

Creativity, Antinomy, Aporia: Contradiction, Harmony and Dissonance

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The inspiration for this paper came from a footnote in Steven Shaviro's 2012 monograph *Without Criteria*. Amid a discussion of Whitehead's non-cartesian conception of the self as not categorically distinct from other entities and occasions in the world Shaviro comments on how contradictions are resolved (or not resolved) in Whitehead's universe and how that non-resolution shares some similarities with concepts from Kant's first critique.

This merits more extended commentary than I am able to give it here. Whitehead's resolution of antitheses-- by operating “a shift of meaning,” and by converting oppositions into aesthetic “contrasts”-- has a strong affinity with Kant's decidedly non-Hegelian (or anti-Hegelian in anticipation) treatment of antitheses, or “Antinomies” in the “Trancendental Dialectic” section of the First Critique.¹

There are also interesting resonances between these two non-hegelian² accounts of contradiction and Derrida's account of the concept of aporia that he develops across many of his works. In much the same way that Whitehead's creativity shifts contradiction to an aesthetic register reconceiving it as some attribute of contrasting actual entities, Derrida's aporias operate as condradictory accounts of contradiction: an attribute of a concept (like mourning, forgiveness, etc.) that simultaneously acts as a precondition for its intelligibility and also a reason for their impossibility or inactibility.³

This paper argues that Whitehead, Kant, and Derrida all approach contradiction as an implicit element of actually existing things, words, thoughts, and the like as opposed to fuel for a Hegelian

1 Shaviro, 25

2 Ibid.

3 Derrida, 32

synthetic motor producing new unities across a teleological historical process. Since Whitehead asks us to think of contradiction in an aesthetic register, I would like to explore that further as well. Through an application of these ideas to aesthetics.

In the same section of *Without Criteria*, Shaviro talks about this conception of contradiction within the context of modernist musical composition. It seems rational that the same language and arguments these philosophers use to characterize *Harmonices Mundi* can also be used to speak more specifically of musical harmony.

All this implies a new, modernist sort of “harmony”: one that does not exclude dissonances, but encompasses them within itself as well. In dealing with “antitheses,” or “apparent self-contradictions,” Whitehead's God neither selects among the alternative possibilities in the manner of Leibniz's divinity, nor “sublates” the oppositions into a higher, self-reflexive and self-differentiating unity in the manner of Hegel's absolute.⁴

Since composers are so comfortable conceiving of themselves as little gods of their musical worlds, perhaps it makes sense to compare Leibniz's god to Francesco Scarlatti or J.S. Bach. These are composers who carefully constructed rich contrapuntal unities through careful selection of individual instances of line and harmony. We could compare Hegel's absolute to late Beethoven: abstracting higher layers of self-coherent unity from nested layers of tonal logic, often operating in ways that superficially contradict themselves. Additionally the absolute functions like the *ursatz* in Heinrich Schenker's theoretical project: a elegantly simple self-differentiating unity that spawns incredibly complex and variegated surface behavior in tonal music.

An additional question that arises from this is: what sort of god composer is suggested by this sort of flat ontology of contradictions in the Whitehead-Kant-Derrida nexus this paper operates on? In my practice as a sound artist and composer, what attitudes towards aesthetics and music are suggested

⁴ Shaviro, 24

by these three accounts of contraction that I find compelling?

I. Whitehead's Creativity⁵

Alfred North Whitehead's post-*Principia Mathematica* metaphysical project that emerged from the philosophy lectures he gave upon moving to the US to teach at Harvard⁶ was, for a long time, deeply out of style in American and European humanities departments. It goes without saying the highly analytic and positivistic philosophy departments of the time were also unreceptive. This is, of course, partially due to the fact that for a long time metaphysics was deeply out of fashion in the academy and we are only now seeing an earnest return to speculative thought.

In the majority of the 20th century, Whitehead was popular chiefly among process theologians who produced compelling process-metaphysics oriented within the context Christian and Jewish hermeneutics. The University of Chicago divinity school was for a long time a haven for this type of scholarship with philosophers such as Charles Hartshorne adopting a Whiteheadian approach.⁷

Whitehead is seeing a resurgence primarily through philosophers of science such as Isabelle Stengers, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and others who emphasize the process orientated nature of an occasion of experience, a moment in history, a scientific experiment, and so on are constructed. This is the deeply Whiteheadian argument that you don't exist independently. Instead what exists is the nexus of intra-relations that reconstitutes you in each occasion of experience. Since Whitehead's metaphysical project is still considered esoteric to many western academics, brief and very general introduction is in order.

Alfred North Whitehead is often associated with the concept of *panexperientialism* because at

5 According to A.N. Whitehead on page 21 of *Process and Reality*: "Creativity" is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively. It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity. "Creativity" is the principle of novelty."

6 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whitehead/>

7 Ibid.

the core of this metaphysical project is an assertion that, in terms of possessing a capability for activity, or “vitality” or whatever you want to call it, the difference between a rock and a person is one of scale rather than type. Experience itself, or *throbs of experience* as he likes to call them are the basic building blocks of reality rather than matter in the way it is conventionally conceived.⁸ This is not to say he is non-materialist or rejects the primacy of matter, but rather that he asserts the binary between materialism and idealism is built on faulty assumptions and linguist confusions that have plagued western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle.

Whitehead says that all *actual entities* (his word for “the (intra-acting and interdependent)⁹ real things of which the world is made up are of a *dipolar* constitution. This means that an actual entity has attributes that are simultaneously material and conceptual/of thought.¹⁰ Since God, a rock, you the knower reading this paper, and 1975 World Series are all actual entities they both contain both these poles in their constitution.

Obviously, you possess a much more developed conceptual/mental pole than a rock. It is essential to note what Whitehead is not an animist. He is not claiming that all material objects possess what is called “mental capabilities” in popular language, but rather there is some attribute of actual entities that at certain intensities produces an “inner world”.

Another important concept from Whitehead's system is prehension. Whitehead argues that actual entities have to construct themselves from past actual entities by “reaching out” in a process in a temporally situated process. According to process theologian C. Robert Mesle, a form of prehension readily apparent to us is memory which he illustrates with a colorful example. He says, “We experience a past experience again, but we do it from the current perspective. We feel past feelings. One student of mine illustrated this by relating that, as a kindergartener, she had once wet her pants in class.

⁸ Mesle 92

⁹ This neologism “intra-action” is borrowed from Karen Barad. This describes the entanglement of agencies, or how different agencies become agents only through those entanglements. See *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).

¹⁰ Mesle 100

Sometimes, she reports, she still feels a return rush of embarrassment when she recalls the event.

Feelings carry emotional tone”.¹¹ Prehension can be physical or conceptual. Physical prehension refers to actual entities prehending themselves into being, whereas conceptual prehension refers to “feeling” of a past eternal object. Eternal objects are similar to attributes or forms: for example “redness”.¹²

Also of note is concept in process philosophy of unilateral and relational power.¹³ Unilateral power is the form of power spoken about by Nietzsche, Leibniz, Plato, etc. when they speak of power to make things happen in the world, or to assert a *will*. This sort of power is the power of Deleuze's war machine¹⁴ to bring worlds into concert with its totalizing and stratifying will. Relational power, in relief, is the power to be affected by other actual entities. A deeper capacity for particular forms of physical prehension. Regarding relational power, Mesle says:

Our capacities for pain and pleasure, our physical senses, our appreciation of beauty, our openness to ideas, and our ability to learn and adapt are the powers that distinguish us from electrons and rocks and microbes. In short, the higher we go toward more complex organism, the more the power to be affected emerges.¹⁵

What Whitehead calls concrescence is also important to understanding his concept of contradiction. For Whitehead, concrescence is the process by which an actual entity is made concrete. This is the process for Whitehead by which unity is achieved and by which actual entities become concrete. In this sense there is similarity to the passing of the virtual into the actual in Deleuze, especially since for Deleuze both the actual and virtual are both “real”.

“Concrescence” is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity.... There are not “the concrescence” and “the novel thing”: when we analyse the

11 Mesle 98

12 Mesle 98

13 Loomer <https://www.religion-online.org/article/two-conceptions-of-power/>

14 Deleuze is mentioned a few times in this paper as his thought has a lot of resonances with Whitehead. Deleuze only mentions Whitehead one (positively) in a short chapter from *The Fold* (1992).

15 Mesle 72

novel thing we find nothing but the concrescence. “Actuality” means nothing else than this untimate entry into the concrete.¹⁶

Thus, the passage of the surface contradiction of the virtual into the actual is happening not through a synthetic process of the sublation of a contradiction, but rather through the actual entity wielding its relational power to prehend itself into a state. The network of this process happening constantly and in an intersecting tapestry of experience produces a unified panexperiential world that upon analysis reveals nothing but this coming into unity.

So what is God's position in this process? For Whitehead, God is not a supernatural entity, but a sort of inferred component of his metaphysical system necessary to make it work. God resides in the way that Whitehead conceives of novelty, or as he calls it creativity. If the world was just actual entities prehending themselves from prior actual entities, then there would be no novelty or creativity, just repetition. Whitehead's god is essentially his theory of difference, or how he conceives of the creativity of being. Whitehead characterizes God in *Process and Reality*.

Apart from the intervention of God, there could be nothing new in the world, and no order in the world. The course of creation would be a dead level of ineffectiveness, with all balance and intensity progressively exuded by the **cross currents of incompatibility**” (bold added by CR).¹⁷

God is a “primordial” vector of all possibilities. Here I see similarities with some of Deleuze's thought on undifferentiated forms and spaces such as the plane of immanence and the BwO (this despite the claim in *The Logic of Sense* that “the body without organs is not God, quite the contrary.”)¹⁸ So god is the generator of novelty who resolves contradictions at the level of the actual. God is also an actual entity, and as such is part of this relational nexus that produces the world. According to Mesle,

“God is part of the relational process. Not only does every drop of becoming experience God,

16 Whitehead 211

17 Whitehead 247

18 Deleuze

but God experiences every drop of becoming. Thus God also has a “consequent nature” which is God's infinitely complex experience of every single moment of becoming constituting the actual world-- forever. God is good because God shares the experiences of every creature – every pain, joy, hope, despair, failure, and triumph. God is not an impartial, disinterested observer of the world but the uniquely “omni-partial” and “totally interested” participant in every relationship there is. God knows what it is like to be you and me and “them” and the animals and plants we all eat. In the fullest sense possible, then, God is love: god is perfect relational power.”¹⁹

In contrast to Leibniz's god who acts independently from their creations and wields unilateral power to pick the best of possible worlds according to the infinite wisdom of their judgment,²⁰ creativity or god in Whitehead is a force or an entity that produces novelty through relational power: the infinite power to be affected by all other actual entities.

This differs from a dialectical process where contradictions are synthesized or suspended at some higher order in a couple ways. For now I think it is most important to remark that there is *no higher order*. Actual entities are what everything is.

God is some force or entity in our same reality, and there is no distinct plane of ideals (subordinate to or subordinating material reality). There is no realm of forms of which material reality is a reflection in the Platonic sense nor is the conceptual realm some sort of illusion of the mind in a vulgar materialist sense. Whitehead calls these differently planes bifurcations of nature and he sees them as illegitimate and, once again, the product of linguistic confusions..²¹

19 Mesle 87

20 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz/>

21 Whitehead *The Concept of Nature*

II. Kant's Transcendental Dialectic

Kant's speculative project is, of course, radically different from that of Whitehead. *Critique of Pure Reason* is, after all, an investigation into the shortcoming of totalizing metaphysical projects.²² Antinomies are generally contradictions that emerge when our perceptual apparatus is unable to comprehend the transcendental or noumenal Outside. For Whitehead, there is no transcendental outside since experience itself is the bedrock of reality. Experience is marked by a poverty of capacity to comprehend the world, instead it *is* the world. These throbs of experience are the lego blocks that world is built from, not matter or ideals/forms.

The antinomies that Shaviro speaks of in Kant's first critique occur in the section entitled Transcendental Dialectic:

“The second class of sophistical inference is applied in general to the transcendental concept of absolute totality in a series of conditions for a given appearance, and from that fact that I always have a self-contradictory concept of the unconditioned synthetic unity in the series on one side, I infer the correctness of the opposite unity, even though I have no concept of it. I will call the condition of reason with regard to these dialectical inferences the antinomy of pure reason”.²³

For Kant, sense data passes into understanding which then moves into reason. Kant's skepticism towards dialectics comes from his assertion that reason, because of its structural composition, ultimately drives towards abstraction and towards the Outside. Kant argues that traditional rationalist metaphysics try to make a priori claims about transcendental properties of space and time that are ultimately doomed since they originate in this passage from sense data to reasons.²⁴ And for Kant, we don't really have access to that realm.

The self-contradiction or antinomy is in that reason is always driving towards an

²² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-metaphysics/>

²³ Kant 410

²⁴ Ibid.

“unconditioned synthetic unity”²⁵ (totalizing metaphysical understanding of the world) and infers the correctness of the conditioned unity arrived at through analysis of sense.

So reason emerges, problematically, as the result of this antinomy between conditioned and unconditioned. These contradictions emerging from the poverty of our ability to conceive of nature a priori through reason ultimately are constitutive of reason itself and map the contours of what are, for Kant, the limitations of our experience.

This form of antithesis differs from a Hegelian “dialectical” account in a number of ways. In *Intelligence and Spirit*, Reza Negarastani opts to translate *aufhebung* into English, instead of the more conventional *sublate*, as “suspend”.²⁶ He claims that this translation draws attention to competing positive and negative meanings of the word in German: to preserve or retain something and to cancel or abolish something. He uses introspection as an example:

For example, in the case of the pure introspective I, the I that appears to be immediate is in fact mediated by its relations with others; its immediate positedness (*Gesetzstein*) is the result of (i.e. is mediated by) the movement of positing (*Setzen*). Through *aufhebung*, the positive immediacy of the self-reflexive I is canceled, while the determinate negativity that accounts for the difference between the immediate and its mediation (I and another I) is preserved. In other words, the identity of what appears to be immediate is abolished or taken out of action, whereas the difference between the immediate and its mediation (the opposition) is preserved.

Accordingly Hegel's *aufhebung* has both a temporal and spatial aspect: what appears to be immediate *prima facie* is taken out of action or postponed (the temporal aspect) only to preserve the difference between the immediate and its mediation on an elevated level (the spatial aspect), as in the suspension of Being and Nothing in the more stable Determinate Being. Therefore,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I believe he may have inherited this translational quirk from Ray Brassier.

aufhebung is closely associated with the extended labour of determinate negation, as opposed to the abstract or indeterminate negation that inadvertently ends up perpetuating the purported immediacy of the state of affairs it seeks to abolish.²⁷

So the Hegelian antithesis there is a spacial aspect, or a suspension. On one level, the antithesis is resolved, but on another (spatially) higher level the difference is preserved. The splitting into a positive aspect (affirmation) and a negative aspect (negation) produces a series of stratifications: not unlike a Schenkerian analysis.²⁸ Kant's antinomies, such as the antinomy of pure reason discussed by Shaviro, operates a shift of meaning through inference that (in anticipation) side-steps Hegel's suspension and retains what I previously referred to as a "flat ontology of contradictions".

Another antinomy that Kant writes about that is relevant to this conversation, and particularly to Whitehead's idea of God as the non-resolver of contraction and the fount of possibility and novelty is Kant's antinomy of spontaneity and causal determinism. Kant takes on two antinomous claims of the enlightenment rationality that were contemporaneous to his work.

On one side there is the techno-scientific claim that reality is governed by causality and natural laws that are scientifically observable, and on the other side the claim from liberal enlightenment political thought that the individual is self-determinate agent with a will and an ability to affect the world. Once again, Kant moves the contradiction into an aesthetic realm by claiming that what looks like an resolvable opposition is really just contouring the boundaries of reason's capability to speak to us about the Outside. At a certain point, for Kant, reason steps outside its ability to act as a tool for legitimate inquiry into the constitution of the world and becomes a tool for rhetoric.²⁹ In a way this mirrors Plato's skepticism of the written word.

27 Negarastani 9

28 For more information on Schenkerian analysis a good bibliography can be found here:

<http://www.schenkerguide.com/bibliography.html>. In addition to the autonomous stratification of Hegelian dialectics I see resonances of Goethe's romantic organicism. His concept for the "urpflanze", and the idea of organic wholes being generated through homology or self-similarity. More discussion of this at: <http://hps.elte.hu/~zemplen/goethemorph.html>

29 Kant 628

Both Whitehead and Kant acknowledge that the apparent contradiction between free will and determinism is a product of a limitation of the language and modes of inquiry western philosophy operates with. For Whitehead a causal universe is imbued with the potential for novelty through the relational power of God (which I argue is akin to a Deleuzian immanence) and for Kant both propositions are more or less true and the apparent contradiction is simply a result of the limits of reason.

III. Derrida's Aporia

For Derrida, Aporia is a form of contradiction that is simultaneously an impasse and a condition for a possibility. There is some relationship to rhetorical strategies and to irony, where contradiction is also preserved. I would like to focus on aporia as it relates to Derrida's writings on forgiveness, though the structure of the aporia is similar in other situations where Derrida deploys the concept. In *On Cosmopolitanism*, Derrida writes:

In order to approach now the very concept of forgiveness, logic and common sense agree for once with the paradox: it is necessary, it seems to me, to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that calls for forgiveness? If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls 'venial sin', then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the

impossible.³⁰

Thus in a very poetic turn Derrida postulates that the essential condition for an act to merit forgiveness is that it is unforgivable. Here again the contradiction is shifted to an aesthetic register. Instead of being resolved at some higher level forgiveness's contradictory character remains. Its contradiction is what allows it to be sensible. This points, like in Whitehead's creativity, towards some sort of (perhaps secularized, perhaps not) Other as a generator of this sensibility. As Derrida points out, christian forgiveness is predicated on the forgiveness of the unforgivable. We should act to our others as Jesus acts (beyond the limits of our finitude) towards the whole of humanity when he provides absolution from even the most unabsolvable sins.

So if aporia are not resolved dialectically for Derrida, are these contradictions inherent to forgiveness resolved in some higher register? Or if not, then what does it mean for them to persist in their unresolvability?

Like Whitehead's God who navigates the "cross currents of incompatibility"³¹ to produce the possibility of novelty in the world, the aporia in Derrida is positive: the very contradictory structure of forgiveness makes novel forgiveness possible. Forgiveness is a *creative* act in Whitehead's sense of the word.³² Without this aporia: without forgiveness requiring a negation of its own possibility we would have no ground and no stakes to forgive. Later on in this passage, Derrida invokes Hegel saying that the only crime that is truly unforgivable is a "crime against spirit"³³, or crime against the nature of humanity and its capacity to forgive. So, in other words, the only crime that is truly unforgivable is a crime against forgiveness.

Derrida criticizes what he sees as a common sense or popular narrative that "forgiveness must

30 Derrida 32

31 Whitehead 247

32 Mesle 79

33 Derrida 34

have a meaning”.³⁴ For Derrida, this meaning is related to punishment. For something to be forgivable in a common sense fashion it must be a transgression open to a sort of sensibility where a proportionate punishment could be imagined. This form of forgiveness requires a mediator, a third party to “make sense” of the transgression. Derrida sees real forgiveness as occurring without this mediation: a direct forgiveness of the transgressor by the one that they slighted.

Thus the forms of forgiveness that truly representative of the aporic nature of forgiveness are the forgiveness of transgressions so ghastly that they escape our ability to apply meaning to them. We are incapable of developing any sort of internal conception of the horror of genocide or of the war crimes committed by the United States in their deployment of the atomic bomb.

Here a second level aporia develops. These sorts of crimes, the forgiveness of whom is a forgiveness with serious stakes (the forgiveness of a “venal sin”) are also what Derrida attributes to Hegel as “crimes against spirit”, since they are crimes against humanity, civil society and against the very capacity to forgive itself.

Thus there is no resolution to this aporia, much like there is no resolution to Whitehead's “cross currents of incompatibility”³⁵ nor Kant's antinomy of pure reason.³⁶ The contradictory nature of aporia becomes an “aesthetic contrast”.³⁷ It is a characteristic of forgiveness that marks its limitations and possibilities as a concept. Just because forgiveness is contradictory does not mean it is illegitimate or in some sense false. In fact, its aporic nature imbues it with its conceptual dynamism. Forgiveness is not a stock character that can be pinned down or deployed senselessly without regard for the particularities of an engagement. I am sure we have all had the experience of being told by a parent or a partner or someone else “don't say you are sorry if you don't really mean it”.

It is instead always in renegotiation and subject to the particularities of the transgression that

34 Derrida 36

35 Whitehead 247

36 Kant 410

37 Shaviro 25

demands forgiveness and the wider context under which the transgression occurs. The aporia of forgiveness forces us to approach an instance where forgiveness is a possibility as a novel circumstance considered as a product of that novelty.

IV. Contradiction and Dissonance

As previously noted, Steven Shaviro makes an interesting comparison between the treatment of dissonance in modernist music and the treatment of contradiction in Kant and Whitehead.³⁸ In this sense, a dissonance represents a contradiction, in the sense that it *calls for* some sort of resolution.

Schoenberg famously describes the “emancipation of dissonance”³⁹ from the rhetorical vice grip of an implication that they necessitate resolution by their very structure. Schoenberg claimed that as each harmonic object gains a sense of autonomy it is released from the constrictive rhetoric of tonality. While the need-for-resolution appears naturalized or somehow inscribed onto the sound itself (or the limitations of our Kantian sense-understanding-rationality pipeline) it is actually the product of a specific sound rhetoric that has developed over time.

A good example is the dominant seventh chord. In the Renaissance, before Rameau and the wide scale verticalization of harmony,⁴⁰ composers generally thought of verticalities as epiphenomena of contrapuntal activity. They were however keenly attuned to the vertical dissonances that were produced when musical lines coincided in different ways. Generally before Monteverdi, the dominant 7th chord would thought of as a dissonance that required special preparations (as part of an appoggiatura, a suspension, etc.). Composers of the Renaissance began thinking of the dominant 7th chord as an acceptable verticality in its own right, albeit one that required special conditions for its resolution.

The dominant 7th chord contains a tritone between its 3rd and 7th chord members, and that tritone is, according to the developing grammar of tonality, resolve dinwards by half steps towards the tonic

38 Shaviro 24

39 Schoenberg 258

40 For more information see Rameau's *Treatise on Harmony* from 1779 and related secondary literature from the History of Music Theory discipline.

and the 3rd scale degree. This *call for resolution* is, in a limited sense, related to psycho-acoustic and physical phenomena. Harmonies that are very low on the harmonic series such as the perfect unison, octave, and fifth, sound generally more consonant to us across cultures.⁴¹

Beyond that we enter into the logic of particular musical “languages”⁴². To put this in Kantian terms, dissonance is an antinomy. Like all antinomies it appears as a contradiction, but this appearance actually illuminates more about the boundaries of the particular system or methodology under observation (in this case tonality rather than reason) than it does an actual contradiction that by its nature requires suspension or sublation.

So the call for resolution ultimately ends up, as Shaviro says, “converted to aesthetic contrast”⁴³. This view of dissonances as aesthetic contrasts as opposed to occasions that produce a need for resolution is very much in keeping with this modernist drive towards emancipation of dissonance. Perhaps, in moving towards a more holistic sound aesthetics we could call this instead *the conversion of dissonances into aesthetic contrasts*.

This concept of dissonance as aesthetic contrast is especially apparent in the free atonal⁴⁴ music of Webern and Schoenberg. This music has a deep harmonic logic in the sense that it oriented around the composing out of particular intervallic arrangements. These include trichords and tetrachords that recur at differing pitch levels. However there is very much a sense, especially with Webern, that pitch has been moved to a similar register of aesthetic contrast. This is a space that parameters such as timbre, dynamics, articulation, and the like already inhabit. In this sense, it looks forward to various forms of “timbre music” such as the Spectralism represented by composers like Grisey and Murail and the Musique Concrète Instrumentale represented by Lachenmann and his followers.

41 A vibrating body also vibrates at $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{4}$ etc. the length of the string, vocal chord etc. This produces a series of partials whose relative intensity gives a sonority its particular timbre.

42 Scare quotes because music, despite the familiar platitude, does not function like a language. It does not possess the same sign/signifier relationship. I generally can not use non-texted music to tell you that I am going to the store to buy milk.

43 Shaviro 25

44 Meaning the music written after they abandoned late romanticism and before they embraced dodecaphony in the 1920s.

V. Contradiction and Modernism

While Shaviro's claim that modernist musical aesthetics “encompasses contradictions within itself”⁴⁵ is valid and interesting, perhaps a more fundamental argument can be made by transferring the analogy from contradiction/unity and dissonance/consonance to the binary between pitch and noise. Lachenmann's music is very much concerned with exploring what is possible within this binary and its in-between states.⁴⁶ Often the overall formal contour of Lachenmann pieces is noise becoming pitch and pitch becoming noise. This has become a popular strategy for devising musical logic for composers of our current epoch. In fact, one might even call it a cliché.

Both modernist composers of the 2nd Viennese school and post-Lachenmann composers of what is often called, a bit presumptuously, the 3rd Viennese school are really just moving the resolution of contradiction to a different musical parameter. For Lachenmann, noise often becomes dissonance and pitch becomes consonance or vice versa. For Schoenberg and Webern, often things like registral envelope, dynamic contour, orchestration, and timbre become dissonances to be resolved. So perhaps Shaviro is overzealous in concluding that modernist harmony is encompassing dissonances within themselves and escaping the this dialectical structure. It is just displacing it. However, it is only an educated guess that Shaviro is referring to these composers, as they are the most archetypically associated with musical modernism.

A much stronger argument can be made for a Whitehead-Kant-Derrida logic of contradiction in the music of the New York school composers of the mid 20th century such as John Cage, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolfe, and Alvin Lucier. Feldman, for example, works more or less exclusively with pitch, but does so in a way that seems to eschew the resolution of contradictions. His harmonies are dissonant according to common practice tonal harmonic conventions, but there are

45 Shaviro 24

46 For an introduction to Lachenmann, his notational conventions, and the sounds he works with, see his string quartets. Particularly relevant is *Gran Torso* (1972).

crystalline and crafted with an ear towards a specific aesthetic sensibility.⁴⁷

There is no sense that the harmonies resolve from one to another. Instead, it is a sort of flat litany of harmonies often lasting for multiple hours at similar dynamic levels, articulation envelopes, and the like. Feldman opens a Whiteheadian primordial vector of possibilities (Whitehead's conception of creativity as an inherent source of novelty)⁴⁸ by aestheticizing the way that a sound decays in various spaces.

Feldman's music is as much about the way the chords reverberate in a room and the phenomenological effect of the duration and relative flatness of the music (in other words, there is no real sense of a teleology). There is a powerful invocation of memory. Chords from many minutes ago repeat themselves in new contexts prompting new ways of hearing them. This is a music version of Whitehead's concept of prehension. The sonorities grasp themselves into being from previous heard ones.⁴⁹

This can also be compared to Derrida's aporia of forgiveness. A transgression gains the potential of being forgiven the moment it becomes unforgivable.⁵⁰ Likewise the soundings in a piece by Feldman only become harmonious when their clanging and beating higher partials jutt up against each other producing a dissonance that then reverberates in a space in ways that articulate the space itself.

A strong analogy can be made between the music of Alvin Lucier and Kant's conception of antinomies. In what is likely his most famous work *I Am Sitting In a Room* (1969), Lucier records himself speaking and then plays that recording back in a room. He then records the sound of the recording reverberating in the room, plays that back in the room, and so on and so on. What emerges is a sonification of the room itself.

47 In writing this I am thinking particularly about a performance I heard earlier this year of Feldman's work for violin and piano *For John Cage* (1982).

48 Whitehead 21

49 Mesle 98

50 Derrida 34

The listener is, in progressively more audible forms, presented with the resonant frequencies of the room while the “dead” frequencies recede from audibility. The semantic and musical / poetic “content” of the text is not resolved through some dialectical process. Instead it is totally tabled and its true purpose in illuminating the specificities of the room emerges.

In Kant's philosophy, an antinomy is a contradiction (such as between the political assertion that people are autonomous and have wills and the technoscientific assertion that we live in a causal universe) that is not resolved.⁵¹ Instead, it is shifted to an aesthetic contrast by recognizing that the true work of the antinomy is in illuminating the boundaries and limitations of reason in much the same sense that Lucier illuminates the boundaries and limitations of the room.

Also relevant here are the post-New York School composers of the Wandelweiser collective.⁵² Wandelweiser is an international collective of composers influenced by Cage, Lucier, and Feldman who write acoustic, electroacoustic and electronic works that often explore extremes of duration and subtle and quiet textures. American composer and Wandelweiser member Michael Pisaro often works with rice, pouring it onto various objects and surfaces such as metal, styrofoam, ceramic and cardboard. A piece that demonstrates this is *Ricefall(2)* (2007). In these situations, like in *Im Sitting in a Room*, the noise, or the contradiction is not resolved but rather becomes a tool for illuminating the specificities of the materials onto which the rice is poured.

There is an affinity between Whitehead-Kant-Derrida form of contradiction and aleatory. The contradictions of aleatory music serve to produce novelties/creativities by converting antitheses into aesthetic contrasts in a way that discloses something about the process used to derive the aleatory, the space the performance is happening in, the way sound behaves, the sociality of listening, or the bodies of the performers.

51 Kant 628

52 A large repository of writings and scores by the Wandelweiser composers can be found at <<https://www.wandelweiser.de/>>

VI. Contradiction and Noise

A final form of music that handles dissonance/noise/contradiction in a way hospitable to this form of music is Japanese noise music of the 80s and 90s: a topic the author of this paper has written at length on. Noise shows of this sort occurred in cramped live houses with powerful PA systems tuned to be as present and loud as possible. Performance often involved extremes of gesture and physicality as well as extremes of timbral saturation (noisiness) and volume.

Like Kant's antinomies that push the boundaries of reason towards an understanding of its own contours, a noise show pushes the boundaries of the bodies of the performers and the equipment they use (often broken and/or modified consumer audio equipment) to its limits. A concert is often over when a piece of equipment in the signal chain breaks rendering performance impossible. This often only takes a minute or two, and noise shows are generally a frantic and short burst of contradiction that ultimately explodes out of itself: rendering itself silent but thus shifting the breaking into the realm of an aesthetic contrast.⁵³

This is reproduced in the register of recording technology, as most noise cassettes are simply direct input from damaged mixing boards to tape. Often the levels are set too high intentionally allowing the noise to clip, introducing another layer of saturation, and another contradiction not to be resolved but instead introduce another layer of aesthetic content: the sonification of the limits of the recording technology.⁵⁴ Such an argument can and should be extended in the future to digital glitch aesthetics as a large phenomenon.

In this sense silence and noise becomes such a contradictory binary. A piece for solo snare drum by Peter Ablinger entitled *KLEINE TROMMEL UND UKW-RAUSCHEN* (2000) operates in this realm. The only sounds in the piece are silence, snare drum roll, and white noise generated by a radio. These

⁵³ Novak

⁵⁴ Ibid.

sounds are all heard individually and in congress with each other, but there is no sense that the gulf between noise and silence is navigated or sublated into a larger whole. The non-resolution of their contradiction becomes the source of novelty.⁵⁵

VII. Conclusions

This paper has two primary propositions. The first is that Whitehead, Kant, and Derrida all embrace contradictions and antitheses in a way that side-steps any sort of dialectical or synthetic method in favor of a shifting of contradiction towards aesthetic contrast. This proposition is an extension of an argument made by Steven Shaviro in his monograph *Without Criteria* (2012). The second proposition is that this approach to contradiction as an aesthetic tool is embraced by various modernist and avante-garde musicians. In a limited sense by composers of the 2nd Viennese school such as Webern and Schoenberg and in a more serious sense by composers of the New York school, their followers, and noisicians of 20th century underground music scenes.⁵⁶

The choice to briefly survey 20th century avant-garde music that seems to obey this aesthetic logic is motivated simply by that being my primary area of research. Going forward this could certainly provide an interesting way of speaking about various aesthetic trends in 20th century visual art, performance art, theater, literature, and poetry. We often think about the breakdown of tonality (in music), representation (in visual art and sculpture), linear narrative (in literature and cinema) and all these other constructive breakdowns we associate with 20th century avant-garde movements as an abandoning of teleology.

Or in other words, the avant-garde as the breakdown of the enlightenment arrow of history: the becoming-self-reflexive of a historical intelligence that Hegel calls Geist. However, in an era of total

⁵⁵ Ablinger's scores and writings can be found on his website <<https://ablinger.mur.at/>>

⁵⁶ Rudig

war, political instability, and deep ideological conflict it is inaccurate to claim we live in a post-historical society, or that the aesthetics of the 20th or 21st century point towards some sort of post-history. I think this inquiry into different ways of conceiving of the way that contradictions behave is more fruitful.

Late Whitehead resurgence out of the divinity school and his gaining acceptance among a diverse group of philosophers of science, gender, ethics, animal studies and of course speculative philosophy and ontology has the possibility of radically reshaping the way we think of our relationships to others, to methodologies of thought, and to the world.

As someone who writes primarily about music and aesthetics, the rise of a process philosophy as a mode of inquiry into these topics that attends to the world as an ongoing series of entanglements and negotiations opens new doors for thinking about what sound is, how it affects people, and how it affects societies (both in Whitehead's extended sense and the common language sense)⁵⁷ is something I am very excited about. Perhaps part of the purpose of this paper is to sneak Whitehead into some philosophical projects we are more familiar and comfortable working alongside: those of Kant and Derrida. There are shards of Whitehead's radical and idiosyncratic thought to be found across intellectual history, and I call for others to join me in an archaeology of these hidden Whiteheadian resonances.

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