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***Three Modes of Estrangement:
Musical Explorations of the Modern
Manifestation of the Free Self***

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Abstrakti

Kolme vieraantuneisuuden moodia: musiikillinen tutkimus vapaan itsen manifestaatiosta modernilla aikakaudella

Artikkelin pääargumentin mukaan oletus siitä, että ihminen irrallisena yksilönä muodostaa suhteen musiikkiin ei johda suurempaan vapauteen vaan vieraantumiseen. Artikkelin nojaa hermeneuttiseen traditioon, jonka mukaan yhteiset kulttuuriset merkitysyhteydet muodostavat edellytyksen myös yksilön kokemukselle. Kun tämä pohja eri syistä hajoaa, yksilöstä tulee haavoittuvaisempi ulkoiselle manipulaatiolle; muun muassa markkinatalouden kaupittelemille ideoille.

Artikkeli nimeää kolme vieraantuneisuuden moodia. Ensimmäinen näistä viittaa positivistiseen musiikkiin, mikä tässä tarkoittaa taidemusiikin sulkeutumista omaksi tutkimusalakseen. Toinen moodi viittaa kokemuksen fragmentoitumiseen ja kolmas ”vapaan itsen manifestaatioon”. Oletus vapaasta, kontekstista riippumattomasta ”itsestä” on artikkelin kriittikin kohde. Kriittinen teoria muodostaa tutkimuksen päänäkökulman. Artikkelin sisältö linkittyy moniin ajankohtaisiin teemoihin: taiteen eristämiseen omaksi, erilliseksi todellisuudeksi, kokemuksen yksilöitymiseen, sekä musiikkimaailman kehitykseen tasa-arvoisempaan suuntaan monikulttuurisessa yhteiskunnassa.

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This article raises a critique of the assumption that a human being individually chooses how to establish his or her relationship with music. The freedom to choose how to approach this world – including art – is often celebrated as a liberation from external authority, and a development towards a more emancipated world: everyone gets the opportunity to engage with art as they like. Leaning on critical theory, I will suggest that assuming an "isolated self" as the reference point of truth and judgment leads to detachment from a shared platform of meaning and, in the end, from meaning altogether, resulting in estrangement.

My aim is to describe specific, undesirable features of how this situation manifests today, calling them "modes of estrangement". I have named them as follows: positivist music and timbral innocence; fragmentation of experience; and the manifestation of the "free self". The modes reveal different aspects of the assumption that the contemporary human subject establishes their relationship with music singularly. The term "mode" is borrowed from a musical context, where it designates a scale that provides a specific, atmospheric colour tone. A mode sets the mood for participation, as practiced, for example, in church or folk music. In contrast to the chromatic system, one finds oneself *within* a musical mode. The mode has a specific historical background within Western context, deriving from a time before the autonomous work of music. This historical aspect will be discussed under the first section, "Estrangement – from what?", in reference to the challenge of rising above a situation and describing it objectively from the inside.

In this context, "estrangement" is to be understood as a philosophical concept rather than a psychological one. Modes of estrangement express cultural attitudes that advance estrangement. These lie between the lines of cultural practices, often not articulated, not easy to explicate, and in the end, not questioned. When discussing the assumed freedom of the

human individual, the aim is not to discuss questions about free will. Rather, this "freedom" relates to the assumption that a human being can approach reality from a private basis, not acknowledging that preconditions of one's private thoughts and experiences have their basis in shared cultural and historical situation.

The contours of the discussion are shaped by perspectives from Theodor W. Adorno's cultural critique, and more specifically, his thinking that concerns the alienated situation of modern human beings, resulting from modern rationality as a product of the Enlightenment. Adorno's perspectives, anchored in the Western intellectual train of thought, could be considered conservative or out of date; today's world has changed with regards to the use of technologies, artistic mediums, the structures of the public marketplace, and multiculturalism. My suggestion is, however, that Adorno's thinking is not only still relevant, but even more so than before. I follow Richard Shusterman in his consideration that Adorno functions as an acute diagnostician in discussion of the problems related to late-capitalist liberalism (Shusterman 2002, 157).¹ Shusterman suggests that the pursuit of private goals and happiness in the contemporary world has resulted in "haplessly lonely and unrewarded pleasure-seekers" (ibid., 148). At times, the pragmatically-influenced writings of Shusterman tend towards descriptions that sound psychological, but also offer insight to the alienated situation of today's world. The aim of this article is to remain within a philosophical discourse. I will discuss and evaluate some of Shusterman's viewpoints along the way. I will also apply other thinkers from the disciplines of aesthetics, philosophy and musicology, such as Walter Benjamin, Gianni Vattimo and Rose Subotnik, who contribute to the discussion from further socially critical standpoints. Perspectives within compositional thinking will be exemplified by presenting some thoughts of the composers Milton Babbitt and Synne Skouen.

Aesthetic discourse, as it is often derived from debates within the 18th century, has made many attempts to establish theories that allow experience to lean on something communal or universal rather than private or random. It has, however, largely concerned itself with ontological issues, rather than social ones, such as historical conditions and social privilege. This article will not engage in the search for an ontological standpoint but discuss the situation of estrangement from within today's

1 In his work *Surface and Depth* (2002), Shusterman interprets the writings of both Theodor W. Adorno and T. S. Eliot as sources that, as he claims, could offer valuable perspectives for critique of today's liberal-minded world. Shusterman discusses this specifically in chapter 8: "Eliot and Adorno on the Critique of Culture" (2002, 139–158).

perspective. Viewing phenomena both through philosophical and socio-historical contexts will offer a possible way of approaching the subject without indulging in either psychological description or purely ontological theory.

The naming of the modes is, itself, meant to be the focus of this article. Further, my intention is to suggest that music as a form of art carries a potential remedy to the situation: it receives its meaning from a shared historicity and value system and offers a platform for displaying a critique of the contemporary situation.

Estrangement – from what?

Modes of estrangement refer to paradigmatic cultural tendencies that, in one way or another, carry the seed of estrangement or alienation. They include thought patterns that form the grounding of prevalent practices. Simultaneously, the expression "estrangement" suggests that there is something that human beings are estranged *from*. There are difficulties grasping the core of a mode, or an alternative, better world, in an accurate way. These difficulties concern critically observing a situation that one finds oneself *within*. The legitimacy of the attempt of describing the modes objectively ought to be discussed.

The immanent character that these modes of estrangement indicate, is neither strictly ontological nor merely a historically descriptive situation that could be objectively depicted. The modes relate to the historical idea of a musical mode: modes set the mood for participation in a shared way, and thus function as a common horizon for an experience. Modes, often associated with church and folk music, refer to an era before the autonomous work of art. My choice to call specific aspects about the modern situation of human beings "modes of estrangement" indicates that they are based on shared illusions. What has been forgotten is that there is a mode at all, which sets out the way of experiencing up against a shared cultural basis.

While this article describes the estrangement that results from the assumption that human beings establish their relationship with music individually, it also suggests that music – as an artistic and cultural expression – offers a possible remedy. Adorno made the suggestion in his time, that if there is any hope for the world, this hope is found within art. Art is both a product of the society, it identifies with society

and, simultaneously, breaks with its logic by not being reductive to cost-accounting reason. Adorno suggests that art thus points towards unthought possibilities. Adorno is sparse with offering solutions, as new thought systems would also be rooted in existing concepts and produce more of the same. I, too, will suggest that music offers an antidote to the contemporary situation. However, slightly more optimistically than Adorno, I will suggest solutions in the end. This requires some balancing so as not to indulge in new idealisation and speculation about a better world but to acknowledge that this thinking, too, is bound to a historical situation.

Shusterman suggests that art "helps us connect us to each other and to a history that can provide a critical touchstone for judging the present" (2002, 151). This formulation reveals both possibilities and dangers when seeking for a solution. While the claim that art connects us to a history and provides us with a critical touchstone for judging the present is philosophically valuable, suggesting that it helps us connect us to each other could be at risk of losing its critical basis. If the expression "helps us connect to each other" is understood as individuals connecting to each other by having fun together with music, it forwards an uncritical understanding of the way in which the individual approaches this relationship, and a historically detached idea of music. The aim of this article is to acknowledge – and I interpret the intentions of Shusterman to be similar – how this connectedness to a shared historicity, an "ethos" that shapes our experience and sets our relationship with art in a certain way, is *a necessary condition for music to have any meaning at all*. My critique is not that an individually formed relationship with music is non-desirable, but that it is not possible. Simultaneously, the individual is expected to form this relationship singularly. I argue that self-realisation and personal freedom to express oneself as one likes, are highly rated values of the liberal Western world, which often doesn't carefully consider how this freedom is actualised.

To relate this to the question of what human beings are estranged *from*: perhaps this could refer to a distant memory of something which has been lost, or a perception that something is lacking, or is not quite right? Discussing this "something" as a type of "other", which can't be directly defined, is not controversial from the viewpoint of Adorno's critical theory, according to which thinking still has its roots in the "non-identical", the reality which is not identical with our ideas, even though modern rationality attempts to forget these roots. However, in the writings of Adorno, solutions offered to the situation are sparse, and only occasionally

glimpsed as suggestions. Establishing clear contours for the discussion of estrangement is challenging, but there are reasons for this attempt, which relate to the need to re-evaluate the contemporary situation.

Mode I: Positivist music and timbral innocence

The mode of estrangement depicted in this section arises from art being created with high levels of specialisation, but in isolation from other spheres of society. This is illustrated by the position of an educated composer of art music in today's world. Contemporary artists are, to quote Shusterman, "driven to fashion and assent some 'particularist' individuality to call attention to their work" (Shusterman 2002, 152). One is called to develop methods and techniques individually, and to justify the existence of each work. In combination with this, music identifies with the procedures of modern rationality, ending up with positivist patterns of thinking. This identification with rationality was, according to Adorno, a necessary development of musical modernism. I suggest it is still, in many ways, the "mode" of contemporary art music today.

This position of an educated contemporary artist is exemplified in the way Milton Babbitt defends the idea of a composer as a specialist in his famous essay "Who Cares if You Listen?".² Babbitt paints a picture of a composer who "expends an enormous amount of time and energy [...] on the creation of a commodity which has little, no, or negative commodity value" (Babbitt 1958, 244). Babbitt himself defends this activity. The uselessness of the work of contemporary music, often depicted as serious and advanced, receives, according to Babbitt, plenty of unjustified criticism. While the critique of the advanced work is often based on its failure to perform a social function, Babbitt questions the very assumption that such social function is desirable.

Babbitt compares musical composition to scientific disciplines, even though he doesn't attempt to draw a complete parallel. He asks why sciences are allowed to be specialised without carrying immediately useful results, but music is not: "[W]hat possibly can contribute more to our knowledge of music than a genuinely original composition?" (ibid., 250) Babbitt points out that in a world where this activity was no longer financially supported, music would cease to evolve (ibid., 250). However,

2 Milton Babbitt's article was originally titled "The Composer as Specialist".

Babbitt does not clearly define what he means by "evolution". Providing a more specific definition could be vital to this issue.

Babbitt wrote these thoughts in 1958, but I consider his defence of the artwork that doesn't create any profit as relevant to discuss today, too. It may be that most composers don't represent Babbitt's view today – and neither did they in his time – but the structures that forced art music in the position of solitude in Babbitt's time are still present today.

In a historical perspective, the roots of this development are found in art's becoming autonomous during the period of Enlightenment, rationality replacing religion and autocratic leadership as the authority. When music no longer had a self-evident position as a part of a cult or ritual, it needed to legitimate its existence in new ways. It became the object of judgment of the human subject.

In this context, the Enlightenment ought to be viewed in a wider perspective than as an epoch that lasted around 100 years: a new, paradigmatic approach to reality, in many ways still present in our time. To see how it is reflected in the position of contemporary art music, it is essential to understand what is peculiar to this modern reasoning.

Adorno himself is particularly critical of the circular character of the procedures of modern reasoning; the way it approaches nature – or the object – and the kind of answers it expects to find, are defined in advance. Owing to its own premises, it can't encounter anything profoundly new. Modern rationality is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, not based on knowing the world better, but to dominating over it, projecting a specific order upon "nature" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]). In the end, only the discoveries that conform to pre-defined ideas are considered real. Scientific positivism, which claims that genuine knowledge derives exclusively from the experience of natural phenomena, and is further based on verifying or falsifying statements, could be regarded as a culmination of this development. The most radical form of positivism developed in the post-war era as an attempt to free knowledge from metaphysical speculations.

How is this reflected in the contemporary approach to the artwork, in the "Babbittian music studio"? Following further the thinking of Adorno, that the musical work identifies with the society it belongs to, in the modern period it has become a reflection of modern rationality, based in its own, internal structure. Even though systems such as musical serialism are not always prevalent today within compositional practice of contemporary music, the responsibility of the individual to create a new, internally logical structure for each work, is to some extent paradigmatic.

When Adorno speaks of modern rationality on a general level, he claims that it has forgotten "the ends and fetishises the means as an end in itself" (Adorno 1997 [1970], 54). This is also an important point when discussing the work of the educated contemporary composer. The approach of Milton Babbitt could be described as peculiarly positivist in the sense that he doesn't consider choosing the "isolated, rational self" as the point of departure a problem. He suggests that one would do oneself a favour as a composer by completely withdrawing from the public world and eliminating the public and social aspects of musical composition. He writes: "[b]y so doing, the separation between the domains would be defined beyond any possibility of confusion of categories, and the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibition" (Babbitt 1958, 249). Adorno's social criticism stands far from Babbitt's approach, even though Adorno also makes claims about art's necessity to avoid having its value defined by its usefulness (Adorno 1997 [1970], 257). What is specifically present in the writings of Adorno is the aspect of historicity: Adorno doesn't look at the autonomy of art as ideal, but a necessary consequence of a historical development. Babbitt, by contrast, looks at the situation as advantageous research-wise: "[i]t is my contention that [...] this condition is not only inevitable, but potentially advantageous for the composer and his music" (Babbitt 1958, 244).

Several musicologists who discuss the situation of music in today's world from a socio-historical standpoint, such as Rose Subotnik, have made remarks about the problems of this situation. According to Subotnik, the failure of contemporary music to establish ties with the society reveals "underlying contradictions in a cultural value system" (Subotnik 1987, 390). The thinking within a contemporary artistic method could be detailed and specialised, but what it also seems to be doing is establishing a distance between it and the world. If music is understood as, for example, merely sound processes organised in time, no matter how detailed these technologies are, the social mechanisms behind them are not taken into consideration. As Richard Leppert and Susan McClary note, "the technologies that produce and reproduce the sounds and the institutions that decide what to perform, publish, broadcast, and so forth remain invisible – or inaudible" (1987, xv-xvi). To this could be added that the social aspects of the way in which human beings participate in art – the "why" of the work – also remain outside the discussion.

The positivist approach could also lead to the consideration of artistic material and technique as neutral in their essence. Musicologist and

sociologist John Shepherd applies the concept of "timbral innocence" to describe the assumption that pitch-relationships would form a neutral core of music. Shepherd compares this to writing, or what he calls "white writing": "[j]ust as there is no society, no reality that is not mythical [- -] so there is no writing and indeed no music that is not opaque, structuring the world in one way rather than in any other" (1987, 161). The same could be said to apply to reducing music to mere sound process – or sound waves – believing that breaking it into smaller particles would help one gain greater understanding of it. This type of approach could be described as atomistic, but it also correlates with the Babbittian positivist thought about music and advancement.

The aim of describing this as a mode of estrangement is not to say that all contemporary music functions in a positivist way, but to paint a picture of a situation – a challenge or an expectation – that a contemporary composer encounters today. Some of the difficulty of bringing up the problems of positivist composition of music derive from the fact that timbral innocence as a point of departure comes across as straightforward and objective, far easier to approach than relating the discussion to a wider socio-historical context. Music that has been developed with an emphasis on advanced techniques may come across as non-controversial in itself. Thus, it can freely be developed further within fixed methods and vocabularies, while forgetting to raise questions about its purpose.

Mode II: Fragmentation of experience

This mode discusses a specific aspect of art being placed into its own, separate realm, a realm where the individual can encounter it, contemplate it, experience it and enjoy it. The individual chooses *what* music to encounter, and *in which way*. While the freedom to choose one's own preferences in today's world is seldom considered anything other than a positive development, in this section I will suggest that the lack of a shared foundation for the way music is encountered results in an altogether fragmented experience.

While the former mode concerned the lack of pre-established bonds between the artwork and the social world, from the viewpoint of the isolated position of the professional composer, this section focusses on the audience: those perceiving or experiencing music. This could concern,

for example, a concert venue of classical music, or listening to any type of music from a streaming device.

Walter Benjamin's view in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1969) offers insight to the historical background of this mode. He describes *l'art pour l'art* – the autonomous understanding of art – as a new, negative theology that denies the social functions of art (Benjamin 1969, 6). However, this social function ought to be understood not necessarily as art having a useful function in the social world, but as art being fundamentally intertwined with a lived world. According to Walter Benjamin, the original "contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind" (ibid., 6). The unique value of music – its way of belonging to the world – existed as a ritual activity. Benjamin suggests that art was, in its earlier phase "first and foremost an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art" (ibid., 7). This quote refers to a paradigmatic shift, art becoming an autonomous institution. While, perhaps, there are not any philosophically objective grounds to argue for another era as preferable, the need to point out this historical background rises from the need to be aware that the today's view of art as autonomous – or an *object* for the human *subject* to approach – is not universal but came to exist through a specific historical development.

Shusterman portrays this modern situation as a split between two worlds: when placing art into its own realm, one of "freedom, imagination, and pleasure", an underlying assumption is that ordinary life is, and is supposed to be, "one of joyless, unimaginative coercion" (2000, 20). When art is placed in a separate space – be it in museums or concert halls – this suggests that it doesn't belong to the structures of ordinary life. Shusterman further claims that this division between practical labour and aesthetic experience, in the end, leads to both sides losing their worth: while ordinary labour is turned into "painfully unaesthetic industry", art itself is turned into "useless irrelevant fine art" (ibid., 49).

This point of Shusterman's demands careful consideration. First, placing art into its own realm, which one can approach to experience beauty, indeed appears to have produced two opposites: everyday aspects of life are not expected to be beautiful, while art has become irrelevant to other aspects of life. The work of art is an object that one seeks out for personal interest or enjoyment. The human subject has to choose to find it and attend to it. A non-desirable consequence of this could be a poorer quality of experience; according to Shusterman, an aspect of depth and

integration of experience is lost. This loss of integration of experience lies at the core of this mode and will be further discussed.

Another aspect of Shusterman's argument could be problematic: when describing the possibility of a deeper experience, if one were to put forward the idea that ordinary life, too, should have elements of imaginative freedom or beauty – something that he suggests the realm of art to possess – this could easily lead to idealising thought. These expressions are, to some extent, anchored in a terminology that suggests a sentimental understanding of art in the first place, supporting similar structures to those created by the separate realm for art in the first place.

This relationship comes to expression in the way Adorno describes a truer experience, when facing the unorganised world, or the unknown. For Adorno, the "truth content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of an artwork – its specific ways of being true – lies in its ability to point in the direction of the "other". This is best described by the way modern rationality attempts to reduce the reality to concepts, making reality identical with already established ideas. Adorno calls this "identity thinking". Art's truth does not reach beyond this thinking by presenting new arguments, but by being a product of this society and, simultaneously, negating the very world by not being reductive to cost-accounting reason. Art is able to absorb society and reveal its contradictions. Art thus represents an enigma that the society cannot tolerate. Central to the subject at hand is that the encounter with this "other" is not a harmonic or delightful experience, but a rather gruesome one. The ideologies of the modern society are themselves, in a way, alien to suffering and darkness. It was the mythical fear of the unknown that made human beings dominate over it in the first place. This darkness, the antithesis to idealism, is what art is able to identify with. Thus, following Adorno's critical theory, if there is a possibility for art to connect us to a "truer" involvement with reality, this does not occur as a pleasing experience. If art offers us hope, it is *not* by offering relief.

However, even though Shusterman's view appears to apply vocabulary more freely than Adorno's critical theory, he acknowledges the dangers of sentimentalising art. Shusterman himself writes about Adorno: "[m]aking the same connection between personal and social fragmentation, Adorno also sees this dissociation of sensibility issuing in lifeless thought and empty sentimentality" (Shusterman 2002, 147). This dissociation refers to the gap between calculative rationality and a sentimentalised understanding of feelings. Shusterman supports the critique that the distinction between "feelings" and "lifeless thought" is one that makes experience more

alienated. Rationality having become calculative, has pushed experience into a situation of fatigue, making it lean on sentimental emotions rather than a deeper experience where both elements of sensing and interpreting could be integrated.

What further advances the sentimentalising approach to art is that specific mechanisms rooted in means-ends rationality expect the work to be *useful* for the society. The bourgeois mentality expects that art "should at least demonstrate a sort of use-value modelled on sensual pleasure" (Adorno 1997 [1970], 17). This relationship could be further depicted by saying that, in the modern world, the individual is turned from a "participant in culture" into a "consumer of culture". Here, I use the word "consumer" in a wider sense than art becoming a commodity of the market. It refers to the overall relationship between the modern human subject as the spectator and the artwork as an object belonging to its own, separate realm. Relevant to the subject at hand is the question, *what kind of individual is found listening to, or gazing at, an artwork?* The consumer is someone who puts the work in front of themselves and absorbs it, as opposed to being absorbed by it. One could take this further and claim that when the modern individual consumes the artwork, he/she consumes already-made interpretations of the work: already formed codes of an already interpreted reality. This leads the art-consuming individual to receive easily digestible meanings of art.

The loss of communal foundations could also render the individual more vulnerable to external manipulation: advertisements, trends, and mass media. In the absence of collectively founded norms, the liberal marketplace comes to function as one of the new authorities that dictate the preferences of the individual. The enhanced freedom to choose how to consume culture doesn't necessarily lead to the realisation of a "truer self". Rather, it could lead to the dissolution of culturally- rooted perspectives. Shusterman explains that this "privatization of spirituality has made us feel increasingly alien in our natural and social world and thus ever more contemptuously manipulative and destructive of it" (2002, 141). Shusterman refers to a critique often found within the writings of Adorno, according to whom this development has estranged human beings so radically that they are simply no longer aware of their estrangement. Philosopher Espen Hammer has described Adorno's view as follows:

The smiling consumers [- -] can be said to be so estranged that the word "estrangement" has almost come to lose its meaning. They simply have no individuality left, nor did they have it to begin with; therefore, their

lack of authenticity is experienced as neither painful nor self-dissolving. (Hammer 2002, 75)³

Simultaneously, this loss of meaning is disguised by the general belief that individuals have finally liberated themselves from external authority and can independently choose an authentic way to engage with art.

As the individual can't lean on a shared foundation for judgement, the consequence could be that the experience of the individual becomes fragmented. Shusterman suggests that the contemporary situation has turned the "self", too, into a social product, "a weak and withered fruit of liberal individualism" (2002, 148). This self is already a dissolved one but is nonetheless expected to choose its preferences singularly. This situation was also commented on by Adorno and Horkheimer in their time: "[n]ot only is domination [of the world] paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947], 21). In this realm of isolation, a lonely and fragmented self – or what Shusterman polemically refers to as "a lonely pleasure-seeker" (Shusterman 2002, 148) – is born: one who mostly has shattered reference points and impulses to lean on when experiencing and making judgements.

This mode is also not a choice of the singular human being, but a situation that one already finds oneself within: it has become the responsibility of the human being to singularly create meaning *for* oneself.

Mode III: Manifestation of the "free self"

The development of modern society since the Enlightenment may, from today's perspective, be viewed as a victorious journey towards emancipation from external authority, reason substituting religion and autocratic leadership. In terms of art, it looks like one is able to express oneself freely, and thus manifest oneself artistically. Liberal society appears to promise "more happiness for more people by promoting their freedom to

³ Original quote: "Adornos smilende konsumenter kan sies å være så fremmedgjorte at begrepet fremmedgjøring nær sagt mister sin mening. De har rett og slett ingen individualitet og har heller aldri hatt det; derfor oppleves uegentligheten hverken som smertefull eller selvoppsplittende" (Hammer 2002, 75, translated from Norwegian by RSA).

pursue it in whatever form they see fit” (Shusterman 2002, 148). How does the ideal of the freedom to express oneself through art, come to expression in today’s world of music?

Philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s work *Transparent Society* (1992 [1989]) presents artistic mass media of the postmodern world in a way that provides a context for this subject. While the modernist epoch at the beginning of the 20th century still viewed history as a linear development towards a freer world – a core belief of the Enlightenment – in the postmodern world the question of definition is raised: who has defined the historical narrative of Western culture to begin with? Vattimo makes the following remark: ”modernity ends when – for a number of reasons – it no longer seems possible to regard history as unilinear” (1992 [1989], 2). A historical narrative that has been cultivated as universal by the people of a Western world, or even more narrowly, of a Western elite, has become problematised by the modern, pluralistic and multicultural world, and can no longer function as a universal truth. This subject may have been discussed within academic institutions for a few decades, but it is today a current topic outside of academies, discussed by, for example, music festivals, cultural funding systems, music ensembles, concert series and different artistic organisations, who are attempting to adjust their activities to a changing world.

Further, Vattimo claims that the loss of the possibility of viewing the history as unilinear

is also, and perhaps above all, the result of the birth of means of mass communication. These means – newspapers, radio, television, what is now called telematics – have been decisive in bringing about the dissolution of centralized perspectives, of what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard calls ”grand narratives”. (1992 [1989], 5)⁴

While Vattimo portrayed these thoughts about three decades ago, today many further media could be added to the list, such as the development of devices that allow for the digital streaming of music.

Waving goodbye to the hegemonic approach to culture centred around Western universalism is supported by democratic ideals of moving towards greater social justice. However, the subject of freedom to express

4 Jean-François Lyotard himself writes: ”If the term ‘postmodern’ has a meaning, then, it must distance itself from this philosophy of history, since its point is to make the collapse of the grand narratives” (1984 [1979]), 39).

oneself artistically becomes more complex when raising questions about *how* meaning, or the content of expression is formed, in the first place. Vattimo describes this process as a development from "central rationality" towards "local rationalities":

With the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalized communication explodes like a multiplicity of "local" rationalities – ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities – that finally speak up for themselves. They are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a single true form of humanity that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience and contingency. (Vattimo 1992 [1989], 8–9)

While from a standpoint of social justice a diversity of voices ought to be supported, there are reasons to ask more specifically in which ways this freedom is actualised. According to Vattimo, this freedom is "an ideal of emancipation based on oscillation, plurality and, ultimately, on the erosion of the very 'principle of reality'" (ibid., 7) The way that freedom could lead to an "erosion of principles of reality" could be understood in the light of the fact that the thinking of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group, the society. Referring to the discussion in the previous sections, merely individually constituted meaning is not possible.

One may apply this to the artistic context and say: if genuine meaning is only possible in relation to shared meaning, then, experiencing art as meaningful individually, in isolation from outer reference points, is not possible at all. This is also true when the individual chooses to stand in opposition to external standpoints. Making an opposite claim intelligible is only possible within the context of already established meaning.

The situation appears as highly dichotomous: while the aim is to forward social justice and democracy by giving more people the opportunity to express themselves, this freedom is impossible to realise simply by adding more voices to the public discourse. To paint a picture of this situation: a contemporary art music festival has invited artists with diverse backgrounds to a panel. Musicians that represent diverse cultures and musical genres, are engaged: a DJ from South America alongside Western composers of score-based music. The participants are asked to discuss what music means to each of them personally. The aim is to establish new social bonds and develop a positive and pluralistic atmosphere. An underlying assumption is that there are many different ways to engage with music, and all of them are equally correct. The overall message of the panel could be: "be authentic and don't hide your voice!" In this

constellation two things are assumed; first, that private meaning outside of a wider social context is possible. Second, the approach presumes relativism in the sense that each approach to music is considered equally legitimate.

First, this approach to plurality tends towards the lack of a shared basis to discuss music. Even though there's still the possibility that each of these individuals represent a social group and thus operate within, what Vattimo calls, local rationalities, there doesn't appear to be assumed an "umbrella meaning" that makes a conversation between these groups possible. However, even if not acknowledged, there *is* an umbrella meaning: in this constellation the concept of "music" becomes equally universalising as the autonomous paradigm of Western art music. Music is only music, it is there, and it is for everyone to freely participate in. This approach to music defines it in an essentialist way rather than acknowledging how it is formed through the specific historical context of Western culture. This approach also prohibits one from becoming aware of hidden power structures that are present in the very way the discipline of music has been formed, and thus, unwillingly, it enhances *imbalance in power*. The approach to music that considers it as universal and "timbrally innocent", has its very specific historical background within Western culture. Thus, assuming music as a medium for each individual to express themselves through, doesn't in the end support plurality, but Western thinking – the very hegemony it believes itself to stand in opposition to. Consequently, *loss of shared meaning appears to stand in the way of breaking with Western universalism*.

Second, the assumption that all these different ways of engaging with music are equally correct and completely subjective, advances relativism. This seems obvious, but the dangers of it are not always acknowledged. The denial of shared reference points of discussion, including the possibility of evaluating different viewpoints, can lead to power concentrations: if a symphony orchestra, for example, were to deny democratic and knowledgeable dialogue as the basis for adjusting and changing their practices, it would allow for hegemonic thought and practice without the pressure of changing these. This practice, again, could be supported by already established structures of power, both financial and social. Reflecting this in an even wider context of political implications, the lack of common foundations for discussion – alleging that all perspectives are of equal worth and that there is no way of expressing a superior position – could have dangerous implications: if every different instance of truth stands in relatively same position to each other, what would make

discussion a better way of solving conflict than physical violence? Losing common bases for discussion may prohibit the development from, what Vattimo calls, "realising a rational programme of improvement, education and emancipation" (1992 [1989], 3). Relativistic attitude thus seems to hamper the development towards an improved world.

The modern faith in the liberal-minded individual is also pointed out by Shusterman, who refers to the thinking of the literary critic T. S. Eliot as follows: "if everybody says what he likes and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come right in the end" (Shusterman 2002, 149).⁵ This attitude is, what I have named the "manifestation of the 'free self'", as one of the modes.

While the human individual finds themselves as, to some extent, the new, ultimate reference point of truth, the consequences of this are seen in the erosion of meaning altogether. As a socio-historical subject, the human being experiences things in the context of a common history and a shared world. Vattimo writes: "The emancipatory effect [- -] is not confined to guaranteeing everyone the possibility of greater recognition and 'authenticity', as if emancipation meant finally showing what everyone – black, woman, homosexual, Protestant, etc. – 'really' is [- -]" (1992 [1989], 9). Vattimo also notes that "[t]he emancipatory significance of the liberation of differences and dialects consists rather in the general *disorientation* accompanying their initial identification" (ibid.). This pluralistic world leads, according to Vattimo, to disorientation. My claim is that this is the case when plurality is actualised without considering shared frameworks of meaning as necessary for negotiating true change.

A trend, which accelerates this process, is the vanishing of specialist knowledge in favour of new production mechanisms that take over the decisive role. By "specialist knowledge" I refer to knowledge that has developed over a period of time, often requiring a long education or training of an artistic handcraft and disciplinary reflection. It is a knowledge that encompasses contextual thinking *in addition to* the "specialised research within a discipline" as described with reference to Babbitt. Walter Benjamin makes a comment about the loss of this kind of knowledge within literature by describing the lowered threshold of gaining access to publishing:

With the increasing extension of the press, [- -] an increasing number of readers became writers – at first, occasional ones. [- -] [T]oday there is

5 The original quote is from T. S. Eliot's *Essays, Ancient and Modern* (1949, 106).

hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of things. (Benjamin 1969, 12)

The possibility of anyone publishing something in the press is almost exclusively considered a democratic development, producing the possibility for more people to participate in public discourse and have their voices heard. However, from this also follows, according to Benjamin, a transition from specialised training to what he calls "polytechnic": "[l]iterary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property" (Benjamin 1969, 12). This could be described as the focus moving from specialist knowledge to technical training that doesn't carry the bonds of historical continuity and deeper, disciplinary understanding.

The example above refers to a historical development but is applicable to processes in the contemporary world. In musical context a relativistic approach may be accelerated in the context of the development of commercial music industries determining what music reaches the audiences. Rose Subotnik makes the following comment:

Just as the centre of Western culture has shifted over the Twentieth Century from European elitist tradition to the American marketplace, so, too, the most sophisticated resources and technology for musical production, reproduction and dissemination are controlled not by contemporary art music, which until fairly recently was dominated by European composers, but by popular music, an essentially American phenomenon. (Subotnik 1987, 387)

In this quote Subotnik refers to two opposites: composition of contemporary art music as the "European elitist tradition" on the one hand, and popular music on the other. Central to the topic at hand is what is lost through this shift; the defining power being located in the music studio. When I refer to the loss of "specialist knowledge" above, I suggest that what is lost is not merely compositional knowledge on harmonic relationships or internal musical structures of a work, often associated with the domains of contemporary art music. Rather, this knowledge also includes the historical, interpretational understanding of a discipline, in addition to notational and instrumental handcraft, and an understanding of how all these aspects are interwoven. This type of knowledge takes time to adapt and develop.

The problem of this, third, mode could be summarised as follows: when it is not carefully taken into account how personal freedom is actualised this results in estrangement rather than freedom. The situation is accelerated by the free marketplace becoming the domain that largely determines what reaches a listener's ear. Shusterman expresses this situation as follows: "[i]f neoliberalism's most powerful myth is that of individual freedom and fulfilment, its most trusted method is that of instrumental, cost-accounting reason" (2002, 146). While a more rooted experience is in danger of becoming unapproachable, the *memory* of such an experience may, too, have been lost. All the while, modern human beings believe themselves to finally be completely free to choose their own preferences, consume as they like and express themselves.

Music as cultural critique

Each of the three modes of estrangement derives from privileging of the human subject as the reference point of truth and judgment. The first one refers to musical composition becoming positivistic, a science in its procedures, and to the expectation of composers themselves to establish the function of their work. The second one refers to the fragmentation of experience, resulting from art being placed in a separate realm for the individual to encounter, while the individual lacks shared foundations for encountering it. The third mode discusses the illusion that an ultimate "free self" could be manifested in art. This results in artistic relativism and, in the end, the free market takes over the defining power of who or what is heard. The next step will be to discuss the possibility of cultural corrections to the situations described above. I will suggest two such corrections, both referring to *ways of dealing with the present situation* rather than new, theoretical constructions. These solutions advance the idea that music itself carries a central role as cultural critique.

First, the discussion of music as an artform could be framed, to a larger degree, *in a socially relevant way*. This doesn't necessarily mean "in a socially useful way". It could suggest recognising how the work is already a social object, complex in its composition, by virtue of its materials and techniques belonging and responding to the world, and thus creating dialogue. It means moving away from "timbral innocence", as presented

under the first mode, and acknowledging how music is never completely neutral in a social or political sense.

Some thinkers, such as Shusterman, have suggested that rediscovering the wisdom of the Classical period, offers some insight to the possibilities of how the relationship between a human being and the society could be considered. "Classical wisdom" is not technical or instrumental in its nature, nor is it oriented towards means-end rationality. Rather, it is connected to questions of what a good life could be (Shusterman 2000, 145). In Aristotelian thinking, an ethical approach to life requires developing character and educating one's emotions. This kind of approach appears as alien in today's world, where individuals are expected to pursue private goals and personal happiness. In this picture from antiquity, the focus doesn't centre on the individual, but on the necessary bonds between the individual and the society. The outcome of studying a previous culture as an alternative mindset could reveal the today's approach of "private meaning" as something specific for our time.

Inside the "Babbittian music studio", raising questions in a socially relevant way, could carry compositional consequences, too, that challenge the positivist approach to music. The subject relates to the certain type of knowledge discussed under the third mode: a knowledge that neither centres around internal structures of music, nor attempts to foster art as simply useful, but is complex in its ways of letting compositional work converge with the world. This could be discussed in the light of a quote of Subotnik's reflections of the lack of social bonds between contemporary music and the society in the 1980s. She proposed that

contemporary composers probably stand to benefit, as some composers already do, from putting aside their artistic heritage altogether for a while, and starting out from a popular basis of composition into which elements of their heritage might gradually be absorbed. Conceivably this could take them into a middle ground between art and popular music, which seems already to be populated by some reflective, articulate rock musicians as well as some adventurous "serious" composers. (Subotnik 1987, 391)

Subotnik's thought could bring valuable perspectives to the subject at hand concerning "estrangement" in the contemporary world. It doesn't suggest forgetting about a heritage altogether but letting elements of the heritage be gradually absorbed to the mechanisms of popular music. However, one may argue that art would stand in danger of becoming a medium for external purposes, such as economic profit and consumption, and lose some of its reflective basis. This is indeed a risk: even if

contemporary music were brought out of its isolation, integrating it into the mechanisms of popular music would not necessarily help to develop more connected art, or a less estranged world. Nonetheless, it could be equally destructive to believe that one will find a safe space of "timbral innocence" in the studio of Babbitt, where works are created detached from the external mechanisms of the social world.

The suggested solution, raising questions in a socially relevant way, entails the acknowledgement that there is no "innocent space" for musical activity. An artist ought to continue asking themselves questions that concern the relationship between their work and the world. Musical education could be more oriented towards reflecting issues of what a good society would be like. Bringing in ethical questions, making composer and musician student reflect upon these in combination with their learning, would perhaps offer a foundation for approaching commercial music domains, too, while still remaining connected to some core values of artistic activity. One of the strengths of the artwork is its ability to connect us with shared meaning and raise questions about the situation of the today's world.

The second solution refers to the discussion under the third mode: the possibilities of using social diversity as a true source of change, not merely adding more individual voices to a discipline. Outsidership is effective in raising criticism of the internal practice of a field. To paint a picture of how this could happen, I will quote the composer Synne Skouen's polemical writings about her experience as a woman composer: "[h]ere I stand, filled with Western classical music education since early childhood, stuffed with later academic education and many years of work experience, and I still feel dizzy from the encounter with the massive wall of cleverness in masculinely-dominated musical life [- -]" (Skouen 2014).⁶ Skouen describes the experience of inadequacy, but in a way that doesn't concern her own shortcomings. Rather, this concerns the values and practices of an institutionalised field. She writes: "I feel I stand 'lovingly, but inaugurated' outside of this tradition, and ok, this I have to do something about. But in which way do I want to invade?" (ibid.).

A central element to this subject is the "I" in the quote of Skouen. She needs to decide how to invade a tradition where she experiences outsidership. She attempts to find her place in a meaningful way. As described in mode one, the relevance of music has been turned into a

6 Original quote: "Her sitter jeg, stinn av klassisk musikalsk læring fra tidlig barnsbein av, proppfull av senere høyskoleutdanning og med mange års yrkeserfaring, og kjenner at jeg fremdeles blir svimmel i møtet med den massive veggen av flinkhet i det maskulint dominerte musikklivet [- -]" (Skouen 2014. Translated from Norwegian by RSA).

personal issue to solve. The individual having to choose how to establish their relationship with art, encountering the questions alone, says something essential about the contemporary situation. However, Skouen herself is well aware that her "I" doesn't only concern herself, and in the end, is not a personal "I". Her compositional work is deeply rooted in existing practice. This is precisely what gives her access to reflect upon the constitution of the discipline, and what makes her "I" collectively relevant. Skouen writes further:

Nothing indicates that I should recognise myself as an extension of the tradition of Beethoven and the boys. Therefore, my work also carries a specific affinity to montage technique: I can't compose unabated further as if there were nothing to think about [as if I were one of the boys]. I can only pick what I need, concrete requisite, and bring it under my direction. At best a dialogue is created. Between then and now, and them and me. (Skouen 1999)⁷

Here, Skouen describes how her social position makes her look for compositional solutions such as montage technique, to engage with the tradition. "Montage technique" could mean approaching the tradition from an external position by applying musical material as montages, elements that carry some context around them, and thus communicate in another way than mere pitch-relationships alone, thus enabling another type of dramaturgical organisation of musical elements. Skouen's critique is *powerful due to the fact that it is not merely her private opinion*. Her "I" already relates deeply to shared meaning, and thus carries the ability to affect change: her truth becomes a part of the shared truth.

This, second, solution responds both to the Western world facing social diversity and structural changes. However, it also presents an approach that could be highly beneficial for a dynamic development of the field of art music itself. The political thinking of Hannah Arendt offers some insight to this issue by throwing light on the dialectic character of thinking. I will here refer merely to this aspect about Arendt's philosophical thinking; it brings the subject already discussed into the political context of the way "dialogue" could function constructively. For Arendt, thinking itself

7 Original quote: "Det er ingenting som tilsier at jeg skal kjenne meg som en forlengelse av tradisjonen fra Beethoven og gutta. Derfor har jeg også en viss affinitet til montasjeteknikk: jeg kan ikke komponere ufortrødent videre som ingenting (som om jeg var en av gutta). Jeg kan bare hente det jeg trenger, som konkrete rekvisitter, inn i egen regi. I beste fall oppstår det en dialog. Mellom da og nå, og mellom dem og meg." (Skouen 1999, n.p.n. Translated from Norwegian by RSA).

has a dialectic nature, where different perspectives mirror each other. As Arendt presents it, *normality* – understood as reciting norms without further thought – is what prohibits genuine dialogue (Arendt 2006 [1963]). When a discourse becomes highly internal, it fosters the opposite of relational thinking, which brings in several perspectives. According to Arendt, as Jakob Norberg presents it, "our 'thinking attention' to reality is always a collective enterprise because we must turn to one another to solicit support for our novel judgments about the world" (Norberg 2010, 85–86). Relating this to the subject at hand, reciting a norm – a phrase of normality – without further consideration, in the end, serves to consolidate existing thought and reduce the chance of true dialogue. This is applicable to musical composition, when regarded as an activity where one engages with shared social codes. One could end up repeating norms or clichés embedded in musical materials and methods, believing that one operates from a neutral position. Encountering norms, here referring to *ways of doing things*, from a critical standpoint, as in the example of Synne Skouen, even functions as a major contribution to the tradition, by keeping the dialectic character of a field in a dynamic state. This depends on individuals who are willing to do the work of engaging in a tradition that carries norms that don't fully correlate with their own social standing. It also depends on the surroundings supporting diversity and understanding its potentials.

Being a social object anchored both in history and presence, a work of art provides a great tool for renegotiating present norms and assumption. Returning to Shusterman's suggestion that art could help "connect us to each other and to a history that can provide a critical touchstone for judging the present" (Shusterman 2002, 151), one could interpret this further and say that art and culture connect us to each other by offering a space for *negotiation* between social groups and individuals, history and today. Culture goes deeper than a mere verbal dispute. Quoting Shusterman further, art offers "an invaluable tool for emancipatory critique and spiritual regeneration, because it embodies crucial values beyond the pervasive logic of materialist profit and efficiency" (ibid., 153). In this light, art itself offers a critical space for the society to re-evaluate the present.

Occasionally Adorno, too, explicitly suggests that a "truer" approach to reality is possible. According to Adorno this necessitates a certain type of approach from human beings themselves. Adorno and Horkheimer write: "[a]long with mimetic magic [modern rationality] tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object" (2002 [1947], 10). In this

sentence it is assumed that there is some way of knowing or experiencing that does apprehend the object, the unknown. Adorno also speaks of an intellectual or metaphysical experience, *geistiger Erfahrung*, as a truer approach to reality: "[t]he thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience [*geistiger Erfahrung*], without unravelling it" (1991 [1972], 13).⁸ Espen Hammer interprets this "truth" of Adorno as a truth one can go inside of, "a truth that fulfils and reconciles, not as correctness and correspondence, but genuine experience. This requires that the subject lets herself be 'spoken to'" (Hammer 2002, 96).⁹

Returning to the question of how art might function as cultural critique, one of the core beliefs embedded within the three modes described is that culture and art come in *addition* to other things in life and are separately chosen by the individual. From this perspective, art could be placed on top of a hierarchy of needs – let it be a pyramid – as an area of personal enjoyment and self-realisation. Cultural needs are thought to manifest themselves after other, more necessary needs are satisfied. To understand the possibilities a reversed thinking offers, one could turn this pyramid upside down: when culture and art are placed on the bottom as something fundamental, this reflects their function in another way. Culture, as a foundation, carries shared ways of understanding the world, acting, thinking of values and even feeling. True renegotiation of norms and ideas occurs on the bottom of the pyramid, by the foundation of the hierarchy, causing impulses of change in other areas of society.

8 Original quote in German: "Eigentlich denkt der Denkende gar nicht, sondern macht sich zum Schauplatz geistiger Erfahrung, ohne sie aufzudröseln. Während aus ihr auch dem traditionellen Denken seine Impulse zuwachsen, eliminiert es seiner Form nach die Erinnerung daran." (Adorno 1972, 72).

9 Original quote: "[-] sannhet av dette slaget – sannhet man kan 'gå inn i', sannhet som oppfyller og forsoner, ikke som korrekthet eller korrespondanse, men som genuin erfaring – forutsetter at subjektet lar seg 'tiltale'" (Hammer 2002, 96. Translated from Norwegian by RSA).

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