

Self-Reflection in Being-Other in Agostino Di Scipio's *Audible Ecosystems*

Luc Döbereiner

Paper presented at the symposium *Music and ecologies of sound. Theoretical and practical projects for a listening of the world*, University Paris 8, May 2013

This paper concentrates on the idea of an emergent audible self in Agostino Di Scipio's series of works titled *Audible Ecosystems*, developed between 2004 and 2005, with a specific emphasis on the work *Background Noise Study*. Di Scipio's way of working and speaking about his work renders obvious the futility of certain musicological approaches of explanation or interpretation. It requires no outside theoretical bedding or justification, no reconstruction of intent or meaning, or worse, "appreciation". Di Scipio and his work can speak for themselves.

What I will hence attempt to do is to work out what I see as a key idea in the complex conceptual-aesthetic web constituted by the *Audible Ecosystems*. In doing so, I will examine the work in the light of theories and concepts that the composer does not necessarily refer to himself. I am not trying to reconstruct the composer's intentions, but to formulate an idea of sonorous subjectivity in connection with compositional spatiality on the basis of the series of works in question.

Di Scipio provides us with a rich web of theories resonating with his work, ranging from the critical theory of the Frankfurt school to biological systems theory and his work lends itself to a great variety of readings, Makis Solomos, e.g. has recently proposed a Deleuzian reading. In my very brief and sketchy reading, I will draw among others on Georg

Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's quite underappreciated theory of sound. In contemporary discourse on sound art, there is perhaps no theorist whose rejection appears to require less argumentation than Hegel's. Various divergent theories share Hegel as their common enemy who is assumed to be hopelessly out of date. I will not enter the futile attempt to defend or refute anything, for which I have neither time nor preparation. I will rather attempt to practice some concrete theory, for broad rejections or appreciations are, as Adorno wrote in his *Three Studies on Hegel*, "subject to the judgment passed in Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on those who are above something only because they are not in it."

In the work *Background Noise Study*, the third part of the *Audible Ecosystems* series, sounds that are usually excluded from conscious listening, such as background and ambient noise are used as sound sources in a transformation system structured around a feedback loop. Roughly described, the system consists of two microphones distributed in a room recording background noises which are being strongly amplified, transformed, and played back approx. 20 seconds delayed over loudspeakers facing the walls. On the one hand this loudspeaker setup emphasizes that the produced sound is not to be perceived as a pure sound object in itself, but as mediated by the loudspeakers, and on the other hand the fed back sounds again become placeless background noises playing the room.

Not unlike Alvin Lucier's seminal work *I am Sitting in a Room*, the room's filter characteristics are thus repeatedly applied and emphasized. There are, however, a number of essential differences to Lucier's influential work, whose outlining serves to pinpoint some of the work's most distinctive ideas. Firstly, the space in and through which the sound emerges is the same as the space in which the listeners are moving, thus becoming part of the ecosystemic dynamics as sound sources and absorbers. Secondly, the space is not excited by playing back a pre-produced sound, but in *Background Noise Study* the fed back amplifications of ambient noises create sound out of nothing as it were. Thirdly, apart from the pure feedback, there is a series of cascaded sound transformations and conditions of transformation forming an adaptive and self-regulating system which gives rise to higher-order musical relations. Fourthly, control signals are derived from the input signals, which are in turn used for their transformation. Sound is thus material and gestural control of its own transformation, thereby abolishing the difference between control and sound material. However, the key category for us is here space and it is via the role of space that we will approach the question of the emergent audible self, or sonorous subjectivity. How can the role of space in the *Audible Ecosystems* be grasped?

What function does it have in the system?

In their famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer encapsulated the idea of a spatial reification, the dead rigidification of life in one sentence: “Space is absolute alienation.” For Adorno, music has “time as its problem,” but it is not just given to music as a “time art” (*Zeitkunst*). Music rather has to “contend with time itself” (*mit der Zeit selbst fertig werden*, “to have done with time itself”). This having-done-with-time already contains the ideal of music’s spatialization, which for Adorno, is to a certain extent also a main danger of objectification in music. While painting, according to Adorno, has dynamization and negation of space as its ideal, music strives for a negation of time. We might be reminded of a phrase from Wagner’s *Parsifal*: “Here, time becomes space” (*Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit*). The spatially conceived nomenclature of musical form names precisely this articulation of time, like the spatial simultaneity of notation forms the condition for exact temporal organization. Bad spatial rigidification rather impends where the arts attempt to approach each other emulatingly with the undialectical idea of a continuum of the arts, instead of following their own immanent principle. For Adorno, space is thus both music’s ideal in that it strives for spatially conceived form in its temporal organization and forms the danger of abstract simultaneity, i.e. of objectification,

In Di Scipio’s *Audible Ecosystems*, sound, having everything to do with space, is not spatialized, it is not moved in space, since it is never conceived of as an object and space is never conceived of as an empty form or container. Space is not a virtual space of representation, but the “real, material, and historical space” of the performance and sound is not abstractly represented. Sound is not a substantial material, but a material event, disappearing and resounding. It is material not because of its quasi-tangible corporeality, but precisely because of its elusivenesses, because as a trace it has the status of a present absence or absent presence.

We should state very clearly that sound is always event and never object. It is energetic, ephemeral and informational: it is nothing that can exist “in itself” or “as such”; it is the traces left by physical mediations and interactions.

Space is a condition of sound and inscribes itself into it. Sound carries the traces of space, and is nothing but traces left in space. As a time series the digital sound signal contains properties of the space. Instead of a spatialization of sound one can thus rather speak of a temporalization of space in sound, turning the phrase from Wagner’s *Parsifal* around, “Here, space becomes time”. Here, one finds a dialectic already expressed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature*, the second part of his 1817 *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical*

Sciences. Hegel understands sound as performing, “the transition of material spatiality into material temporality”. The systematic position of music of music in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* is illuminating, music comes after painting. The previous transition from sculpture to painting is already the reduction from three-dimensionality to the surface. This process of deobjectification instigated by painting is now carried forward by music. The step towards music is an *Aufhebung* (sublation, cancellation) of objective spatiality. In its “free unstable soaring” (*haltungsloses freies Verschweben*, vibrating disappearance), music withdraws into subjective interiority. It is an art that, “takes the subjective as such for both form and content, because as art it communicates the inner life [*das Innere*] and yet even in its objectivity remains subjective.” Remarkably, Hegel thinks this *Aufhebung* primarily from the point of view of music’s materiality, i.e. based on physical sound:

The cancellation of space [*Aufhebung des Räumlichen*] therefore consists here only in the fact that a specific sensuous material sacrifices its peaceful separatedness, turns to movement, yet so vibrates in itself that every part of the cohering body not only changes its place but also struggles to replace itself in its former position. The result of this oscillating vibration is sound, the material of music.

The cancellation [*Aufhebung*] of spatial objectivity has to be read in all its ambiguity. Spatiality is not merely abolished, but also preserved in sound, space endures within sound. The sonorous vibration, the oscillation, constitutes a double negation. As a first negation, a body or parts of a body, whose place is its “indifferent and specific subsistence“ [*bestimmtes Bestehen*], is displaced or deflected. This negation is once more negated by the body’s striving to restore its original position. The double negation is consequently, “the inner vibration [*Erzittern*] of the body within itself, i.e. sound.” Hegel terms this vibration also an ideality or subjectivity, which, while being a negation of the specific properties of a body, in their change or displacement of density, position etc., still preserves these properties. Hegel terms this ideality timbre. Sound escapes from the body which it produced, but it keeps its properties. In *Background Noise Study*, this element is essential for the recorded sounds and their further transformation. Space is preserved in the audio signals. Di Scipio writes: “all sound the microphone captures in the room, represents not only an audio signal but a source of information concerning the room environment.” The space has inscribed itself into the sound, it is *aufgehoben* in it.

Hegel describes the “manifestation/emergence [*Erscheinung*] of sound” as subjectivity becoming free [*freiwerdende Subjektivität*]. Even if Hegel, in contrast to Di Scipio, speaks

of a subjectivity tied to the idea of a deep inwardness, both share the idea of an audible self, which is constituted through the self-reflection in an other. This other, through which the audible self is formed, is space in Di Scipio's *Audible Ecosystems*, without which there cannot be any sound, in and through which sound resounds, from which sound makes itself stand out, and through which sound encounters itself. In his book *Listening [À l'écoute]*, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy develops the idea of the emergence of a self as a non-substantial self-referral, a resonance or resounding that connects sound to subjectivity.

A *self* is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a *self* is made of a relationship *to* self, or of a presence *to* self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible entity. . . —this referral itself would have to be infinite, and the point of occurrence of a *subject* in the substantial sense would have never taken place except in the referral, thus in spacing and resonance, at the very most as the dimensionless point of the *re-* of this resonance: the repetition where the sound is amplified and spreads, as well as the turning back where the echo is heard by making itself heard. A subject *feels* [*se sentir*]: that is his characteristic and his definition. This means that he hears (himself), sees (himself), touches (himself), tastes (himself) and so on. . . , and thus always feels himself feeling a “self” that escapes or hides as long as it resounds elsewhere as it does in itself, in a world and in the other.

The sonorous resounding self or the “subjectivity becoming free”, however, is not a proper self, or an individual self, it is not an I. A work like the *Audible Ecosystems* much rather points to the “form or structure of self as such, that is to say to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral, since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral.” The infinity of self-reflexion is most clearly discernible in the role that feedback plays in Di Scipio's work. This, however, does not mean that the process is closed in its self-referentiality. As Di Scipio writes, “sonic identity (form, timbre) is the self-consistent manner by which a system changes upon meeting with what appears as *non-self*.” The similarity to the biological concept of autopoiesis, the self-creative emergence of life is striking. There is no external agent and nor original subjective depth, but a self-constituting self-referral, that simultaneously posits the distinction of inside and outside. Biologist Francisco Varela describes the concept of autopoiesis as follows proving the remark by philosopher Slavoj Žižek that the language of contemporary biology uncannily resembles the language of Hegel:

There's a circular or network process that engenders a paradox: a self-organizing network of biochemical reactions produces molecules, which do something specific and unique: they create a boundary, a membrane, which constrains the network that has produced the constituents of the membrane. This is a logical bootstrap, a loop: a network produces entities that create a boundary, which constrains the network that produces the boundary. This bootstrap is precisely what's unique about cells. A self-distinguishing entity exists when the bootstrap is completed. This entity has produced its own boundary. It doesn't require an external agent to notice it... It is, by itself, a self-distinction.

We can say that art creates subjective paradigms. There are certain subjective figures presented in art, which are not identical to the composer or the composer as subject. It is also not something which is "merely subjective" and therefore a particularity which has only limited validity. The subject, however, remains something to some degree indeterminate, something that cannot be fully reduced to a chain of causes. In the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, for example, there is a divine, cosmic subject. In the music of Beethoven, there is the constitution of an autonomous, self-determining agent who defies god. Today, in philosophy, art, and politics the subject seems to be an impossibility locked between ideological delusion, enjoyment, and individual mystical inwardness. In the face of the global idea of the impossibility of collective subjective self-determination, I see Di Scipio's work is an artistic formalization of the structure of the emergence of subjectivity inherent to the materiality of sound itself. And here I see its political significance.