, *Autonomie des Klanges*, p. 154
[28] Ibid, p. 155.

very real and actual phenomena that do sound directly before our ears, largely virtual. Musical pitches are in some sense not actually higher or lower than one another, even though the amalgam of physiology and culture seems to perceive them this way, but rather perceptual units of faster or slower periodicities. An investigation of the ontology of music perception is, however, out of the scope of this text. I simply would like to suggest that beyond the results of human hearing and perception, however real those perceptual objects may be, the Western tradition of thinking harmonic space relies not only on the vocabulary of spatial forms and as such constitutes a type of metaphorical thinking, but includes really imagining this implied space as such.

Furthermore, musical compositions are comprised not of individual tones, but of tone relations:[29] scales, melodies, chords, progressions, and melodic/harmonic forms. Much of the historical development of Western classical music was concerned with not only extending these tone relations or integrating particular cases of more distant relations, but also dealing with the kind of consequence these relations had on the work's overall form as the horizon on which this virtual space appears to us. Indeed, perhaps one of the most famous moments in this history is Schönberg's positing of an "emancipation of the dissonance,"[30] of a harmonic space where the ultimate recourse to a tonal center is finally abolished. This can be read as a sort of de-centered, perspectiveless space where the difference between the consonance and dissonance – as Schönberg describes it, the distance to the fundamental[31] – and therefore the conventional orientation of the harmonic space itself, collapses, or rather, the conventional melodic-harmonic relations of tonal music are disrupted.

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[29] Hindrichs is also careful to note that the basic tone relation, an interval, is analogous to the German word 'Zwischenraum' [literally, between-space]. Ibid.
[30] Schönberg, „Opinion or Insight," p. 258.
[31] Ibid, p. 260.

Here is the point where another order of musical space emerges, latent until the onset of the avant-garde. One of the most fascinating aspects of Schönberg's work is his development of other musical parameters to help differentiate out musical-spatial relations set loose by his abdication of tonality. Yet this de-centering of at least the virtual space of harmony, as it was cemented in convention, had another byproduct: what Adorno called the "Kündigung der Kommunikation,"[32] [termination of communication] a result of the expressionistic fragmentation of harmonic forms (as well as a correspondingly unbridled form of expression), can also be evidenced in the comically widespread indifference or even revulsion of the layperson to Schönberg's music – or indeed New Music in general. This kind of rejection on the part of the listener to a convention-breaking form of art production is not necessarily new, but rather points to a distance in the position of the spectator in relation to the aesthetic object. I argue the type of virtual space arising from the relation of reception on the part of spectator to the aesthetic object has been latent in all art, and only with the avant-gardist strategy of disruption becomes explicit.

B. Aesthetic Distance

If we accept that there is a virtual space of music constituted not just by the metaphorized and imagined space of tone relations, mimetic representations of real space, the social and historical processes that accompany the real spaces in which music sounds, and the space defined by some sort of distance between listener and work, the question arises: what exactly is the nature of this space? Here I make a brief recourse to theory in the visual arts to clarify the point.

Art historian David Summers writes:

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[32] Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, p. 51.

"Painting and the graphic arts are principal arts of virtual space. We may look at a frescoed wall, at painted stone or brick, at a scroll or sheet of paper or canvas, and seem to look 'into' its surface; we may see an apparent three-dimensional reality…A virtual space is always an image on a surface…Virtual spaces are always representations of space…"[33]

Of special note is the way Summers describes looking 'into' the surface of a painting. This will prove decisive for the later discussion of immersive effects as an opposition to distancing ones, as it implies, no matter the degree to which one is actually looking 'inside' the aesthetic object, at the very least that an imagined absorption into a representation carries also a notion of engulfment on the part of the observer. For now, I would simply like to point out that this special mode of perception common to the virtual spaces found in music and representational painting (if not all forms of art) reveals a supercategory of virtual space of the aesthetic object.

In an essay from 1912, the Swiss-English aesthetician Edward Bullough gives us a further account of a similar phenomenon, applied not to a work of art, but rather to fog at sea. He explains that contemplation of the fog paradoxically produces on the one hand uneasiness or anxiety from the very real danger it poses to maritime navigation, yet at the same time a special sort of pleasure. "Abstract from the experience of the sea fog," Bullough writes, "its danger and practical unpleasantness…direct the attention to the features 'objectively' constituting the phenomenon – the veil surrounding you with an opaqueness of transparent milk… the carrying-power of the wind…the creamy smoothness of the water…"[34]

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[33] Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western modernism*, p. 43.
[34] Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle."

Bullough, after this rhapsodic mis-en-scéne, then makes the point that this type of perception "...is a difference in outlook, due...to the insertion of distance. This distance appears to lie between our own self and its affectations..."[35] He concludes that contemplation of this sort only becomes possible through separating our perception of an object's qualities and their affectation on us (the quality of the foggy air and the corresponding look of the water) from any kind of practical or immediate effect it might have (danger to navigation, delay in travel). It would seem from this analysis that through a particular mode of perception, by 'abstracting' qualities in a particular way, one begins to see 'behind' the purely actual phenomenon, creating a sort of metaphorized double image of the world in one's own subjective perception. This 'mirror image' is also how Deleuze describes the relationship of the virtual to the actual;[36] we can thus say that what Bullough calls 'psychical distance' – which I will hereby refer to simply as 'aesthetic distance' – is the intentional production of a virtual space where one looks past what is immediately present to make associations and trace connections to that which is more loosely linked to the moment of aesthetic perception.[37]

I argue that not only does this concept of aesthetic distance bear more than a passing resemblance to Kant's idea of the 'disinterested' spectator in its abstraction of aesthetic perception from practical utility, but that this phenomenon is precisely what Adorno refers to in his *Aesthetic Theory*, when he writes that the special type of abstraction in modernist art is a means for that "aesthetic distancing that traditional fantasy no longer achieves,"[38] a counterbalance to the force of a culture industry which would "narrow [art's] distance from its viewer," so that the "humiliating difference between art and the life people lead..." is

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[35] Ibid.

[36] „...a virtual image contemporary with the actual object, its double, its 'mirror image'"" Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, p. 150.

[37] It must also be noted here the similarity of aesthetic distance to Benjamin's concept of the aura as it pertains to history: "We define the aura of [historical objects] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 5.

[38] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* p. 22.

"made to disappear"[39]. We can conclude from this that not only does modernist art constitute an attempt to maintain aesthetic distance despite its apparent rejection of a virtual space, but that for Adorno this type of medial disruption of convention that he calls abstraction (one can think here of the relation of abstract to figurative painting) is essential to maintain this distance.

For Adorno, modernist abstraction, not merely an intensification of the type of abstraction that would normally occur in perception of aesthetic distance, extracting qualities from immediate utility, is inextricable with its newness. Modernist abstraction would rather separate not just utility from qualities but from the very conventions for communicating such qualities, creating a 'blind-spot' that is "the result of a historical process that began by destroying a specific tradition and then destroyed tradition as such."[40] If we hold that conventions of tradition include the construction of virtual spaces, it follows that just like the example of Schönberg, the abstraction necessary for aesthetic distance in modernist art negates the virtual space of the artwork by disrupting its constitutive elements and therefore the very fundament of tradition. Here, a historical and therefore temporal character is revealed.

C. Historical and Temporal Distance

Perhaps one of the most well-known applications of this negative type of aesthetic distance is the "Verfremdungseffekt" of Bertolt Brecht. In his 1936 essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht describes qualities in traditional Chinese theater which he identifies (not without the problems of the historicizing and selective eye of the outsider) to contribute to a sense of estrangement on the part of not only the actors themselves, but

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[39] Ibid, pp. 16-17.
[40] Ibid, p. 23.

also the public. He describes effects that stood in stark contrast to contemporary practice in Europe, whereby the audience would be empathetically spurred to identify with characters, with an analogous virtual space of figures in a plot, and thus brought "into closest proximity with the events and the character"[41] by the bourgeois theater in order to "emphasize the timelessness of its objects."[42] The effects in Chinese theater Brecht describes, on the other hand, rob the audience of "the illusion of being the unseen spectator,"[43] which instead "identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on."[44] The end effect Brecht strives for is to "historicize the events portrayed"[45] by breaking the spell of the virtual plane of plot and characters that one normally 'identifies into.' This would in turn corrode the corresponding 'timelessness' of the virtual space of theater through a heightened awareness of the situation of the audience-as-observer, bringing into focus the present historical moment of a particular performance.

Both with Brecht as with Adorno a paradox of distance is set up between the alleged 'real,' – the particular and emergent conditions of the current social-historical moment – and the virtual space of the musical or theatrical work, which by having its own virtual space, has also its own accompanying virtual time, both between events as well as between the temporality of events in the virtual space and the temporality of the immediate lived experience outside of it. In Brecht, the practice of bourgeois theater, in creating a proximity between spectator and work by channeling seemingly realistic emotions and empathy that create feelings of identification in the audience, simultaneously creates a temporal distance between the present moment and the 'other-time' of the work. This is, according to Brecht, because these types of affective responses are constructed to seem "inevitable, usual,

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[41] Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," p. 93.
[42] Ibid, p. 96.
[43] Ibid, p. 92.
[44] Ibid, p. 93.
[45] Ibid, p. 96.

natural, purely human"[46] and as a result universally valid and finally ahistorical because they present humanity as "a coherent whole…a fixed quantity, eternally unchanged,"[47] which, for an avant-gardist would be egregiously false in view of a fundamental commitment to progress in both art and society, and for a materialist would simply be a denial of the very real propensity of the structure of human relations to develop along with the conditions of production.

With Adorno, it is the instrumentalization of aesthetic experience by productive forces that, through kitsch or reactionary art, also pose a false semblance, which is in other words a virtual space that does not properly reflect the social reality of its time: the rift between tradition and the modern, the fissure caused by the aporia of avant-garde art, and the utopian possibility of emancipation in the face of the catastrophic failure of such to materialize. This semblance would also, through its being heteronomous (determined by the commodity relation and by capitalist production and therefore too utilitarian to properly separate from the realm of aesthetics) deny the necessary threshold of abstraction from immediate practical use that would create the aesthetic distance needed to maintain art's autonomy against and from within commodity fetishism. Like with Brecht, a surface coherence of the virtual space of the artwork creates a temporal distance to social reality that not only denies the possibility of both apprehending and moving past the current historical moment, but also necessitates disruptive effects like abstraction or breaking the fourth wall in order to paradoxically maintain its own aesthetic distance to function as an artwork.

But while this approach could be called a sort of 'realism' in that it takes into account the 'real' structures at work in social processes, if it is constituted by rejecting or disrupting a virtual space of aesthetic perception while simultaneously upholding that aesthetic space,

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[46] Ibid, p. 97.
[47] Ibid.

where does it lead? If we take Deleuze's formulation of actual and virtual objects into account, where no actual object exists without its virtual mirror image, is this not merely another type of virtual space? What is particular here in Brecht's approach, the denaturalizing and disrupting of the empathetic and identification processes of classical theater, becomes generalized in Adorno. His formulation of the new as a 'blind-spot,' a "purely indexical gesture"[48] that carries with it a sort of horrific shudder at the destructive power of the utterly new and not-yet-known, not only destroys tradition as such, but also posits that art which actualizes this newness, by both negating social processes embedded in the convention of tradition and at the same time still being the nexus of those very processes, becomes "the other" of society,[49] thus some sort of negative reflection.

Adorno rightfully acknowledges the contradiction at the heart of the matter, that whatever this 'other' is, wherever the space created by the disruption of the virtual fabric of the illusion of the art's surface lies, it still is coded within the dually symbolic and 'realistic' world of social production and relations. Does it nevertheless follow that this 'non-timeless' space that rejects the conventional virtual space of art and thereby to a greater degree 'actualizes' the aesthetic object or its constitutive elements is somehow more 'real?' I argue that despite widespread use of the term 'real' found in both in Brecht and Adorno that would posit this space outside the virtuality of illusion as that-which-really-exists, we are nevertheless still dealing with artistic experiences (the most extreme cases which would "promote non-art reality,"[50] such as that of Fluxus, either fail to do so and remain aestheticized or fail to be aestheticized and cease to exist as artworks) and as such, never really leave the realm of aesthetic perception. Because of this, the kind of negation of virtual space that avant-garde disruption brings around, rather than breaking out into some hitherto unseen 'real,' simply shifts the site of the virtual space of aesthetic perception from

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[48] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 20.
[49] Ibid, p. 31.
[50] Maciunas, *Manifesto I.*

inside the preestablished medial conventions of the artwork to outside it. In other words, just as we can read Bourriaud's claim of relational works that create a 'social interstice' as expanding the art experience to the social situation around the work, we can also say that attempts to access this 'outer-virtual' space – still virtual through its continued interpenetration by social-historical processes and their corresponding symbolic particles – simply expand the sphere of art into an extra-medial virtual space, considered to be 'other' in Adorno's modernist vision of abstraction.

Yet from the perspective of our time, this trick has not aged well. As early as 1912, Duchamp formulated the disruptive effect with his readymades, whereby a prefabricated non-art object such as a urinal both resists the conventions of the traditional art object, yet at the same time is called upon as the subject of aesthetic perception, bringing to the foreground a conceptual (or even the institutional) virtual space of the aesthetic object and the encounter the between this space and the beholder. As philosopher Graham Harman puts it in his incisive treatment of modern and contemporary art, after the first radical examples of such disruptive recourse to 'outer-virtuality,' "the past half-century has retaught this same lesson ad nauseum."[51] The development of contemporary art after Duchamp can be thus seen as an extension of this same idea, of bringing foreign materials (or rather, materials that point to 'otherized' perceptive categories) into the sphere of art, resulting in what Clement Greenberg already in 1971 criticized as the "Stereotyp der avantgardistischen Kunstpraxis."[52]

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[51] Harman, *Art and Objects*, p. 156.
[52] Greenberg, „Gegen Avant-Garde," p. 400.

D. Between Modern and Postmodern Conceptions of Distance

If we accept that the avant-garde strategy of disrupting convention and thereby creating, at least temporarily, a negational distancing effect by positing an extramedial virtual space has become a stereotype – in New Music clearly evidenced by the near ubiquitous adoption of Lachenmannian noise sounds into standard practice – I assert that in order to redeem the promise of avantgarde art in face of the ever-corrosive forces of cultural assimilation that would, through overuse, also *overstabilize* these materials, thus draining them (or us) of the ability to maintain the aesthetic distance of defamiliarization in the face of the need for historical proximity, then this very strategy of disruption should be reevaluated. The phenomenon of overstabilization is with Adorno linked to the totalizing force of relations under capitalist production, denying the speculative quality of the not-yet-known, the significant type of newness that would be an antidote to art that does not properly account for the emergent social and historical processes that feed into it. Yet since the publication of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970, much has changed. Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* of 1991, makes a diagnosis of the fundamental shifts in cultural and economic production at the end of the 20th century which shows the modernistic way of thinking and its corresponding techniques in art to be defunct. As such, a different problem of aesthetic distance becomes apparent.

Jameson writes that "no theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital."[53] This imagined act of 'being outside,' or 'being other' that we find in Adorno[54] that would express

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[53] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 48.
[54] "The more total society becomes," i.e. determined by commodity relations, "...all the more do artworks in which this experience is sedimented become the other of this society." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 31.

the reality of the 'false' society becomes in Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism impossible, since for Jameson "the other [sic] of our society is in that sense no longer Nature at all," – in other words, there is no "nature" of society to appeal to – "as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify."[55]

Jameson then relates the "the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital" which "ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity,"[56] to a spatial concept: "we are submerged in [postmodernism's] henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) bereft of distantiation."[57] What was latent in Adorno's posed aporia of works that strive for otherness yet must contend with their own embeddedness in the totalizing structure of commodity fetishism, is expressed by Jameson with more clarity and despair in terms of a qualitatively expanded world of production relations that erases the possibility itself of an outside perspective. With this, the need for distance becomes more urgent to the same degree as its as its very nature shifts; this analysis also leads to the conclusion that the space that the kind of critical distance found in Brecht and theorized by Adorno hitherto posited as somehow more real, is itself a sort of wishful thinking.

Is this not the very same paradox facing advanced art today? In the aftermath of the ruthlessly utopic forms of the early avant-garde and their softer variants in the later 20th century (extending as well to the media-arts based currents at the turn of the millennium), in music as well as visual arts and theater, which repeated the point in endless variation that virtually anything can be brought into the sphere of aesthetic experience and thus be valid as art, have we not reached a point of material and conceptual saturation?

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[55] Ibid, p. 35.
[56] Ibid, p. 49.
[57] Ibid.

Accompanying the 'filled and suffused volumes' of Jameson's postmodern space, it would seem that also in the realm of aesthetics, we have lost a sense of direction. Nobody knows where to go. I would point to the New Music landscape, which current floats between 'expressive noise sounds' as a sort of counter-reformation against the subsiding wave of 'relational music' composers who came to prominence in the 2000s, or 'decadent multimedia', where this relationality that appeared at the beginning of the millennium has become diluted into pure spectacle. I would even go so far as to suggest that this aesthetic impasse has much to do with what philosopher Mark Fisher describes as 'capitalist realism,' where, similar to Jameson, the conditions of late capitalist production have been so naturalized that any alternative becomes almost inconceivable.[58] For lack of any significant compass, art becomes subjugated to the logic of the institutional marketplace.

Whereas Jameson's analysis revolves around firstly the impossibility of an outside space existing that would make critical acts possible, and secondly on describing exactly what kind of orientational difficulties arise therein, I would also make recourse here to one of Adorno's remarks in his *Negative Dialectics*, namely that "what would lie in the beyond makes its appearance only in the materials and categories within."[59] Although perhaps Adorno already in the late 1960s anticipated such a condition that Jameson in the 90s catalogues (Jameson acknowledges elsewhere that one of the main tensions in Adorno's work is the "passing of the modern itself"[60]), what can be gleaned by such a point is that perhaps, despite the impossibility of an 'other,' or 'real' space, there is still a glimmer of hope in the cracks of what is.

Despite their opposing uses of the term 'reality,' the above remark of Adorno bears a similarity to the aesthetic philosophy of Graham Harman, popular in recent years, in his

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[58] Fisher defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now *impossible* to even imagine a coherent alternative to it." Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 2.

[59] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 140.

[60] Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, p. 245.

Object-Oriented Ontology of 2018. Harman posits a 'real' at the core of any object, beneath all appearances which, while unreachable, can nevertheless be indirectly hinted at through aesthetic means. What he simply calls 'metaphor,' together with his approach of 'aesthetics-as-first-philosophy,' implies that through a sort of 'lens,' a willful act of imagination, concentration, and reflection, and by combining things in strange, surprising and even 'wrong' ways, we can still gesture towards the real in an oblique rather than direct manner. One of the consequences for art is that, although we may never have immediate access to a real, to an outside, through a particular act of perception that superposes qualities in an unfamiliar way – what Adorno would call thinking in contradictions,[61] or what Harman would describe as the "explicit tension between hidden real objects and their palpable sensual qualities"[62] – is perhaps the only path, however unattainable in any final sense, towards an 'other' space that would lay the groundwork for the not-yet-known of the new.

I would continue along similar lines to say that although perhaps no act of art can actually materialize a socialist utopia and although there may be no distance that would allow us to truly stand outside the reach of totalizing social or productive forces, there could still yet be ways, relatively speaking, of reformulating and reviving the sort of critical distance so far discussed that would resolve the modernistic otherness-through-abstraction with Jameson's assertions that both "countercultural forms of cultural resistance" as well as "overtly political interventions...are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they might be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it."[63]

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[61] "To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction. A contradiction in reality, it is a contradiction against reality." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 145.

[62] Harman, *Art and Objects*, p. xii.

[63] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 49.

D. Distance as Disjunct Virtual Space

We can summarize the discussion thus far as follows: aesthetic distance, necessary for art to be art, posits an abstraction through separation and a virtual space which one is, at least subjectively, 'drawn into,' while disruptive distance critically mobilizes the spectator by negating a virtual space and positing an 'outside' – whether some misconceived 'real' or an extra-medial virtual space that only relatively appears as an outside – in order to redeem aesthetic distance in the face of totalizing productive relations that would 'objectify' human life, rendering it inseparable from its practical functions. If we add to Jameson's analysis that capital, liquidated from production into financial markets and spread to nearly every corner of the globe, is now supplemented by digital assets that seem to exist everywhere and nowhere all at once, very near in our pockets and at some intangible distance in the cloud, which mediate human relations to a qualitatively new degree through their overwhelming speed and undeniable ubiquity, the question arises of what sort of artistic approach could be meaningful.

I proceed twofold: firstly, reflecting art theorist Peter Osborne's characterization of globalism, in his essay "The postconceptual condition: Or, cultural logic of high capitalism today" of 2014 as an "internally disjunctive global historical-temporal form" which is "a totalizing (but not thereby 'total,' since it is open to no more than a distributive unification) radical disjunctive, contemporaneity...totalizing but immanently fractured,"[64] I would suggest a model of aesthetic disruption which, rather than proposing disruption from an 'outside,' would rather create a noise-like oscillation between "conjunctively disjunctive"[65] layers of virtual space. If we imagine a spectrum between inner-medial virtual space constituted by medium-specific conventions of a discipline of art, and an outer-medial virtuality posed by

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[64] Osborne, „The postconceptual condition: Or, cultural logic of high capitalism today," p. 23.
[65] Ibid.

the modernist critical distance relative to these conventions, perhaps one could address the condition described first by Jameson and then later Osborne by mobilizing a kind of 'global' virtual space resulting from the interpolation of medial layers.

Alternatively, if we imagine a ring of concentric spheres of virtuality extending outwards from the inner-medial virtual space of figuration in paint or melodic-harmonic tonal music into increasingly abstract and outer-medial materials, ending finally in actions, performances, concepts and situations that circumscribe the field of art perception, perhaps creating an interference between these rings would for a moment confound the overstabilized cultural perception that always presses in on aesthetics. Through a structural oscillation between layers that never quite stabilize into a total illusion or a total negation, or which through this movement are kept at a certain distance from any concept of such, perhaps something like a 'conjunctively disjunctive,' distributively unified, but internally differentiated formal principle could arise. Here, the use of structural or medial disruption would not break out into another space, but use the discrepancies and contradictions between layers of this concentric arrangement to hint at something beyond.

Such an approach would no longer need the shock of the new to destroy tradition, since tradition is no longer a relevant category after the aporia of the avant-garde. Rather, its goal would be to trace between the layers of virtuality, between inner-medial (figurated medial materials), medial-abstract (non-figurated, 'raw' medial material), extra-medial (non-medial, 'foreign' materials) and outer-medial (non-medial non-materials, like concepts, situations, or the receptive layer between object and beholder) to exploit exactly the point where these become contradictory. In this sense, distance becomes a formal principle that, by moving between virtual layers of media, would create a sort of negative space: a negation of the principle of negation of virtual space. Rather than affirming some pre-figured virtual space of art as it is handed to us in the tradition, in the absence of tradition itself, this negative space would exist primarily as the differential between the layers of virtual inner-

and outer- medial spaces in and around the artwork, providing a disjointed unity of aesthetic experience that remains skeptical of traditional forms as well as the historical avant-garde.

Yet this is only one piece of the puzzle; the 'ring-jumping' I describe is mostly a re-synthesis, intensification and formalization of certain principles of modernist art. The next step is necessitated not only by the need to, with recourse to 'inner-medial virtuality,' avoid falling back into some premodern virtual space of medial semblance, but also to address the shift in the nature of the subjective 'looking-into' that this virtual space presupposes. I argue that Osborne's notion of the 'conjunctively disjunctive,' a non-total relation of differentiated parts, is also what Jameson means when he writes of the "disposition of the subject"[66] that has taken place as a result of late capitalist systems. Taken together with his earlier claim that even the unconscious has been 'colonized' by capital's long arm, contributing to the distancelessness of the postmodern, we can conclude that it is indeed subjectivity itself that has been altered by shifting productive forces. As such, the relation of the subject to the artwork and the very space that this creates, specifically a sense of 'inner virtuality,' would correspondingly change. For these reasons, I propose an oppositional effect to aesthetic or critical distance, firstly constituting a core category in aesthetic perception and secondly offering an alternative form of disruption that would focus precisely on the inner space of art's virtuality and the subject's orientation within and around it.

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[66] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 10.

II.   The Concept of Immersion

        A. Immersion as Absorption

There is a sense in which we are already immersed in the flesh of the world. We may close our eyes, fall unconscious, but our brains rarely stop registering the flow of environmental data. Music, specifically, has a particular relation to a common conception of immersion since, as Seth Kim-Cohen points out in his In the Blink of an Ear, "from birth to death, the ear never closes."[67] Besides this, sound waves, like light, radiate out from a source, saturating a room with their reverberations. Yet just as with our discussion of distance in musical space, so too must we lay aside the bare phenomena as not enough concerned with the virtualities that arise in our perception from such events, and instead focus on immersion as a spatial treatment grounded in the reception of aesthetic perception in the beholder as an oppositional force to that of distance.

In her exhaustive treatment of recent trends in what she calls "Theater der Vereinnahmuhng" or "immersive theater," Theresa Schütz distinguishes between two types of immersive forms of perception. The first, an effect of lesser intensity, what she calls "immersion-as-absorption," which "zeichnet sich durch eine spezifische Intensität (z.B. konzentrierte Wahrnehmung) aus, die das Subjekt temporär ganz und gar einnimmt und von anderen Aktivitäten, Empfindungen oder Gedanken temporär abschneidet,"[68] and „im Theater generell primär auf der Ebene von Konzentration und kognitiv-imaginativer Aktivität abspiele (und demzufolge auch im ‚traditionellen Theater' denkbar ist)"[69] can be seen as the receptive condition akin to Summer's experience of ‚looking inside' a painting. Already here we encounter a paradox of the proposed opposition of 'distance - immersion.' If aesthetic

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[67] Kim-Cohen, In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sound Art, p. xviii.
[68] Schütz, Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater, p. 21.
[69] Ibid, p. 37.

perception, as in the case of Bullough, by defining this boundary between the aestheticized and the rest of the world at a given moment, creates a sort of qualitative distance that estranges the object from normative perceptions of it, how can this act of 'looking inside' or 'looking past' also create a sense of absorptive engulfment?

Oddly enough, media theorist Friedrich Kittler gives us a possible answer in his essay "'Heinrich von Ofterdingen' als Nachrichtenfluss" from 1985. In describing the communication structure latent in the politics of Novalis' novel from 1800, Kittler writes:

"Am Anfang des Netzplans, wie anders, steht weißes Rauschen. Mit seinen unerhörten Eingangssätzen gibt der Roman erst einmal den Hintergrund an, vor dem er Roman werden kann. ,Die Elten lagen schon und schliefen, die Wanduhr schlug ihren einförmigen Takt, vor den klappernden Fenstern sauste der Wind...[Der Protagonist]... hört also nichts mehr von seinen Eltern...An Informationen, die ihn noch erreichen, bleibt nur eine unmenschliche und stochastische Streuung akustischer und optischer Daten, die zwar der Text registriert, nicht jedoch sein Held. Genauso beginnt Literatur."[70]

Kittler's analysis of storytelling that begins by positing a background noise only from which a narrative can arise, besides showing a surprisingly media-rich side to the literature of the early romantic, points to a telling feature of aesthetic perception. His scheme is not so different from that of Bullough, where also the sea fog must be separated from its immediate environment, or 'background,' in order to be perceived aesthetically and thus with distance. Kittler goes further, though, to make the point:

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[70] Kittler, "'Heinrich von Ofterdingen' als Nachrichtenfluss," p. 484.

"Ofterdingen überhört alle Geräusche, übersieht alle Gesichte, die kein mögliches Wort als solche speichern könnte, um durch diese Selektion aus seiner Gegenwart herauszufallen."[71]

The principle of selection Kittler describes not only implies the kind of intentionality of aesthetic perception suggested at the example of Bullough, but furthermore bears a striking resemblance to the model of 'structural noise' I posited as arising from avantgarde disruption; indeed, Kittler also makes reference to information theory in his analysis, whereby textual meaning includes sources, senders, channels, receivers, and destinations.[72] Here, in contrast to Bullough, the presence of an "unauslösliche Hintergrund"[73] [unerasable background] behind the selection is seen to be latent in all aesthetic perception, pointing to the fact that there is always the threat of noisy disruption and a persistent potential for negational distance.

I suggest that inversely, this kind of network analysis of the channels of communication in art (also present in the 'communication superhighways' of Bourriaud's theory), while providing a foundation for a disruptive and distancing model, at the same time helps us to understand the effect of immersion-as-absorption Schütz identifies. By involving the beholder in a communication network of symbols and affects that create this 'temporary cut' from an environment, it can be said that a sort of qualitative encapsulation is created that involves the beholder in aesthetic perception.[74]

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[71] Ibid.

[72] „Wenn Informationsnetze nach Shannons Theorem grundsätzlich eine Quelle, einen Sender, einen Kanal, einen Empfänger und ein Ziel verschalten, müssen auch aus Wörtern gemachte Nachrichten (oder eben Diskurse) angeschrieben werden als Netzwerk, das notwendig immer mehrere Bücher, Dokumente, Archive, Bibliotheken und Institutionen einbezieht." Ibid, p. 483.

[73] Ibid, p. 482.

[74] Graham Harman also makes a lengthy treatment in the chapter on 'Metaphor' in his *Object-Oriented Ontology*, whereby a kind of symbiotic superobject arises that involves the withdrawn 'real' of the spectator as a stand-in for that of the object of perception.

I argue it is exactly this kind of symbiosis of investment, affect, and perception that creates a sense of absorption. One can think of the common experience of reading a book. Concentration falls and the images and actions represented by the words come vividly to the mind. The noise of the street becomes almost forgotten, yet never totally disappears: a siren may grab our attention back to the surrounding world. This kind of immersion-as-absorption, inherent to traditional art, is not only predicated upon a background noise that is ready to disturb, or the fact that aesthetic perception itself is unstable – ready to disintegrate at any moment – but crucially that our minds are able to jump quickly between opposing information channels or spheres of experience. Thus, my proposed model of threading between layers of virtual space is not only predicated on an opposition of distancing and immersive effects as they pertain to absorption, but also as Peter Bürger formulates the relationship between avantgarde and tradition, "it is only the full unfolding of the thing...that makes recognizable the general validity of the category."[75] Although I try to hold also my own distance from strictly avant-garde formulations in acknowledgement of their increasing anachronism to the contemporary situation, the principle is the same: what was latent perhaps in art of all times receives, through a historically situated reformulation, a new life and as such comes to maturity as a category of perception.

B. Immersion-as-Transportation

The second category of immersion proposed by Schütz is that of "immersion-as-transportation" which "greift hingegen auf der Ebene der Bedeutungsgenerierung, wenn sich Lesende qua Vorstellungskraft ein Bild der primär realistisch konfigurierten, erzählten possible world gemacht haben"[76] and „ziele...auf die situativ geteilte Anwesenheit von

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[75] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 18.
[76] Schütz, *Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater*, p. 21.

Zuschauer*innen und Performer*innen im otherworldly gestalteten Aufführungsraum."[77] Contingent upon an experience of absorption that could generate a 'possible world' in the imagination, the transportative would, through a „besonders intensiver Zustand" make possible „eine situative Erfahrung von 'präsenz,'"[78] here understood as a "Gegenwärtigkeit multisensorischen Erlebens dessen, was einem in situ buchstäblich vor [sic] die Sinne kommt und auf diese Weise Aufmerksamkeit für das eigene situative, sinnliche In-der-Welt-Sein zu produzieren vermag."[79] Immersion-as-transportation for Schütz is thus not simply an intensification of a sense of absorption, but much more strangely a sense of presence, arising from a situated multisensory experience, that comes precisely at the point of the 'otherworldly.'

This bears a marked difference to the use of the term 'presence' by performance art and theater theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte, for whom the term denotes rather a sense of immediacy in the moment of the performance *as opposed* to any kind of fictional or illusory world of plot or characters, having more to do with what she calls the "phänomenalen Leib" of the actual performer rather than the "semiotischen Figur" of the portrayed character.[80] In her *Ästheik des Performativen*, she writes that "Präsenz ist keine expressive, sondern eine rein performative Qualität. So wird durch spezifische Prozesse der Verkörperung erzeugt…Präsenz ereignet für [die Zuschauer] als eine intensive Erfahrung von Gegenwart."[81] Fischer-Lichte uses this to then characterize performance art of the latter half of the 20th century as pursuing a "radikale Entgegensetzung von Präsenz und Repräsentation/Darstellung"[82] which contained, rather than the 'as-if' of traditional

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[77] Ibid, p. 37.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid, p. 38.
[80] „[Die Fähigkeit zur Präsenz] wurde vielmehr, durch Prozesse der Verkörperung erzeugt, mit denen der Schauspieler nicht seinen semiotischen Körper, sondern seinen phänomenalen Leib auf spezifische Weise hervorbrachte." Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, p. 165.
[81] Ibid, pp. 165-166.
[82] Ibid, p. 167.

representation, "die Forderung nach 'tatsächlicher' Gegenwärtigkeit…in realen Räumen und in Realzeit…stets hier et nunc, in absoluter Gegenwärtigkeit."[83]

Although we have seen that the appeal to 'reality' outside the medial layers of an artwork is just as problematic as any appeal to 'absoluter Gegenwärtigkeit' [absolute presentness], there is nevertheless a certain sense in which this concept of presence, as "eine unmittelbare sinnliche Wirkung" with "überwältigende Affekte,"[84] is indeed more actual in its focus on the raw gesticulations and energy that would directly generate affects in the spectator, prefiguring any kind of sympathetic identification or meaning in representation. What in Fischer-Lichte servers as a kind of radical conclusion to Brecht's call for breaking the timelessness of theatrical representation[85] is refashioned in Schütz's theory to serve the idea of immersion-as-transportation. There the intensive condition built on an absorptive sense of being 'taken-in' reaches a particularly strong or even overwhelming actual sensory affect that would call forth a distinct sense of the present moment from within the virtual space of representation.

As the state of immersion-as-transportation hinges upon a subjective intensification and qualitative transformation of the state of 'being-absorbed-in,' I here draw on my own direct experiences as a musician and listener to illustrate. The strongest example that comes to mind is from my time as an orchestral musician in my teenage years. It was during a performance of Ottorino Respighi's neoclassical *Pini di Roma*, where the long build-up of the final movement results in such a powerful clamor that, as a contrabass player placed next to the brass instruments, I remember experiencing an overwhelming affective response that simultaneously made me distinctly aware of the passing of the present

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[83] Ibid, p. 168.

[84] Ibid, p. 161.

[85] Elsewhere, Fischer-Lichte is careful to note that her concept of presence differs from Brecht's alienation effects, as with Brecht the actor supposedly represents two figures: "eine Figur, der ein bestimmter Namen zugeordnet ist…und die Darstellerin, die aus der Rolle heraustritt und das verhalten der Figur kommentiert…" In this way, Fischer-Lichte proposes a more complete breaking of the virtual space of plot and character than Brecht envisioned. Ibid, p. 150.

moment, nearly impeding my ability to continue playing. Yes, perhaps a 17-year-old is particularly apt to such responses, and the proximity to very powerful acoustic sources does much to favor such a response. Nevertheless, here the regular absorption experienced by a musician engrossed in close listening and watching to anticipate their next gesture that would encapsulate them in a world of musical experience transformed. Instead of being 'lost' in the particularities of a performance, I instead became so aware of the exact moment of performance and my affective response that the residue of the moment stays with me to this day. In descriptive language we could call this being 'riveted:' the bodily reactions called forth by the virtual space of music – crucially, perceived from the 'inside;' from being involved in the musical performance – became so strong that it bolted my sense of time and space, of self and surrounding, to that very sensory flow which I seemed to directly inhabit – the present.

C. Superposition of Actual and Virtual Spaces

Schütz goes further to conclude that with any experience of immersion, both absorption and transportation come into play, writing that "die Spezifik der Immersionserfahrung scheint sich hierbei über das Zusammenspiel von ‚immersion as absorption' und ‚immersion as transportation' einzustellen. Insofern sie nicht nur impliziert, dass das Mediatisierende…zugunsten des Mediatisierten…zurücktritt und temporär in Vergessenheit gerät, sondern auch, dass die vorgestellte Welt des Als-ob im Modus einer „Quasi-Erfahrung" rezipiert wird."[86] Firstly, I would note that there is something here that is present in traditional art, where the 'mediating' disappears on account of the 'mediated,' sublimating material to an illusory representation. This is also the model of Summer's virtual space of an image on a surface, where, for example, a Rembrandt painting transforms "the

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[86] Schütz, *Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater*, p. 22.

qualities of the simple materials he used into qualities of the prospect he has shown us."[87] Yet beyond the postulation of a virtuality that one is not only drawn into but 'hides' the material with which it is constructed, what exactly is this ‚Quasi-Erfahrung' to which Schütz refers?

Schütz notes elsewhere that the virtual space is also a potential that "bildet gerade nicht…das Gegenstück zum Wirklichen, sondern zum Aktualisierten."[88] For this reason, she refers to literary theory that names this dimension as a "non-actual possible world."[89] With such a framing, when Schütz qualifies the transportative experience as one that "hebt auf die Erfahrung eines Weltenwechsels ab, auf die temporäre Abwendung von der eigenen Lebenswelt zugunsten einer ästhetisch konfigurierten possible world,"[90] we can glean the following: that the emergent quality of immersion is that of an oscillation between a sense of encapsulation in a fictional net of symbolic relations and an intensive experience of here and now in the face of this fiction. However, due to the previously discussed impossibility of total actualization or total virtualization, of completely giving ourselves up to the unrealized fiction of a 'possible world' and leaving the actual one behind, there arises another paradox.

Schütz's solution is to assert that with these processes of immersion, "Gemeinsam ist ihnen die Privilegierung eines möglichst unmittelbaren, intensiven Erlebens, das auf Distanzminimierung und eine temporäre Verschmelzung von Fiktion und Realität setzt. Gegenstand des Erlebens ist dabei ein bestimmtes Selbst-/Weltverhältnis."[91] It would seem that the 'Quasi-Erfahrung' [English: quasi-experience] of immersion to which Schütz refers is a sort of loop: one is affectively pulled 'into' the virtual space of the aesthetic object to the degree that the potentiality seems to replace actuality exactly at the point where one

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[87] Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western modernism*, p. 51.
[88] Schütz, *Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater*, p.292.
[89] Ibid, p. 21.
[90] Ibid, p. 26.
[91] Ibid, p. 10.

experiences the intensive immediacy of presence, strangely enough calling the affective bodily response into the foreground. Embedded in the experience of a virtual, possible world, this experience of presence would in turn also create a sense of proximity to whatever virtuality is presented, producing a 'Verschmelzung' [fusing] between fiction and nonfiction.

Yet again, as Deleuze asserts, since "the virtual is never independent of the singularities which cut it up…" and indeed that virtual and actual, 'possible' and 'real,' possess a "mutual inextricability,"[92] we can only conclude that this fusion, like Bloch's midcentury formulation of a utopian horizon, is necessarily unreachable. One must also again here consider the similarity to Benjamin's notion of the aura as "a distance, however close it may be,"[93] where surface appearance of sensual objects as they are presented to us, regardless of how much we focus on them, reveal themselves to be always ephemerel, hinting at something but never fully materializing. At the risk of spilling over into metaphysical discussions out of the scope of this paper, I would only note that the common characteristic to formulations of appearance or potential is their propensity to withdraw at precisely the point at which they seem reachable. Thus, the final segment of Schütz's loop of the 'quasi-experience' of immersion would such that at the moment of intensification where the distance between actual and virtual spaces seems the smallest would be exactly the point where any perceived proximity implodes, in its subjective magnitude leaving instead perhaps the most tangible object of subjective perception: the relation between self and world.

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[92] Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, p. 149.
[93] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 5.

D. Immersion as Complimentary Strategy to Distance

Later on, in describing her experience attending the immersive theater work *Söhne & Söhne* [2015] from the group SIGNA, Schütz gives a concrete example of how not only the relationship between self and world can be activated, but also how the 'loop' I proposed of immersive experience can tip over into something destabilizing. The works of SIGNA, often site-specific and lasting for several days where the public can freely move around the performance area[s] or even live together with the actors, exploring for themselves the plot embedded in a fictional world, can also be quite intense – perhaps a necessity for the immersive mechanic to fully unfold. In *Söhne & Söhne*, audience members are put into the roles of new hires of a mysterious cultlike organization in an industrial area in Hamburg, and through emotionally charged group negotiations are enticed to take part in various jobs demanded by the company.[94] At the end of the piece (after several days), an intensive ritual takes place. It is during this final ceremony that Schütz became overwhelmed and refused to participate. She was thus made to leave the performance early.

Schütz writes of her experience:

"Dass ich mich in situ in einer theatralen Situation verschließe, weil sie mir sektenähnlich vorkommt, möchte ich allerdings gerade nicht als Form kritischer Distanznahme, sondern vielmehr als Moment wirkungsästhetischer Vereinnahmung beschreiben, insofern in meinem körperlichen Abwehr und Distanznahme just meine temporäre emotionale Distanzlosigkeit (zur Weltversion der Sekte) zum Ausdruck kam. Und weil solche sozial-relational erzeugten, körperlichen Ausrichtungen sich in situ ereignen und gegenseitig vor- und

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[94] For a lengthier description of the work, see:
https://www.welt.de/print/welt_kompakt/hamburg/article148596391/Kafkaeske-Kunstfirma.html

miteinander gespürt und beobachtet werden, können sie eine Distanznahme zweiter Ordnung im Sinner einer Selbstreflexion der ausagierten Beziehungsweise zur Folge haben...Aus der erlebten Vereinnahmung resultiert dann eine produktive Selbst-Distanzierung."[95]

Coarsely stated: the fiction came too close for comfort. Furthermore, due to the involved and interactive nature of such performances, where the weight placed on freedom of interaction conversely forces the reaction of the involved spectator to the foreground, Schütz's refusal and need for distance becomes itself material for the aesthetic experience. Here is another key point to the concept of immersion: the multisensory interactive involvement of the audience completes the mechanic which would transform the interplay of absorption and transportation from aesthetic engulfment and intensive fictionalization into tools to reflect on the nature of the relationship between actual and virtual, reality and fiction, self and world – in this case on the nature of the need for what Schütz calls 'self-distance' in face of 'emotional distancelessness.'

I assert that this can be construed as a form of negative immersion, and as such can serve as a complimentary strategy to the critical distance observed in the disruptive strategies of the 20th century avant-garde. Crucially for Schütz is that this type of immersion, where the paradoxical loop of being pulled strongly into a fiction that rivets one to the present moment in the face of that fiction, cannot function without a highly affective, emotional investment on the part of the spectator that would make such a negative reaction, such as removing oneself from the scene, necessary. This stands in stark contrast to the critical distance of Brecht, who would like to rather break the subjective involvement of identification, or the 'othering' of Adorno, who looks towards an outside position to maintain aesthetic difference in the face of increasing commodification. I would suggest rather that

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[95] Schütz, *Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater*, p. 91.

this kind of 'critical immersion' that has a disruptive effect on the self-world orientation of the observer reflects Jameson's postulation of the 'disposition of the subject' and an overfull and directionless postmodern space.

However, would then immersive art simply be an affirmation of the postmodern condition? Although Schütz does not touch on issues of critical distance despite their long tradition in modernist theater, she does admit the criticism that in some cases, immersive performances can function as "neoliberal experience machines"[96] when providing merely a heightened form of entertainment that doesn't reach the extremes of subjective destabilization. Yet more interestingly, Schütz reflects that with immersion, a "symptomatische Ambivalenz eingschrieben ist…Sie besteht darin, dass Immersion zum einen als eine positive, bereichernde Erfahrung konstelliert wird, die zum anderen aufgrund des potentiell (und temporär) eintretenden Gefühls eines schwindenden Distanzierungsvermögens zugleich auch negativ konnotiert ist und damit zum Topos von Immersion als Form der Manipulation beiträgt."[97] In this reading, the claim that the perceptive loop of immersion that rivets one's sense of self to an aestheticized 'possible world,' when reaching a certain threshold of affective intensity takes on a sinister character, calling to mind more recent phenomena like data surveillance feeding online news algorithms or exploitative 'fake news' political rhetoric.

Schütz continues to relate this ambivalence of the inscribed potential for manipulation in light of the qualitatively intensified melding of virtual and actual spaces of immersive theater to "einer Gegenwart fortschreitender Globalisierung, Neoliberalisierung und Digitalisierung…die ein unglaubliches Spektrum an Handlungs- und Entscheidungsmöglichkeiten für die Gestaltung des eigenen beruflichen und privaten Lebens anbietet. Potenziert durch die hohe Dichte täglicher Informationsströme…welches

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96 Ibid, p. 12.
97 Ibid, p. 26.

unzählige Weisen des Orientierens anbietet…kann diese Freiheit…auch in einen Zwang kippen, so dass Desorientierung, Überforderung und Vereinzelung die Folge sind."[98] Here we find traces of Jameson's "disorientation of the saturated space"[99] of postmodernism mirrored in Schütz's analysis of the concept of immersion. When the audience is free to make their own decisions as active agents in a scene, uncertainty can arise – what to do when sitting, watching, and listening is not prescribed? – especially when that uncertainty is followed by a sort of 'saturation' of the aesthetic experience to encompass a multisensory field on multiple levels of mediality: characters, environment, situation, and perhaps most importantly, affective bodily response. A common reaction, as evidenced by Schütz's self-analysis, would be to feel disoriented and overwhelmed, feeding the need for separation. Rather than a celebration of disorientation, the ambivalent or negative application of immersion, in its seriousness and intensity, would constitute instead something like a tragedy of disorientation.

E.   Immersion as Schizophrenic Virtual Space

Most notable in the above description of the relation of immersive techniques to neoliberalism, globalism, and digitalization, however, is Schütz's recourse to the proliferation of ‚Informationsströme' [flows of information]. Whereas for Bourriaud, the appearance of streamlined communication channels (I risk overquoting his postulation of 'communication superhighways') necessitates art that reformulates hardened social relations and thereby expands aesthetic perception to encompass the social situation of art, the mention of a density of information flow for Schütz is used to explain the ambivalence of immersion and thus justify the riveting oscillation of absorption and transportation that

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[98] Ibid, p. 286.
[99] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 413.

would seem to reach 'into' the subject to, when accumulating a critical intensity, destabilize their sense of self through 'too much' closeness.

The purpose of the occasional interlocution in this text of media theorist Friedrich Kittler will now perhaps become clear: his media-deterministic approach to analyzing music, literature, film and their accompanying historical and discursive processes of development continually shows how the channels of communication in technical media in an objective sense prefigure and mold our thinking. In his essay "Flechsig, Schreber, Freud: Ein Nachrichtennetzwerk der Jahrhundertwende," Kittler turns a critical eye to the diagnosis of the psychotic delusions of the German state senate president Daniel Paul Schreber made by his then-psychiatrist and brain researcher Paul Flechsig and the later psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud. Besides exposing the mutual interdependency of the politics of science and the mentally ill as it related to shifts in state power in late 19th century Saxony, a remarkable aspect of Kittler's essay is the implications for the contingency of subjective, psychological conditions on language and technology.

Kittler writes that in Schreber's book *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, an exhaustive description and justification of Schreber's condition written over the course of his psychological treatment, Schreber's "delirante Nervensprache die Nervenforschersprache seines Artzes ist."[100] Indeed, as Kittler relates, Schreber's doctor Paul Flechsig, one of the first to study the anatomy of the brain, likened "Gehirnbahnen" [ridges of the brain] to the German "Eisenbahnnetz" [railway network].[101] According to Kittler, this kind of language was part of a larger political and epistemological shift "unter historischen Bedingungen," i.e. under orders of King Albert of Saxony to reform university sciences, which would "die Sprache und Geist auf Epiphänomene eines neuro-elektrischen Datenfluss reduzieren."[102] Kittler also evidences Schreber's writings that reflect this change to "hirnphysiologischen

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[100] Kittler, "Flechsig, Schreber, Freud: Ein Nachrichtennetzwerk der Jahrhundertwende," p. 80.
[101] Ibid, p. 10.
[102] Ibid.

Materialismus"[103] (ibid) from a more religious or metaphysical worldview: the patient describes his own condition not in the romantic language of an idealist spirit – the 'Geist' – but rather "das Vorhandensein einer Geisteskrankheit im Sinne einer Nervenkrankheit."[104]

Indeed, Schreber's delusion goes further to state explicity that "Gott ist vornherein nur Nerv, nicht Körper."[105] Kittler capitalizes on this delusion of a scientific-physiologic god that would use its nerve powers, or "Strahlen" [rays] to send "Ausdrücke, auf die ich nie von selbst gekommen sein würde, die ich nie von Menschen gehört habe"[106] to outline the hidden power structure between king, state sanctioned science, and mentally ill. The curious turn of meaning is Kittler's addition to the story: his tracing of this history is set in the technical terms of information flows, describing the 'Nachrichtennetz' [communication network] between the involved parties as one that constitutes a "Stand der Datenverarbeitung"[107] [state of data processing] or "Datenfluss"[108] [data-flows], and bringing to bear Freud's description of "die Seele als Schaltwerk"[109] [the soul as logic board] on the "Nervenbahnen, die...Schreber's Gehirn verschalten"[110] [nerve networks which operate Schreber's brain].

Kittler's conclusion is, among other things, faced with Schreber's self-description, where 'rays' sent into his brain by a nerve-god to put words there that are not his own and are barely understandable to him, that "Ein Gott in Besitz solcher Kabel kann schon verrückt machen,"[111] and finally that "Der Wahnsinn ist also technologisch und Gott...ein Gott von

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[103] Ibid.

[104] Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, p. 394.

[105] For lack of a paper copy of Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten*, I cite here a digital version archived on the 'Projekt Gutenberg-DE' website. Elsewhere, I add page numbers that appear in the citations in Kittler's essay. Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, Chapter 4: https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schreber/nervenkr/chap004.html.

[106] Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, p. 76.

[107] Kittler, "Flechsig, Schreber, Freud: Ein Nachrichtennetzwerk der Jahrhundertwende," p. 75.

[108] Ibid, p. 69.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid, p. 79.

Nachrichtenkanälen,"[112] citing Schreber's prescient remark that "eine ähnliche Erscheinung wie beim Telephonieren"[113] exists. As vexing as Kittler's prose can be in its frequent refusal to make explicit assertions, I argue that in this juxtaposition between Schreber's psychotic hallucinations and the structure of media technology, expressed in the image of a telephone-cable-holding god that beams thoughts into the heads of the unwilling, we find a crucial tool to understand the discussion of immersion as it pertains to the postmodern condition.

In this light, we can add to Schütz's characterization of the advanced digitalization of the global moment as one filled with a high density of information streams that would underwrite the looming propensity for disorientation, that, besides being coupled to a notion of distanceless postmodern space of expanded capital in its overwhelmingly open and therefore coordinateless possibilities of action, in the present, our "Verfolgergott"[114] [persecutor-god] uses 5G. Rather than resembling railway networks and telephone cables, the 'rays' that are beamed into our heads in the form of disembodied words, images, and sounds are actual rays of radio, light, or cellular data signals. I would follow Kittler's suggestive montage to argue that the media technology of computers and smartphones, WIFI and data clouds similarly reach inside the subject and 'place' things there that are not our own, a sort of naturalized psychosis whereby audiovisual hallucinations are an everyday occurrence.

Thus, immersive effects, by creating such an intensive bodily affect and identification, in the face of a melding of 'reality' and fiction that destabilizes the subject's self-world relation, contrary to traditional virtual spaces of art which we 'look into' or are 'absorbed into,' rather 'reach inside' of us. The subject here is unable to remain as a distant observer

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[112] Ibid, p. 80.

[113] Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, p. 322.

[114] Kittler, "Flechsig, Schreber, Freud: Ein Nachrichtennetzwerk der Jahrhundertwende," p. 77.

and as such, instead of coolly apprehending aesthetic objects through critical distance or – as in premodern art – socially preformed affective conventions, becomes subservient to a hallucination in uncomfortable proximity. Reading backwards, one could say that immersion makes explicit the model of frenzied ray-transfer Kittler proposes as a media-unspecific model of communication by latent power structures from something that was indeed present in all art. In this way, we can find a certain amount of manipulation at the bottom of any aesthetic perception that would beam foreign images into our head, only understandable through someone else's language. Again, this delusion-inducing side to aesthetic perception seems to unfold more fully with the model of immersion Schütz proposes, mirroring a human potential that unfurls itself as a result of expanded technical means.

This condition also bears a striking similarity to what Jameson identifies as the "aesthetic model" of schizophrenia[115] that is predicated on the "loss of the historical referent"[116] which prevents the subject from organizing "its past and future into coherent experience"[117] so that "it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments.'"[118] For lack of any outside nature, inner unconscious, or even teleological finality to appeal to, the saturated and thus spatially flattened postmodern coordinates produce the quality of an "eternal present," which Jameson tacks on to the enjoyment of "the ideal schizophrenic."[119] He provides a passage from Marguerite Séchehaye's *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* to illustrate a situation of a "breakdown of temporality," which would

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[115] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 26.
[116] Ibid, p. 25.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid, p. 10.

"release this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it...thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject the undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material...signifier in isolation. The present world of the signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity."[120]

The similarity here to Schütz's language of immersion should be clear, where an overwhelming intensity of representation brings firstly a sense of presence, a powerful experience of the here and now that would seem to at least temporarily wash away a sense of memory and expectation, thus presenting a feeling of present time in isolation, which in its magnitude engulfs the subject with 'undescribable vividness.' Secondly, the mention of a 'loss of reality' can be connected with Schütz's proposed fusion of fiction and nonfiction and indeed a notion of the 'unreality' of the non-actual possible world of the virtual space. Taken together, these would result in the loss of subjective orientation Schütz describes in her need to remove herself from the performance and take distance from her own affective bodily response. Furthermore, the ambiguous condition of anxiety and 'hallucinogenic intensity' Jameson designates is not only the same ambivalence of immersion Schütz describes, but has also a resonance in the unfortunate condition of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose "Schreckwunder" (wonders of terror), hallucinations appearing in shadows and talking insects, generate amazement and fear in equal amounts and as well are attributed to the manipulative rays of the "Verfolgergott" at the other end of the telephone line.[121]

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[120] Ibid, pp. 27-28.
[121] Schreber, *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/schreber/nervenkr/chap021.html (last paragraph).

I mean to suggest that the critical, negative form of immersion that would go beyond simple wonder at being engulfed in a fantasy to take up the ambivalence at its core follows the aesthetic model of schizophrenia – to be very clear, a metaphorical lens for describing subjectivity, not a medical diagnosis – in its affective power to hallucinogenically blend and thus fuse possible and actual worlds by creating moments of endless present time and thereby disorienting the subject's sense of self. This would be a mirror of the media conditions of global capitalism – in its qualitative intensification of absorptive virtuality that would dilute a sense of actuality – of, as Jameson relates, "the derealization of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality."[122] In a state of saturation of not only possibilities of action and communication that would blur a feeling of orientation, but also of saturation of the technically mediating apparatuses that would pull us in a given direction – these possibilities, expressed in images that posit a semblance of virtual space (think here of YouTube advertisements and Instagram influencers) also *pull back on us* in many directions simultaneously – the 1981 remark of Jean Baudrillard becomes eerily relevant, that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary to make us believe that the rest is real..."[123] I would go so far as to speculate that in such a landscape, we reach a state of *negative subjectivity*, where such gravitational forces of virtuality plant so many 'Schreckwunder' in our heads that they de-magnetize our ability to act, in turn necessitating increasingly more heightened illusion in aesthetic objects in order to maintain a stable self-world relationship.

Returning to the aesthetic model I proposed at the end of Chapter 2 as a way of maintaining aesthetic distance, we can now complete the picture. I assert that on the one hand a disjunction of virtual space is necessary to synthesize and carry forward the lessons of avant-garde art of the modernist project, continuing to deny a clear semblance of inner-medial virtual space, yet also in doing so not relying on a misconceived notion of a 'real' or

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[122] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 34.
[123] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 12.

'other' space outside. On the other hand, it is also desirable, in order to avoid a manneristic revival or pastiche of 20th century ideas, to account for these medial, virtual spaces in terms of immersive effects, which taken in their full ambivalence, would provide a qualitatively different form of disruption in its focus on the subject's self-world relationship and thus address the present condition of negative subjectivity.

The deadlock that can best be solved in individual artworks rather than theory is as follows: how can one, for lack of no 'outside' to appeal to, in the face of a 'schizophrenic' subjectivity determined by technical media, in a 'disjunctive' moment that never reaches totalizing unity, nevertheless find one's way back to an autonomous subjective position in art? Just as how I suggested that negating the critical distance to a medial layer of virtuality would result in a negative space made up of only the differential between layers, I would similarly posit a differential of the self-world relation of the subject as possible through a negation of technologically mediated, deterministic subjectivity. Perhaps by presenting elements of immersion – intensive bodily affect, heightened possible worlds, situations of multisensory engulfment, or a sense of 'too close for comfort' – in a disjunctive way, never bound too tightly in a unified semblance, one could approach a liminal space of subjective autonomy.

III.   Conclusion

Let us recap: there are two sides to the paradox of distance and immersion. With aesthetic distance, or critical distance, shifting the focus of aesthetic perception to outer spheres of medial layers, rather than breaking out into some 'real' dimension, instead expands the aesthetic experience first to an outer-medial virtuality of 'raw,' unfigured material and eventually to a non-material concept or relational situation. On the other hand, with the immersive mechanic, a threshold of intensity can cause a disorientation of the subject's perception in the present moment of medial-virtuality that, rather than breaking the fiction or refusing identification, causes them to identify *too strongly*, necessitating a self-distancing cooldown that would call into focus their own relation to the virtual space of the aesthetic object and thereby their own environment outside of art. This may even be construed as, through its forcefulness of affectation, deeply involving the inner virtual space of the subject's own sense of self.

One could then reformulate the relation between distance and immersion as a difference between *extensive* and *intensive* methods of moving between medial layers of the virtual space of art. The extension of distancing effects expands or contract the scope of aesthetic perception between concentric spheres of outer- and inner- virtual layers by disrupting medial conventions, while immersion intensively qualifies this scope with a heightened bodily affective response that would distort the relation of actual and virtual spatial layers and a corresponding subjective self-definition, regardless in which medial sphere it works. Both distance and immersion can also have a negativistic effect: the former by destabilizing the relation of aestheticized-material to nonaestheticized-world, and the second destabilizing the relation of the affective-subject to the affecting-virtual space. Finally, we must qualify the paradoxical relation between actual and virtual, where the virtual is never totally present yet always feeding into the actual, and the actual is never

acting alone and always implying a virtual, with a corresponding artistic method that would still disrupt on the one hand the overused and misconceived strategies of the avant-garde and on the other hand avoid directly confirming a destabilized postmodern subject. I propose here a disjunctive approach that would disjoint both the layers of inner- and outer-virtuality as well as the constitutive elements of immersion, avoiding the totalizing semblance of unity that would betray the necessity of 'thinking in contradictions.'

At this point, the reader may shrug their shoulders and think: but what does this practically mean for music? Despite my belief that such things are better directly experienced in artworks rather than seen on paper, I will nevertheless briefly sketch some implications for musical composition that I see arising from the previous theoretical discussion.

I admit that much of the theory I have outlined has been extracted and adapted from the visual arts and theater. Due to sound's relative resistance to representing concrete objects or characters directly like in the visual arts or theater, one might wonder what exactly it would mean to break or overextend identification within distancing or immersive effects. I would again call to mind the example of Schönberg's 'emancipation of the dissonances,' which collapsed the orientation of the melodic/harmonic plane of tonal music, thus disrupting its inner-medial virtual space, and by extension communication with the listener. A more recent example of the kind of disjunct layer-jumping I propose can be perhaps evidenced in Jennifer Walshe's *EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT* [2016] where a non-coherent network is formed between video, images, energetic performativity, speech, singing, and instrumental tones.

The case of a sort of disjunct critical immersion is, however, from my perspective, more complicated and less emergent, probably in no small part due to New Music's historical and self-reflexive propensity to negate its own tradition of melodic-harmonic relations which would seem to provide the most established way of overdriving absorption

into transportative immersion in their common affectivity. Yet at least in the affirmative sense, immersive tendencies can be seen in the recent trend of what I would call 'sound-texture' New Music, exemplified by such composers as Clara Iannotta, Mâlin Bang, or Timothy McCormack. The premise of this music seems to be that by using concrete and noisy instrumental and object sounds – unlike the approach of Helmut Lachenmann, who did much to introduce such noises into the canon – in expressive and affective 'landscapes' of density (a pertinent example would be Iannotta's string quartet *Dead Wasps in the Jam-Jar (iii)*), the rich acoustic detail of the materials and a microscopic focus therein, for lack of a dynamic world of tone-relations, does seem to possess what Schütz calls "die Eigenschaft…eine geschlossene Welt, eine Diagese, zu bilden"[124] which would serve as foundation for the immersive experience. Support for this claim can be seen in the popular act of closing one's eyes when listening to such music.

What would be missing here that would drive absorption into something more destabilizing – beyond the closed-off, dynamic inner-medial world of sound-forms breathed life by expressive intention – would be firstly a qualitative excess of bodily affect; although many works of the aforementioned composers sonically powerful, never do they come 'too close for comfort' and exceed any kind of threshold of bearable sound. For this sort of effect, I would refer instead to a work like Thomas Ankersmit's *Otolith*, an electronic work which deals with psychological and acoustic phenomenon to create incredibly strong and even uncomfortable effects in its listener. I would even go so far as to speculate that in light of the inhuman power of electronic media, purely instrumental music can seem flimsy in comparison as tools that reached their maturity in an age where inner-medial figuration was the primary means of musical expression.

Secondly, and perhaps more difficult to achieve in an art based on sitting and listening, is the multisensory and intersubjective exchange present in all the works Schütz

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[124] Schütz, *Theater der Vereinnahmung: Publikumsinvolvierung im immersiven Theater*, p. 33.

discusses that contribute to her need for reevaluation of her self-world relation on account of the "sozial-relationalen erzeugten, körperlichen Ausrichtungen" that take place in a performance of immersive theater which are "gegenseitig *vor- und miteinander* gespürt und beobachtet…"[125] Again, what comes naturally in theater or art installations is less directly accessible in music. Despite some notable examples in this area, for example the piece *performance tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed* [2022] by James Saunders, emblematic of his rules-based scenarios of group dynamics in music, I would argue that a relational model that still approaches the affective intensity that critical immersion needs is better addressed when one mobilizes physical contact between audience and performer or audience and sound source.

Such a method would not only fulfill the social-relational conditions of multisensory engulfment and the situation of 'watching and being watched,' but also allow for avenues of acoustic intensity that could then push absorption into transportation and further into its negational form, as sound coming from immediately near is bound to be more affective – let alone if one also *feels* the sound. What is revealed here would constitute a sort of extreme spatial dimension of music, whereby sound sources are not merely scattered through a room or simulated in musical representations or mechanical reproductions, but also inhabit – to a more significant degree than the usual case of soundwaves entering our eardrums – the personal space of the audience.

An added byproduct would be that, taken as a formal principle, this kind of extreme proximity, mixed with the disjunctive and schizophrenic negational approaches to distance and immersion previously formulated, would demand its own special treatment of musical material; at close distance, we perceive sounds differently. One could think of this as a formalization of the concept of amplification: sounds normally quiet when heard from across the room suddenly become full of detail and larger than life. The natural acoustic

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[125] Ibid, p. 91.

dampening of high frequencies is lessened, and the long waveforms of low frequencies can become physically uncomfortable. One could also make reference to ASMR and foley as other relevant examples of how the aural magnifying glass of the microphone can enable novel sound production techniques.

Here the theoretical formulation of aesthetic concepts as they relate to the current and past practices in art as well as past and current states of social productive forces leads happily back to musical material and compositional principles. Exhaustively categorizing what those might be in such a text would not only dilute the urgency of artistic creation, which is tasked with working out such problems first and foremost directly in material, but also deny the limitation of method stated at the beginning: the framework I present in clear language is unable to ascend to full scientific objectivity due to its being inextricably bound with my own creative process as an artist. I am too close to my own works to be able to shed light on them as they emerge, and in emerging the works are too diffuse to properly be captured by scientific language. To this end, the best I can hope for is to 'miss the mark.' To put it rather bluntly: why create if all is theorized? It would be a benefit to misconceive in theory what later appears in the work and in working forget what is explicitly theorized to such a curious degree as to necessitate future creative cycles, if only to correct my aim at an always receding horizon.

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