The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre
Verstraete, P. M. G.

Citation for published version (APA):
Verstraete, P. M. G. (2009). The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Pieter Verstraete

The Frequency of Imagination

Auditory Distress and Aurality in Contemporary Music Theatre

Pieter Verstraete

The Frequency of Imagination
THE FREQUENCY OF IMAGINATION
AUDITORY DISTRESS AND AURALITY IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC THEATRE

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde
commissie, in het openbaar te verdediging in de Aula der Universiteit
op dinsdag 2 juni 2009, te 10:00 uur

door

Pieter Maria Gabriël Verstraete

geboren te Ekeren, België
Promotiecommissie

Promotor: Prof. Dr. M.A. Bleeker
Co-promotor: Prof. Dr. C.B. Balme

Overige leden: Prof. Dr. L. Van den Dries
               Prof. Dr. R. De Groot
               Prof. Dr. K.E. Röttger
               Dr. E. Huwiler
               Dr. D.J. Levin

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen
## Contents

**Prologue**

**Tuning into the Frequency of Imagination**  
1. Contextualising the Development of Music Theatre 4  
2. Auditory Distress as a Conceptual Basis for a New Approach 11  
3. Outlining the Research 18  
4. Unsettling the Case Studies 22  

**Chapter 1**  
**Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound** 31  
1. Enter the Ear: Auditory Distress 32  
2. *n-Cha(n)t*: Enchanting or Endangering the Ear? 39  
   2.1. Cupping the Ears: Channelling Auditory Interventions 40  
   2.2. Enter the Listening Subject: Acoustic Community and Sonorous Envelope 43  
   2.3. Exit the Listening Subject: Positioning through Aural Competence 51  
3. *Ruhe*: Exposures to Excess and Lack in Listening 58  
   3.1. Authority of the Sonorous Envelope 59  
   3.2. Intensifying Excess: Visual Deprivation and the Auditory Gaze 64  
4. Responding to Auditory Distress in the Space of Music Theatre 69  

**Chapter 2**  
**The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective** 77  
1. The Active Idle Listener:  
   Shifting Attention from the Everyday to Music Theatre 79  
2. The Modes of Listening as Response 84  
   2.1. Modes and Perspectives in Listening 86  
   2.2. Hearing versus Listening: Managing Listening Attention 89  
   2.3. The Listening Modes as Analytical Tools 95
2. Blauwbaards Burcht: Open the Curtains to a Theatre of the Imagination 203
   2.1. Unfolding Space: Short-circuits of Auditory Bliss 206
   2.2. Reading the Imagetext: Disintegration of Space 211
3. Men in Tribulation: A Blindman’s Opera 215
   3.1. Disrupting Synthesis: A New Total Theatre of Dreams 217
   3.2. Reproducing an Imaginary Body through Feedback 223
4. The Listening Space: Positioning Oneself in Sound 229

Chapter 5
Epilogue: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre 235
1. Auditory Space in the Wagnerian Tradition of Gesamtkunstwerk 239
2. Artaud’s Conception of a New ‘Total’ Theatre: Vibrational Space 243
3. Music Theatre’s Responses to Total Theatre Today 248
   3.1. Dissociation: Splits in Auditory Perception and the Listening Subject 249
   3.2. Fragmentation: A Self-conscious Subjectivity 255
   3.3. Agency and Authority in Listening: Competence and Discourse 260
4. The Future of Music Theatre and its Afterlife in Theory 266

Acknowledgements 269

Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch) 271

Bibliography 279
The spectator who comes to us knows that he has just exposed himself to a true operation, where not only his mind but also his senses and his flesh are at stake. He will henceforth go to the theater as he goes to the surgeon or the dentist.

Prologue
Tuning into the Frequency of Imagination

The present study takes as its primary concern the listening act of the listener in contemporary music theatre. The development of the type of music theatre I examine here is fairly recent, mainly since the late 1980s in the contexts of Belgium and the Netherlands. It includes a plethora of forms that emerged in response to a general dissatisfaction with the traditions of opera and theatre. These new forms relate in a complex way to the history of music theatre through processes of legitimisation and self-definition. They not only distinguish themselves from the traditions and models of musical performance, music drama, in particular the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk ('total artwork') as I will argue later, but they are also a continuation and development of the traditional forms of music theatre. Because of these complex relations to the past, music theatre today can be seen as a reaction to the established forms, from which it cannot be separated.

As a consequence, music theatre calls for new approaches in academic scholarship for at least two reasons. On the one hand, my theoretical readings convince me that the methods for analysis and interpretation that are based on certain traditions in theatre and opera to which music theatre reacts are no longer entirely sufficient. On the other hand, I observe in music theatre’s practice today that many newly developing forms tend to fall between the methodological cracks of Theatre Studies and Musicology. They are also difficult to situate historically as they are themselves wilfully in a perpetual state of becoming. Both my theoretical concerns and my practical observations within this emergent field of new music theatre performances convince me that a new approach is needed. Therefore propose here to examine the existing theories and concepts to analyse present-day music theatre performances by means of a new approach. My investigation starts from the observation that new music theatre performances generally disturb the traditional patterns of perception and, in particular, of listening. I contend that these disturbances are not only significant for how we experience these performances, how we make meaning of them and how we appraise them. The interventions in our listening experiences are also key to this new, alternative approach.

My conviction that such a new approach is necessary arose when I experienced what some have defined as ‘new music theatre’ by way of the small-scale performance De Overstroming (2002) by Peter van Kraaij. This performance struck me in its minimalistic approach to the staging of a new

1 De Overstroming came about as a co-production between Het Net and LOD, which was then still called Het Muziek Lod. There is an earlier version of the performance, which premiered in 2000 with actress Caroline Petrick. I discuss the version of 2002 with actress Yvonne Wiewel at length as a case study in chapter three.
musical composition that partly improvised by Jan Kuijken comes about in relation to text and narrative. In contrast to this minimalism is its title, which refers to the idea of a ‘flood’ in Peter Handke’s short story *Die Überschwemmung* (1963), on which the performance was also based. The text recounts a story of two brothers on a day out by the river: one blind, the other describing what he sees. As the latter’s descriptions start to unfold exaggerated images of water flooding, the blind brother, who listens carefully, starts to doubt the truth of his narrative. In this self-conscious mode of listening, the narrative influences the listener’s experience of the live musical performance, combined with projections of blurred images reflected in a huge mirror on the stage. Whereas the performance would appear to resist any coherent narrative unfolding because of the juxtaposition of text, music and image, the music unmistakably addresses the listener to synthesise the elements and interpret the whole in a narrative way. The music creates interventions of pre-recorded musical phrases, loudspeaker noises and live interferences by the composer playing the cello in the dark, resulting in an excess of intensities, impressions and potential meanings.

*De Overstroming* strengthens my conviction that the disturbing quality of sound, which is manifested as an excess in listening, is the entry point to the new approach to music theatre. I will use the term ‘auditory distress’ as a basis of my approach to describe the alternative experiences that music theatre offers to the contemporary listener. I will show through the notion of auditory distress how the auditory experience during these performances can help us to understand two significant aspects. On the one hand, auditory distress calls for an understanding of how today’s music theatre works in the interplay of several crucial dramaturgical principles and the way sound or music causes this distress in the listener. On the other hand, through auditory distress I explain how the modes of listening help the listener to respond to the disturbances in her or his perception of these performances. Both concerns contribute to the new approach that I develop in this study.

---

2 As I will explain in more detail in chapter one, the term ‘auditory distress’ helps me to conceptualise the urge of the listener to respond to sound or music as a way to deal with the ‘disturbance’ they might provoke in listening. Other terms that have contributed to similar theoretical considerations are ‘cognitive dissonance’ (coined by Leon Festinger and J. Merrill Carlsmith in 1957) or ‘sonic stroke’ (Meelberg 2008). Though both terms highlight aspects that are similar to the present discussion of the experiences in contemporary music theatre, I choose to use the term ‘auditory distress’ as my central concept in order to avoid the limits that both terms might imply. ‘Cognitive dissonance’ refers to a sense of discomfort that is caused by a tension between conflicting ideas or thoughts at the same time. My understanding of auditory distress shares with the theory of cognitive dissonance that they both consider the perceiver’s urge to find coherence in her or his cognition as a general response to the tensions that sounds may provoke to our thoughts. The term ‘cognitive dissonance’ has already been introduced in relation to the cognitive effects of post-dramatic theatre. However, this term bears the risk of overemphasising the role of cognition, which could ignore bodily aspects of our often unconscious responses in hearing and listening. Meelberg’s term ‘sonic stroke’ would then be
De Overstroming is, moreover, not an example that stands on its own. It relates to the newly developing field of music theatre that is fairly consistent in reacting to the conventional models and traditions of both theatre and opera. By stressing the excess of intensities and meanings in listening, this type of music theatre performance moves away from a traditional preoccupation of a linear development and expression of content through text. In this way, this newly developing music theatre can be seen in relation to recent developments in the theatre through what Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as ‘post-dramatic’ theatre. Music theatre’s break with synthesis in its mode of production, as De Overstroming also demonstrates, can, however, be regarded as a reaction to the operatic staging tradition with its most influential model of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. This model is aimed at an integration or fusion of all the art disciplines in favour of the ‘inner drama’ expressed in the music. Seen this way, De Overstroming is indicative of a type of music theatre practice that is in a state of becoming, but that defies rigid definitions. The disruptions that this music theatre produces highlight a transformation from a tradition that once highly valued drama and synthesis. As such, I propose to look at different examples of contemporary music theatre that react upon these existing theatre and opera traditions, and paradigmatically demonstrate new developments.

Before I explain in more detail which new approach is necessary to understand these developments, I need to frame music theatre in relation to its problems of legitimisation and self-definition against the tradition. In what follows, I will show how the developments of the new forms are rooted in the more accurate in stressing the role of the body in relation to the intensities of sound in the listener. According to Meelberg, the sonic stroke is a sound that, though it does not contain any determinate meaning in itself, it motivates the listener to create meaning through its affective impact. As such, the term helps Meelberg to explain the idea of a ‘musical touch’ as a basis for understanding how the physical relation between music and listener can contribute to a sense of musical gesture (Meelberg 2008: 63, 67). Meelberg’s conceptualisations of the sonic stroke are, however, too much preoccupied with explaining how a musical experience (in his case, atonal music) gives an aural impetus for thinking and reflection. Though many of the experiences in contemporary music theatre share comparable implications as conveyed in the idea of the sonic stroke, as well as in the theory of cognitive dissonance, my understanding of auditory distress consciously detaches the discussion of the impact of sound and music on the listener from an assumed all-encompassing cognition or a musical experience of gestures.

3 As both a theoretical concept and a model for staging opera, Gesamtkunstwerk only marginally occurs in Wagner’s theorisations, since his primary concern was the ‘artwork of the future’ in terms of a larger cultural project. The idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk was already prepared at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Novalis, Schlegel, Tieck and Schelling.

4 My analysis will not aim to be historical, with the exception of the traces of music theatre history I chart here and in the epilogue. I am aware that a historically informed study is needed to complement my synchronistic approach. However, such a diachronic analysis is likely to fail at this point, since music theatre practice is still heavily under development and depends rather on personal artistic trajectories of composers and ensembles. It therefore lacks institutionalisation, though certain forms of new music theatre and a tradition of staging fairly young operatic theatre are due to persist time and consolidate in an ongoing internationalisation.
traditions of both theatre and music theatre with which they have also broken
to a certain extent. I will contextualise these developments in a larger cultural
framework by charting out the main historical motivations, relations of
continuity and divergence with the past. As my main theoretical concerns in
this study follow on from these developments, I will refer once more to De
Overstroming to formulate my approach and main argument. I will look at the
existing theoretical models and methods for analysis, and explain why some of
them have become too narrow for an understanding of how this new music
theatre works in relation to the listener. From these methodological
limitations, I deduce the approach that is necessary to analyse the auditory
experiences in such performances. Finally, I relate the new theoretical
approach to the case studies. In a brief summary, I explain how each
performance contributes to the development of my argument.

1. Contextualising the Development of Music Theatre

Given the complexity of the term ‘music theatre’ today, it is no less than
evident to contextualise the striking characteristics, aesthetic developments
and crises of definition in relation to its historical practice. However, such a
chronological overview would lead me too far from the present concerns of
my study. As a way to limit this enterprise, I will only try to historically
situate my objects of study to the extent that they add significance to the main
features, definitions and developments of music theatre in terms of either
diverging or illustrating their shared tradition. Moreover, I limit my scope to
the recent Flemish and Dutch traditions as grounded in international
tendencies and developments. As follows, this rather short and incomplete
historical overview attempts only tentatively to frame how my objects of study
have contributed to the history and development of music theatre.

Charting the development of music theatre throughout Western history
poses its own problems and limitations. Music theatre’s origin, whether it
began with Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607) and the tradition of drama per
musica, its first systematic theories by the Florentine Camerata in the 16th
century or a century earlier with the intermèdi in Italian Renaissance drama,
has already been extensively debated by scholars of opera and history.5

5 As the first historical landmark in the history of music theatre, one usually refers to
Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607). However, earlier occurrences were Daphne and Euridice (for the
wedding of Henry IV and Maria de Medici) established by the Camerata, a group of scientists
and music lovers interested, among others, in the depiction of emotion by music. An earlier
version of Orfeo was also recorded in 1474 by Angelo Poliziano. In giving reference to Nino
Pirrotta, Peter Kivy dates the origins of music theatre back as early as the 15th century with the
intermèdi, which were musical interpolations between the dramatic acts sometimes sufficiently
coherent in plot and character so that they can be regarded as a proper ‘play within a play’ (Kivy
1979: 23; see also Nino Pirrotta 1982). Consequently, Kivy speaks of an ‘evolution’ rather than
an ‘invention’ of the genre.
Tuning into the Frequency

However, if one would attempt to map music theatre’s traces from Baroque drama through its reformation by Pergolesi, the Italian opera seria/buffa, Mozart’s experiments with spoken dialogue and Singspiel, Rossini’s ‘bel canto’ comical operas, Gluck’s opera reformation, Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk up until the Brechtian epic opera and Zeitoper, Kurt Weill’s songspiel (Brecht’s pun on German Singspiel) or up until the twenty-first century with its occasionally non-operas and anti-operas, such historical mapping would disregard the particular differences which are so significant for music theatre and its relation to auditory distress in a history of listening. Such a history remains, as today, unwritten and would be virtually impossible to do so, even though opera and musical theatre have established fairly consistent forms and histories. Nonetheless, recent history of music theatre yet again compels a critical understanding of its definitions, even if an exhaustive definition has become impossible in view of its rich and dense history.

Composer and author in the field, Eric Salzman has referred to the difficulty of defining music theatre on numerous occasions. Instead of a definition primarily based on historical grounds or aesthetic categorisation, he proposes a more pragmatic approach that fits the present situation:

Music-theater has two contrary meanings. In one sense, it means any theatrical or performance work in which music plays an extended, primary role. In this definition, opera, operetta, and the musical are just localized forms of a large, general category. But, in English, music-theater is a relatively recent term coined to exclude all those traditional genres in favor of new kinds of music-and-theater mixes: antioperas, nonmusicals, performance art, multimedia, extended-voice extravaganzas, and the like (Salzman 2000: 9).

On the whole, Salzman distinguishes between an all-inclusive definition that functions as a portmanteau word or a ‘catchall’ encompassing opera, oratorio, operetta, musical theatre et al., and an exclusionary definition including various types of experimental work that fall in between the established traditions of music theatre:

At one end of this complex new-work spectrum, is experimental opera; at another is the serious, contemporary musical . . . . In between is a large and growing third stream – music-theater in the exclusive, narrow sense – that has grown out of performance art and live multimedia (Salzman 1999: 1-2).

In the more specific, exclusive sense, Salzman points out that the term ‘music theatre’ came to denote “[t]he heretofore excluded middle ranges from chamber opera to experimental work (from nontraditional form and performance setting all the way to extended voice and performance art) to unconventional musicals coming out of the nonprofit and downtown theatre” (Salzman 2002: 64). In this way, the new term ‘music theatre’ assisted in a
the process of self-naming, reflecting rather a politics of legitimacy where a new generation of composers and theatre groups had a need to define themselves as not serious opera, and not light-hearted musical (neither operetta, nor cabaret).

W. Anthony Sheppard (2001) stresses, on the contrary, the continuity of the term and defines the development of ‘modernist music theatre’ not only in terms of its exclusion but of breaking with genre distinctions:

As a loose genre designation, ‘music theater’ is not simply a catchphrase recently concocted by historians of twentieth-century music. Variants of the term were employed earlier in the century, and the phenomenon was noted by many. Jean Cocteau was wise to describe the ‘new form’ of theatrical performance through negation or exclusion; attempting to detail exactly what music theater is or what criteria qualify a work for this designation would run counter to the broadly inclusive spirit signaled by the term. It may be wrong even to think of music theater as a genre, since so much twentieth-century art has been concerned with genre-blurring (Sheppard 2001: 3).

As Sheppard suggests, the blurring of distinct genres is an essential aspect of music theatre. This is also apparent in the performances I discuss, which are generally categorised as, among others, ‘musical narrative’ (vertelconcert, in Dutch), ‘concert installation’, ‘semi-scenic’ staging of operatic theatre, ‘non-linear opera’, etc. Though in these neologisms, music theatre signals its negation from the established ‘genres’ of theatre and opera, its multiple names make it difficult to categorise it as a discrete genre as such. This should not, however, render the contrary definitions, as proposed by Salzman, insufficient, since they relate to a more concrete practice of self-naming and legitimisation in relation to the tradition of music theatre.

Two ideas should be taken into account when considering this double sense of the term ‘music theatre’. On the one hand, the portmanteau definition, which covers all types of music theatre, was in certain contexts reserved to differentiate those performances that focused on the drama, the word or the verbal dialogue (like in Singspiel and opera comique) against opera that would favour lyrical expression (see Keuppens 2006). On the other hand, the more restrictive definition coincides with the socio-political developments of small-scale music theatre often in the nonprofit, state-subsidised sector, as a reaction against the big opera houses (which also attract large sums of state subsidy) and the sometimes even bigger, commercial musical halls. It is in this latter group of small-scale, ‘avant-garde’ music theatre that the tradition is often negated as a way to claim territory. Most of the objects of my case studies came about as part of the latter development of experimental music theatre, in particular the performances by Muziektheater Transparant, LOD and Walpurgis.

Significantly to music theatre’s recent history across international borders, performing artists and composers from the 1960s and 1970s such as Luciano
Berio, Cathy Berberian, John Cage, Philip Glass, Alexander Goehr, Hans Werner Henze, Maurizio Kagel, Georges Aperghis, Luigi Nono and Peter Maxwell Davies reacted against the opera as an ‘institution’ in their musical-dramatic works, which lead to the appearance of the term ‘music theatre’ in the restrictive meaning. Salzman (2000) traces its origins (and confusion) by means of a problem of translation:

> When the neologism musictheater was proposed in the 1960s, it sounded like a translation from the German – which it was. Musiktheater was widely used in central Europe in the sixties and seventies to designate experimental forms of interaction between the concert stage and the theater (see the works of Stockhausen, Kagel, Ligeti, Berio, Bussotti, etc.). In translation, it was intended to distinguish those kinds of musico-theatrical performance works that clearly did not belong in the opera house, the Broadway theater, or the traditional concert stage.

Earlier influences have been suggested, such as Arnold Schoenberg’s Erwartung, Pierrot Lunaire and Die glückliche Hand, Igor Stravinsky’s Renard, A Soldier’s Tale/L’Histoire du soldat and Les Noces (Sheppard 2001: 4). In the tradition of programmatic, symphonic orchestra music, one can add to such lists Edvard Grieg’s Peer Gynt Suite and Sergei Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf, which are both still often performed by youth orchestras or small ensembles – sometimes in experimental arrangements – that incorporate a narrator’s voice. During the 1970s and up until today, a new generation of composers have responded to this tradition with small-scale projects for chamber orchestra (‘chamber opera’) or mixed bands with brass and percussion, but often still within the classical idioms. In this tradition, we can situate Heiner Goebbels in Germany, Georges Aperghis in France, and Philip Glass and Stephen Sondheim in the United States.

The relatively small size of the projects as a defining feature allowed the composers to work more flexibly on a basis of work-in-progress, which was not possible in the opera houses that consumed both time and money. The international spirit also reached North America and especially New York, where the term ‘music theatre’ became a specific designation for musical theatre performances that defined themselves as different from Broadway productions, including the music hall style of singing. Some of the vocal performances in La Didone from the Wooster Group – which provides the case study in chapter two – could also be regarded in relation to the North American, post-operatic tradition of music theatre, which blurs the boundaries with musical styles of singing such as belting (a vibrato-type of singing).

---

Keuppens (2006) suggests, in this respect, that the term ‘music theatre’ refers rather to an organisational form than a genre designation.
The Frequency of Imagination

The issue of music theatre and its definition was taken up in the Netherlands by composers and theatre practitioners such as Willem Breuker, Louis Andriessen, Maurice Horsthuys, Jeff Hamburg and Dick Raajmakers, who initially joined forces in the music theatre ensemble ‘Baal’ (1973-1988). This group came about as a response to the historical ‘Actie Tomaat’ (literally, “tomato coup”) in which students showed their antipathy of conventional, canonical, dramatic text-based theatre. Around the same time, Hauser Orkater (nowadays known as ‘Orkater’ with such spin-off groups as ‘De Mexicaanse Hond’ and ‘Susies Haarlok’) came into existence as a ‘multimedial’ music theatre. The name ‘Orkater’, a combination of ‘orchestra’ and ‘theatre’, reflects its hybrid form (Bobkova 1994: 175). Multimediality became an important feature of the music theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, as both the Baal and (Hauser) Orkater groups exemplify. In their artistic proclamations, these groups reacted vehemently against the large-scale musical and the Wagnerian opera that were seen by these experimental groups as “shabby staged concerts” (Schönberger 1988: 106). Influenced by Bertolt Brecht and the physical theatre (Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre), they rediscovered the dramatic function of music in performances that would not be merely ‘stage music’. Auditory disturbances are integrally part of this aesthetic project that is generally defined by deliberate resistance and contrast. For this purpose, audio technology and electronics were introduced, as is similar to the works of Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk in North-America of the 1980s up until today.

Music theatre in the Netherlands answered to an artistic need for differentiation and resistance to the old opera houses. Ironically, it was the counter-reaction by the Dutch Opera that (re-)claimed the catch-all definition in 1986 when it renamed itself “Het Muziektheater” with its opening of the new opera house next to the Amstel and the town hall in Amsterdam. The state-subsidised opera re-appropriated the self-naming trend to rejuvenate itself, which added perhaps even more to the confusion of terminology. The terminological confusion comes with a territorial struggle for legitimacy and institutionalisation. However, the resisting stream of music theatre gradually also found more stable grounds within the theatre. Recently, in 2004, Paul Koek founded the Veenfabriek in Leiden for such small-scale music theatre works that are not operatic but rather react to the theatre traditions.

1 The first performance was realised in 1972 under the name of ‘Hauser Kamerorkest’. In 1980, the Hauser Orkater group came to an end. However, some of its members continued in different collaborations under different names such as ‘De Horde van Jim van der Woude’ (1981-1984), ‘De Mexicaanse Hond’ (1980 – to the present) and ‘Orkater’.

8 Paul Koek made a great contribution to the continuation of music theatre in the Netherlands, first for ZT Hollandia, and is known for his pleas of breaking the boundaries between performers and musicians on stage. These groups are very much musically oriented with a balanced mix of speech, visual aesthetics, performance and nonsensical communication. They do not directly fall under the reach of my study, despite their relations with musical, text-based

8
Veenfabriek takes the relation between theatre and society as its primary concern of investigation through music and auditory means of communication, including mostly the use of popular idioms and rhythms. The theatre works of Paul Koek have also included the use of electronics by composers who move between the operatic and theatrical traditions, such as Yannis Kyriakides. In recent developments of through-composed experiments with electroacoustic music on both the opera and theatre stage, we can also include the work of Huba De Graaff, Michel van der Aa and Robert Zuidam.

In Belgium, similar developments occurred in the establishment of music theatre. Most of the small-scale music theatre ensembles were established in the 1980s, some as independent, others from within the opera houses and the ‘serious’ classical music. Gerard Mortier was the first to launch the movement ‘from opera to theatre’ in De Munt/La Monnaie in Brussels and later the Flemish Opera in Antwerp and Ghent (Keuppens 2006). This trend has been recently taken up again in both Flemish and Dutch opera houses by collaborating with theatre makers such as Jan Fabre, Gerardjan Rijnders, Ivo van Hove and Johan Simons. Up until today, small-scale music theatres such as LOD (originally ‘Muziektheater Lod’ since 1989, an abbreviation of “Lunch Op Donderdag”), Muziektheater Transparant (1994), and smaller groups such as Walpurgis (1989), Tirasila (1995) and Braakland/ZheBilding (1998) have a growing influence on the international development of music theatre, as also witnessed in the Netherlands and Germany. The growing influence of Muziektheater Transparant on mainstream opera, for instance, has led to various small-scale opera performances and collaborations (such as with Opera Mobile, the Flemish Opera and De Munt/La Monnaie). Many of these music theatre ‘houses’ support the creation of new music theatre works, such as by the composers in residence of LOD (Kris Defoort, Dick van der Harst, Jan Kuijken, Dominique Pauwels) and Muziektheater Transparant (Wim Henderickx, Peter Maxwell Davies, Jan Van Outryve, and Eric Sleichim). It was not until 1993 that they received state funding under the Decree for Stage Arts (‘Podiumkunstendecreet’). A separate category was established for music theatre, which was defined as “opera, operetta, musical and multidisciplinary art expressions.”

For the purpose of my study, I choose to look at those performances that take music as a primary means of expression and acoustic communication as far as this initiates in auditory distress in order to contest our modes of listening. I see, however, much reason to also extend the concepts of my study, such as ‘auditory distress’ and ‘aurality’, to their performances.  

9 The Flemish Opera, De Munt/La Monnaie, the Royal Ballet of Flanders and commercialised musical were originally excluded from funding, though opera is generally funded as cultural institute. Today, there is a lot of public discussion as to whether musicals should also be subsidised. From 2009, for the first time, musical theatre such as Judas Theaterproducties and Musical van Vlaanderen (formerly known as Geert Allaert Productions and Music Hall) will be taken into consideration for structural subsidies allocated by the Department of Culture at the Ministry of the Flemish Community. Apart from LOD, Muziektheater Transparant and
In other words, the history of what Salzman further calls ‘new’ music theatre – to mark the restrictive sense – is fairly recent, as young, evolving and still not well-defined form, hinging upon avant-garde traditions (like auditory distress, shock effect and re-integration of the senses). The development of music theatre comes together with the development of nonlinear, nonverbal forms of performance art such as the earlier mentioned ‘post-dramatic theatre’. Consequently, most small-scale music theatre attracts only a select audience, privileging the individual listener. It has therefore often been exposed to scrutiny as it comes to matters of funding and public interest. This exclusive position of the listener, however, makes it highly valuable for studying the role of music and audio theatre as a place of contestation and transformation of our listening culture. As a type of theatre in so many different forms, it has always been under the pressure of reaction against older, obsolete forms, as Salzman (2000) comments:

Ever since its invention in Italy in 1600, opera has been constantly reinvented as music-theater—dramma per musica—because opera has always threatened to become, well, too operatic: too old, too showy, too devoted to its past, too removed from the concerns of its time. And, above all, too obsessed with voce, voce, voce. It is curious that somehow opera manages to be simultaneously too aristocratic and too popular, as well as too social, too outrageous, too bogged down in the status quo, too expensive, and too starstruck. Hence the long series of reforms […] (10).

As Salzman suggests, a history of music theatre should be understood as a chain of reactions, resistances, reinventions and reforms, rather than a homogeneous development. As such, most twentieth century music theatre can be regarded, in essence, as a reaction against nineteenth century ‘bourgeois’ opera. Within this tradition, Wagner’s realisation of music drama – he calls it Wort-Ton drama – as modelled by the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk was itself already a reformation of the tradition. Through this model, he defined the drama as primarily constituted through the music and re-positioned the listener in a new concept of the auditorium. Its apparatus and acoustic design, however, were devised to fade out the auditory disturbances of industrial life outside the auditorium under the guarantee of persistent aural pleasure. Within the twentieth century context and interest for the growing

Walpurgis, several more ensembles receive structural funding for music theatre (2006/08-2009), such as: Braakland/ZheBilding (founded 1998), Figuren Theater De Spiegel (1993), Art House Pantalone (1999), Compagnie KAIE! (2003) and Van Zilver Papier en Speigeltjes (2005). After its last project subsidy in 2006, Tirasila (1995) has had no further activity. Text-based theatre Ensemble Leporello (1986) also makes a type of music theatre in terms of rhythmised performances with musicians and vocalists. A newly established ensemble, Service to Others (Het Verbond) by film and theatre maker Wayn Traub, is promising to influence the development of music theatre as multimedia performance. For more information see the text by Veerle Keuppens (2006) on the website of the Flemish Theatre Institute (VTI).
Tuning into the Frequency

aural complexity, this ‘auditory distress’ became aesthetically, emancipatory and politically significant. The acoustic intervention became a strategy of avant-garde movements to break with the traditional models. The Wagnerian music theatre apparatus was then no longer sufficient.

Nonetheless, the conceptual idea and staging practice of the Gesamtkunstwerk lives forth in its many recuperations of integrating the senses by some form of ‘total theatre’. Salzman suggests this in 1974, when he defines the at the time newly developing music theatre as “a loosely applied term for theater works or events that involve some merging of arts, forms, techniques, means, and electronic media, all directed at more than one of the senses and generally involving some kind of total surrounding” (Salzman 1974; qtd. in Sheppard 2001: 5).10 In this broad definition, today’s music theatre unmistakably carries some of the myths of the Wagnerian ‘artwork of the future’, but not without the critical and destabilising intervention of what I will conceptualise as ‘auditory distress’. The objects and examples of my study will help me to further conceptualise this destabilisation of such a concept as ‘total music theatre’, to which I will return in the epilogue to this study.

2. Auditory Distress as a Conceptual Basis for a New Approach

The complex developments of music theatre make it significant to look at how this newly ‘becoming’ art form addresses present-day audiences, specifically in what it does to the listener. The first example of De Overstroming already presented a notable impression of the way this music theatre addresses the listener by offering an excess of intensities and potential meanings through music. I want to argue that this excess produces an effect of ‘auditory distress’ on the listener.

The swift and agitated musical phrases in Kuijken’s half-improvised music concealed a sense of distress that made me interpret my musical experiences in relation to Peter Handke’s story. The darkness and emptiness of the stage only intensified my freely ‘flooding’ associations in terms of mental images and possible narrative threads, inferred from the story. This supported my impression that the music was narrating something quite similar to the story, and my feeling of distress was key to this idea. At the same time, the music presented me with a limit to my narrative interpretations since it left me fumbling and groping in the same darkness of the blind brother in Handke’s story as to the validity of the narration that I conceived in my mind. The scepticism of the blind brother filled me with critical doubt about my imaginative efforts to interpret the music as a narrative. If music cannot be narrative by itself, I asked myself: How can I have a sense that something is

---

being told through music? This question brought me to the hypothesis that music can only become narrative as a response in listening that brings resolution to the excess. The emptiness of the stage – and thereby, what I call its ‘visual deprivation’ – intensified this response in my perception.

From these experiences in De Overstroming, I deduce my main thesis: Sound – including music or any other sound experience in the theatre – produces a level of auditory distress. This distress calls for a response in the listener with which she or he tries to control the auditory distress. I argue that this reaction forms the basis of each auditory perception. In the listener’s response, processes of signification – like the inference of a narrative development in De Overstroming – play a considerable role. As such, perception and signification cannot be understood as separate from each other. I propose therefore to carefully investigate the responses of the listener to auditory distress in different music theatre performances. Once a response is established and conceptualised, I focus specifically at how this response contributes to meaningful listening experiences in the theatre. I thereby assert that the listener’s response is key to an understanding of what is at stake in these music theatre performances.

My hypothesis that auditory distress always plays a significant role in how we experience music theatre (or any operatic form for that matter) also sheds light on the tradition of music theatre. Traditional opera or music drama, especially in the vein of Wagner’s model, was construed in such a way that it did not confront the listener with an awareness of the distress created by the music. Rather, the listener’s auditory experience was supporting a narrative, a dramatic action, a sense of coherency or synthesis between the different elements, etc. which would channel the distress and make it unperceived as such. The music theatre I discuss disrupts the evident mechanisms that would compensate the auditory distress. In this way, this music theatre highlights particular qualities in the sound or music that cause awareness for the distress in listening. Auditory distress marks a certain uncontrollability of sound within the otherwise controlled space of the theatre.

The listener’s awareness of this uncontrollability of sound also affects her or his individual responses, which are – needless to say – subjective, and in most cases unnoticed. However, theatre also has its own in-built strategies to direct the listener’s attention and assist in the ways she or he deals with the uncontrollable and disturbing qualities of sound. Traditionally, theatre always creates perspectives for the spectator with regard to how theatrical objects and events are represented on stage, but also how the spectator perceives them. Apart from such perspectives that catches the eye’s attention, theatre also always includes a number of perspectives for the ear that do not only derive from the distinct acoustics of the physical theatre space, but also influence the way the listener perceives and interprets the sounds and music. I will argue that such perspectives in listening might well be predisposed by a text through
focalization as a very specific perspective. Listening perspectives might then well be embedded in a narrative or dramatic development, in speech and action, in the spatial arrangement of the stage and its frame, etc.

In conventional forms of music theatre and opera, these perspectives help us to ‘immerse’ ourselves in the drama and forget about the confines of the theatrical situation or our physical position in the auditorium. The theatrical perspective operates then through our distance to the stage, which is brought nearer through these mechanisms. Music theatre today, however, does not provide easy solutions through its perspectives to compensate for the auditory distress in our responses.

As De Overstroming shows, the juxtaposition of text, image and music resists a unified experience that would fixate meanings and intensify the drama in a unilateral way. The music was only one part in this structure, imposing its auditory distress on the listener, urging the listeners to find a meaningful structure themselves. It was only during and even after the performance that this juxtaposition started to mould together gradually in my imagination, stimulating associations and connections, giving me some promise of closure while reproducing the excess of the ‘flood’ of which the story goes. The performance rather mystified these connections in its staging, than that it gave an unambiguous frame of interpretation. I compensated this lack of a frame with the point of view from the story: the blind brother guided me a way out of this flood of sounds. The perspective of the blind brother could therefore also serve as a perspective for the listening experience. It gave me a ‘point of listening’ or a ‘point of audition’ (Chion 1994). This listening perspective gave me direction in my responses to deal with the auditory distress that the music caused. It directed my attention in search of some narrative development, which I compared to Peter Handke’s story.

In order to understand how auditory distress in today’s music theatre plays upon the listener’s competences to respond in listening, and how these responses contribute to meaningful auditory experiences, we need a theoretical framework that includes both theories of sound perception and signification. The aim of this framework is the analysis of the specific address/response relations of the listener in a mode of relating to the sounds and music in a performance. The models of analysis in Theatre Studies and Musicology, which mutually contribute to the study of music theatre, have, however, been developed in relation to more traditional forms of dramatic theatre and opera. The main enquiry in my study is therefore to critically examine existing theories and concepts that can help to describe the workings of music theatre in relation to the listener’s auditory experiences in the post-modern paradigm.

Time-honoured scholarship of semiotics (and semiology) in both Musicology and Theatre Studies has established particular sets of tools to describe music as a sign in relation to an analysable ‘text’. These semiotic models, which were mostly developed during the 1970s have treated the study
of both music and theatre as a largely philological enterprise, grounded in linguistics. In traditional theatre, music and sound can be studied in relation to the other constituents of a performance, which establish a certain theatrical ‘code’ or ‘text’ that can be analysed, or even ‘decoded’. The semiotic tradition (including Kowzan 1975, Pavis 1976, Ubersfeld 1977, Elam 1980, Fischer-Lichte 1983, and Esslin 1988) then allows one to analyse the auditory ‘system’ in the text of the performance descriptively in terms of signs of emotion, action, dramatic impact, musical puns, underscoring, framing, etc. A sociosemiotic approach (Bryant-Bertail 1990) would add the significance of the socio-cultural context as implied in, for instance, ‘genre’, which brings in its own iconic relations and cultural associations with a piece of music or a sound. This theatre semiotic tradition focuses on the ‘inherent’ meanings of signs and the receiver’s recognition of the intent that leads to the judgment of a given semiotic object or relation between objects. In a more dynamic model for semiotic analysis, Patrice Pavis (1996) has drawn attention to ‘vectors’ between signs that suggest a relative mobility of meanings relative to the spectator’s attention. Most of these semiotic approaches, however, do not explain why a given object or event is interpreted as a sign in the spectator’s perception. Most of the models presuppose that mostly everything in the theatre, intentionally or not, has a meaning in relation to one another in a dense but exhaustive network.

The theatre semiotic approach generally influenced the systematic reflection on sound design in the theatre (as described in many manuals in theatre practice and stage design, like Kaye and LeBrecht 1992). This approach generally treats sound or music then in terms of ‘effects’ on an audience in relation to text and scenic action. Jon Whitmore’s (1994) analysis of aural sign systems in post-modern theatre, for instance, provides an example of how theatre makers can think of sound and music in terms of their function in the play. Whitmore’s semiotic angle on how the use of sound and music communicates the performance’s meanings does not bear much information about the listening act as such, nor explains the reasons why the listener attributes meaning to sounds other than that it belongs to the overall expectation in the signifying system of the theatre. Whitmore also explains how music can affect the impact of the dramatic action on the emotional experience of the audience, but he therefore limits his discussion of the function of sound to a dramatic tradition where text and action are the primary carriers of meaning. When Whitmore does refer on one occasion to the distressing nature of sound that can ‘enrage’ the emotions and ‘assault’ the psyche of the spectators by such effects as reinforcement, distortion, disharmony, the disturbance becomes rather a dramaturgical strategy that aims at “an aural stretching of the audience’s horizon of expectations” (Whitmore 1994: 189-90). I contend, however, that auditory distress is not merely a
strategy with a premeditated effect, but that it belongs to every auditory experience in the theatre.

In semiological theories of music, structures of musical *signifiers* and *signifieds* are generally analysed through their notations in a written score (see Karbusicky 1990, Monelle 1992, Tarasti 1995). The study of Musicology has developed its own instrumentarium for music analysis that focuses primarily on a written score. In opera scholarship too, the author’s intents are traditionally studied in the score and libretto, which has historical validity in relation to the particular performance practice of a given opera. Evidently, opera has its own history, its own conventions and therefore, its own scholarly literature, which is traditionally grounded in musicology. Yet the semiotic study of music has given too much importance to musical notation. With the advent of newly developing forms of music theatre, there is a need for new approaches in opera criticism and scholarship (which has also been fairly underrepresented in many academic libraries). Therefore, there have been many singular attempts of new research on musical performance and opera within musicological scholarship that embrace topical issues such as hybridity, performativity, multimedia, intermediality, etc. (see Cook 1990, Levinson 1990). However, apart from these new impulses, such as in music-ethnographical research and the literary-minded ‘New Musicology’ (McClary 1991, Kramer 2002), the study of the ‘performative’ aspects in new forms of opera and music theatre still needs expansion.

During the past thirty years, musicologists have been contributing to the theoretical debate and scholarship of traditional music theatre with, among others, the establishment of opera theory as a discrete discipline. Opera theory has opened the way for new approaches that encompass philosophical and conceptual considerations into the critical study of the score, the libretto and the staging in conjunction with one another (see, for instance, Kivy 1979, Abbate 2001, Levin 2007). One development in this direction is the welcoming of issues such as narrativity and narration in music that go beyond the idea of meaning as verbal paraphrase (see Cone 1974, Newcomb 1987, Nattiez 1990, Neubauer 1997, Wolf 2002, Rabinowitz 2004, Tarasti 2004, Meelberg 2006). These new developments have enabled to inquire why the perceiver creates meaning, rather than analysing musical or acoustic signs descriptively and systematically according to given semiotic models.

---

11 Today, the many forms and rapid developments of (new) music theatre calls for international discussion and reflection, such as provided by NewOp/NonOp initiated by Dragan Klaic (TIN) and Lukas Païron (Walpurgis, Ictus) in 1992. I had the privilege of sharing my questions and expertise in theatre studies with musicologists in various discussion groups such as the IFTR/FIRT Music Theatre Working Group (from 2004, in respectively St. Petersburg, Washington, Portsmouth and Helsinki), the AG Musik-Theater der Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft (at the Hellerau Festival in Dresden in 2006), the many ASCA meetings, reading groups, the Research Colloquium of Theatre Studies and the Collegium Musicologum at the University of Amsterdam.
However, performance analysis within opera theory still requires further
development. Although contemporary music theatre as my object of study is
in many ways different to opera, operatic scholarship can be taken further for
the purpose of analysis of (new) music theatre. I therefore adopt some of
opera theory’s concerns to focus on music theatre as a performance of music
in the first place, taking the sounding score as I have experienced the
performance acoustically – and not its notated form – as my primary object.
By taking the listener’s responses to ‘auditory distress’ as my main focus, I
also detach any musicological debate of the aesthetic claims and subjective
definitions of what music is from what the auditory experiences in music
theatre actually do to the listener. Music is foremost discussed for its sounding
qualities that could cause auditory distress, alongside other manifestations of
sound, noise, infra/ultrasound or even silence. In this way, I wish to do justice
to this newly becoming music theatre that has embraced many other sonorities
and auditory structures that surpass the purely ‘musical’ for performative
purposes. The performative ‘moment’ then defines the compelling urge of the
listener to respond to auditory distress.

The theoretical framework that is needed for such a performance analysis
of music theatre should connect theories of perception and listening to a
semiotic approach that provides a critical perspective on how and why the
listener produces meaningful experiences. In relation to the traditional
approaches to opera and music, I propose my study of the listener’s responses
to auditory distress in music theatre as complementary to the theoretical
developments in both theatre studies and musicology for at least two reasons.

On the one hand, my approach attempts to offer an answer to the need for
theoretical concepts that are adequate to discuss the practice and workings of
music theatre today in relation to the modern listener’s modes of listening. In
doing so, I examine theoretical concepts that have often emerged from visual
and literary theories, not as exclusively different but rather in relation to them.
I discuss the ‘aural’ concepts from within their respective theories and
disciplines as heuristic tools for the application to my objects in contemporary
music theatre. In this way, I investigate how music theatre works in its
particular address of the spectator-listener and her or his acts of listening. On
the other hand, I contribute to the theoretical discussion of sound in
contemporary theatre with a wider scope of audio culture and, what I will call,
‘aurality’.¹² Aurality includes then everything that pertains to hearing and

¹² My notion of ‘aurality’ aims to distatinate itself from Walter Ong’s (1988) understanding of
orality and oral culture as opposed to literacy and literate culture. Based on Marshall
McLuhan’s distinction of oral and literate societies, Ong defines an oral culture as one where
people are unfamiliar with reproducing language in a written form. He then opposes a primary
oral culture to the literate world where one is committed to writing and print. Ong recognises
within the modern literate world a tendency of second orality which is dominated by a growth of
electronic modes of communication (telephone, television, radio, etc.). The term orality,
however, suggests a close connection to the ‘oral’ production of sound for the sake of language.
listening, including our competence(s) and culture(s) in listening. Aurality should however not be mistaken for ‘audibility’. ‘Aurality’ together with ‘audition’ should rather be regarded as complementary to visuality and vision in Jonathan Crary’s understanding of our changing modes of perception and subjectivity.

For this purpose, an approach is needed that combines perception theories with theories of semiosis and cultural discourse. My study therefore adopts theories of the subject in relation to perception and signification (Barthes & Havas 1973, Connor 1997/2000, Crary 1999) that are fruitful for the discussion of cultural discourse (Silverman 1983/1988). My study further adopts a prosperous interdisciplinary approach by looking at concepts from a plethora of disciplines, such as soundscape analysis (Schafer 1977, Truax 1984, van Leeuwen 1999), sound in film theory (Doane 1980, Chion 1983/1994), media theory and audio culture history (Kittler 1993, de Kerckhove 1997, Kahn 1994/2001, Bull & Back 2003, Cox & Warner 2004), phenomenology and perception theories (Ihde 1976, Maconie 1990, Rodaway 1994, Connor 1997/2000), psychoacoustics and psychology (Forrester 2000, Cytowic 1993, Sacks 2007), as well as narratology (Bal 1985, Abbott 2002, Fludernik 1996, Jahn 2001, etc.) as far as they help me to conceptualise the listener in relation to her or his discursive responses in listening. Innovative in this approach is the perspective of auditory distress as a primarily sonorous manifestation in the listener, which has a physical, cognitive and psychological basis. This new approach, however, remains within the confines of the humanities and therefore limits its argumentation to a critical appraisal of the above-mentioned theories and disciplines for the purpose of discussing the case studies, which I will treat as examples or illustrations of the discussed concepts. The argument about auditory distress underlying this study focuses in the first place on the act of listening as a complex cognitive mechanism to respond to the distress, and in the second place as a discursive practice of reading and interpreting the auditory experiences in music theatre performances.

In summary, the notion of auditory distress as a conceptual departure point helps me to explain how we relate to sounds and music in the theatre, which are initially marked by some kind of disturbance or intervention on our senses and cognition. As I will elaborate on further, this disturbance is caused by an excess of intensities due to an essential insufficiency between hearing and listening. This insufficiency is often intensified by a visually deprived context.
in the theatre. In such a context, one sense (modality) is usually isolated and intensified in relation to the other senses. To give an example from De Overstroming, the intensification is realised by darkening the stage in a black-box theatre context. This visual deprivation is also literally thematised in Handke’s story by the perspective of the blind brother. In contrast to this lack of visual stimuli, the title could refer to the excess of images that the narrating brother conveys. The excess is also realised in the performance through the many associations the listener can make with Kuijken’s improvisational style of composing based on the images in the narration. Through both lack and excess of stimuli, the listener feels compelled to respond to the excess by channelling the sensory information, selecting what is necessary for interpretation, and rendering her or his auditory experiences meaningful.

For the purpose of analysing the listener’s responses, I look at the auditory experiences in terms of modes of relation, in which I distinguish three types of response: the modes of listening (chapter two), narrativisation (chapter three) and auditory imagination (chapter four). As I will argue, the process of relating by means of the listener’s responses is ‘managed’ by the particular perspectives in the performance, including focalization, such as the perspective of the blind brother in De Overstroming. This management implies a crucial questioning of the agency of the listener, as it attributes a certain authority to sound within the performance’s structure of address. Additionally, I will argue that the act of listening is predominantly embedded in a cultural discourse shared by other listeners in the audience that constitutes a community in listening. This discourse has shaped the way the listener responds, makes sense of, and thereby, positions oneself as listening subject in relation to the auditory distress. Therefore, by studying the listener’s responses, the workings of music theatre on listening reveal how these performances act upon their own, contemporary cultural discourse.

3. Outlining the Research

In the first chapter, “Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound”, I state that auditory distress forms the basis of listening. I will argue that this distress stems from a necessary intervention of sound in surpassing certain thresholds of exposure in an acoustic horizon, and in the ear, in order to address the listener. In this penetrating nature of sound, I conceptualise the listener’s address as marked by a level of uncontrollability in relation to the auditory environment. This uncontrollability results in a crisis of the listener as interpreting subject. The crisis then stimulates the listener to solve the disturbance, channel the intensities, make sense of the listening experience, and ultimately, control the distress. Auditory distress as a signal for the uncontrollability of sound invites us then to look at the listener’s capacity (i.e. ‘aural competency’), or sometimes insufficiency to respond to the distress.
This is primarily an issue of agency. As such, the concept of auditory distress generates a central question about the agency of the listener as ‘subject’ in relation to the ‘authoritative’ power of sound that calls for the listener’s response.

In order to conceptualise a notion of the subject in relation to listening, I will refer to the idea of the ‘acoustic mirror’ in early infancy, which describes how the child constitutes a sense of auditory ‘self’ in relation to the enveloping sound of the mother. This so-called ‘sonorous envelope’ finds subsequent representations in music and music theatre, which can cause both a sense of pleasure and auditory distress to the listener due to its qualities of excess. The distress is usually intensified in the theatre by its context of sensory – often visual – deprivation. As an illustration of this mechanism, I will connect the concept of visual deprivation to Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of an acoustic or auditory gaze, which helps me to explain how sound as intervention can draw attention to the auditory distress that is inherent to every sound. Auditory intervention then marks the crisis of the auditory subject, which can make the listener aware of her or his role in the responses to the auditory distress in order to solve this crisis. As a significant consequence, the listener feels an urge to position her or himself due to the unbalancing effect that auditory distress creates. I wish to argue that the listener’s position plays an important function in making the auditory experience into something meaningful. In this way, the response to auditory distress involves a discursive position that arises in relation to an ‘acoustic community’ to which the listener relates in listening.

In chapter two, “The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective”, I continue on this impact of auditory distress that unbalances the listener as a listening subject by an insufficiency inherent to the relation between (passive) hearing and (active) listening, such as Paul Rodaway (1994) formulates: “Hearing may be described as the basic passive sensation, whilst listening implies an active attentiveness to auditory information and a desire to establish meaning” (89). I will demonstrate how this unsteady relation between hearing and listening calls for a management of our attention in the theatre. I will point to the significance of perspectives in the theatre in managing the listening attention. As a first response to these perspectives that influence our perception of auditory distress, I introduce the modes of listening, as discussed in Schafer’s Soundscape Analysis and Truax’s Acoustic Communication studies, enriched by Chion’s studies of the film soundtrack and Barthes’s philosophical reflections on psychoanalytic listening with ‘evenly hovering attention’.

Central to this discussion is a critique of Stockfelt’s ‘ideal’ modes of listening, suggesting an aural competence by the listener. Despite the resonances with Schafer’s pleas for sonological competence through ear-cleaning exercises, her theoretisations help me to conceptualise the listening
modes in terms of a continuum that continuously shifts between these modalities:

An analysis must therefore begin from such shifts between modes of listening […] Hence we must develop our competence reflexively to control the use of, and the shifts between, different modes of listening to different types of sound events (Stockfelt 2004: 92).

In order to anchor these modes of listening – which foremost refer to our daily experiences – in our experiences of the theatre, Jonathan Crary’s approach to the modes of perception and the cultural practice of managing attention offers the conceptual link. His approach might be different from my argument. However, his argument about how all experience is embedded in a specific cultural-historical context, which is mediated in the ways our attention are managed through perspectives, is very helpful to conceptualise ‘attention’ in relation to the modes of listening. According to his argument, our information-saturated world has turned our ears and our capacities of ‘paying attention’ conscientiously into “a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli” (Crary 1999: 1). I conceptualise this necessary act of filtering out ‘unnecessary’ auditory stimuli through the modes of listening, depending on the way we move our attention as our personal and subjective ‘tentacle’ with which we spatially control auditory distress. I then look at these modes in relation to the given perspectives in the theatre in great detail, and show how we switch between them in relation to the perspectives in looking and listening, which call upon the necessity of a frame of reference. One example is the messy intertwining of reduced, causal and acousmatic listening modes in a ‘schizophonic’ listening situation, which offers a perspective that is based on a fundamental split between sound and its source. Similar to the earlier idea of auditory gazing, this split urges the listener to move her or his attention in search for linkages in the performance that would anchor the sounds, resulting in a plethora of listening modes. This listening situation illustrates that, when a stable frame is lacking, the continuous switching between modes of listening can cause an impasse in the listener.

Once the connection between the listening subject and the modes of attention is established, I further investigate two specific responses towards the auditory interventions in the following chapters, respectively narrativisation, and auditory imagination, as particular coping mechanisms against the uncontrollable ‘danger’ of sound.

In chapter three, “The Narrative Response: Narrativisation and Focalization”, I take the concept of narrativisation and redefine it as a most compelling mode of listening that can help the listener to solve the impasse between perception and interpretation. Through the notions of musicalisation (as a ‘post-dramatic’ principle) and vocal distress, among others, I
demonstrate how a narrative mode of listening can work as a coping mechanism in relation to the excess in listening that materialises in a semiotic remainder. For this purpose, I need to redefine the notions of narrative and narrativity in the traditional narratological models. My investigation of narrative theories – especially the psychological and cognitive approaches – help me further to discuss narrativisation as a particular semiotic mode of listening that helps the listener to create coherency and structure in her or his auditory experiences.

I conceptualise narrativisation further as a result of the listener’s way of positioning oneself in listening. I contend that this positioning can be contained by focalization as one specific perspective, which can extend from a text to the performance. This perspective generates then a narrative impulse in the listener to interpret the music narratively as a specific response to auditory distress. Due to the earlier claimed insufficiency of listening and music’s inability to really narrate anything specific, narrativisation seeks relations to other elements in the performance. Narrativity, in this sense, should be understood as an applied narrativity to complete the musical experience. The role of a programme brochure prior to or after the experience, for instance, can be highly significant for generating a narrative impulse in the listener to narrativise the events, even when the performance appears to suspend any apparent narrative development. In relation to music theatre’s paradoxical relation to narrativity, I discuss two pairs of related modes to which the notion of narrativisation could supply a new perspective: a concert or recital mode versus a representational mode, and an oral versus a literate mode of listening. These pairs show how, despite the opacity of a medium such as music, the listener can still feel an urge to narrativise the auditory events in relation to the general representation or to text on stage.

Chapter four, “The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation”, discusses auditory imagination as a third possible response by the listener to auditory distress. In order to understand its distinctive role, I compare this notion to narrativisation as they both contribute to a sense of coherency and order, which relate to a sense in the listener of being a unified subject. There is reason to believe that narrativisation is part of auditory imagination. However, more traditional definitions of imagination would also suggest differences in terms of structuring perception through cognition and memory. As opposed to the homogenising effect of narrativisation, auditory imagination has been too narrowly conceptualised as a disturbance to our inner thoughts, an echo of musical phrases in our auditory memories. In contrast to the existing theories, I propose a more wide-ranging notion of auditory imagination that encompasses our faculty to form mental images and bring coherence into our perceptions.

By way of conceptualising how the workings of the imagination are emphasised on stage, I demonstrate how the construct of the theatre can be
The Frequency of Imagination

seen as an extension of our cognitive processes: as 'theatre of the mind' it reflects our imagination. I show how the opacity of music makes the listener aware of the construct that extends these cognitive processes. As such, this music theatre demonstrates how it operates as a metaphor for the imagination with its sometimes deceptive, homogenising workings. At the core of this discussion is the influence of visual deprivation and sonorous envelope in creating an embodied or ‘haptic’ sense of space in relation to one’s own body. I then illustrate how the sonorous envelope can stimulate an imaginative response in the listener to create an imaginary space as a response to the power of auditory distress to destabilise a sense of self. I argue that spatialisation should then be understood as a specific response of the imagination to create coherence, besides the representations of space in the performance, the sounds or the music.

Chapter five, “Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre”, forms an epilogue to these chapters, opening up the discussion to how music theatre, with its relation to auditory distress, operates in the wider framework of aurality and the politics of listening today. In this final chapter, I take up the discussion of music theatre’s relation to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* and relate it to Artaud’s visions on the active role of the spectator in the theatre (see also the main epigraph to this study). Three recurrent features of contemporary music theatre, which came up during my investigations, are essential to this discussion: dissociation (as part of the split perceptions), fragmentation (in space and subject) and the authority of sound versus the agency of the (competent) listener.

I will conclude this discussion with the listener’s self-awareness and introspection as listening subject called upon by the auditory interventions, instigating a lack of control and a sense of semiotic remainder in the act of listening. By referring back to Stockfelt’s earlier assumptions, namely that “we must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active ‘idle listeners’” (Stockfelt 2004: 93), I examine the significance of such concerns in the workings of music theatre today, when this type of theatre creates self-criticism about its construct, opacity and mediality in producing meaningful auditory experiences that relate to our present-day aural culture.

4. Unsettling the Case Studies

The relevance of the selected performances, first of all, is to be located in the position they take against the tradition of opera and music drama in unsettling, contesting and highlighting different aspects of our modes of listening. Rather than choosing one type of music theatre, I have selected a plethora of performance styles that use sound as their central critical strategy. In this sense, the diversity in form between these performances reflects the history of resistance towards a definition of ‘music theatre’, as I argued earlier, because
of its ‘unsettling’ relation towards theatre and opera histories. Second, the performances serve as paradigmatic examples of certain models of experience as they are chosen for the extremity in their experimentation with sound and music as the primary means to activate and often contest our modes of relation in listening as a response to auditory distress. By way of introducing the case studies, I wish to frame them in their respective traditions and characteristics in order to show how each of these objects demands significant shifts of attention in our theoretical approach to them. By means of the arguments, themes and concepts introduced above, I wish to show how each of my case studies exemplifies these shifts of attention in recent theoretical developments.

In chapter one, I first introduce an interactive installation, David Rokeby’s *n-Cha(n)t* (2001), which I then compare to a recent music theatre performance to demonstrate the implications of such concepts as ‘acoustic community’ and the ‘sonorous envelope’ (the wrap-around effect of sound). The performance is Josse De Pauw’s *Ruhe* (2007-2008) for Muziektheater Transparant, which combines texts from the literary novel “De SS-ers” (*The SS Men*) by Armando Sleutelaar, with songs from Franz Shubert, sung live by the Collegium Vocale of Ghent. The use of music in this performance can be regarded within a recent development of ‘post-dramatic’ theatre as formulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999). Because of its ambiguity, Lehmann regards music as an integral part of a larger project in theatre to break with the confinements of an obvious, linear, goal-oriented or teleological structure. In what he terms “post-dramatic” theatre – a term that has now been generally accepted in theatre studies – Lehmann discusses musicalisation as a strategy in this project, which could expand to other elements in the performance, or to its whole organisation.

Based on a lecture by Helene Varoupoulo (1998), the idea of musicalisation gives way to the metaphor of ‘theater as music’. In musicalisation, Lehmann finds a different way of structuring theatrical communication that breaks free from the confinements of ‘logocentrism’ (the word as centre of attention), causality and *telos* (purposefulness), as constitutive for dramatic theatre. It therefore serves as a dramaturgical strategy to unsettle dramatic, narrative, linear structures that aim at one, culminating point (like ‘catharsis’ in the tradition of dramatic theatre). Similarly in *Ruhe*, musicalisation of text and stage purposefully disconnects the elements that produce meaning, and unsettles the narratives told by former SS officers that argue for National Socialism. It startles the listener and shows that nothing is as it first appears.

Lehmann conceptualises musicalisation as a critical strategy in post-dramatic theatre to explain today’s many cross-fertilisations of musical performance with text-based theatre. Though based on a tradition of musical drama, *La Didone* (2007-2009) by The Wooster Group can be regarded as an example of this strategy, as I discuss in chapter two. The performance
The Frequency of Imagination

includes the baroque opera or, as it was then called, ‘dramma per musica’ under the same title by Francesco Cavalli in 1641. It was programmed as experimental opera during the opera festival ‘Operadagen Rotterdam’. In this staging, the original music drama was, however, overlayed with the cult science fiction film Terrore Nello Spazio (1965) from Mario Bava, better known as the Planet of the Vampires. The ancient story of Dido constantly switches back and forth with the story of American astronauts fighting against an invisible enemy on the planet Aura, as if both worlds were running parallel to each other in time. The juxtaposition went hand in hand with a bombardment of sound effects taken from the science fiction movie, blips and beeps that kept playing with the listener’s modes of attention. Though staged in the context of an opera festival, The Wooster Group is not generally known for making opera or music theatre. Rather, it relates to a post-dramatic theatre paradigm of intricately layered soundscapes that cut through the text as part of their dramaturgical investigations. In an indirect way, the approach of The Wooster Group breaks with a tradition of sound designs in the theatre where sound was only ‘added’ as long as it did not ‘disturb’ the drama as expressed through text or speech. In The Wooster Group’s La Didone, the disturbing quality of sound is highlighted.

Historically in dramatic theatre, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov or Samuel Beckett were very conspicuous about the use of sound and music for purposes such as framing, underscoring, transitional effects or specific cues such as ambience.13 Text-based theatre primarily made use of the human voice as the primary medium of meaning. The use of musical instruments and sound-effects in drama has a long tradition of underscoring, commenting or adding comical effect, under which most often ideas of ‘realistic’ representation suffered.14 The acoustic spaces of many theatres are

13 See Kaye and LeBrecht (1992) for a brief overview of functions that have been intentionally ascribed to the sound design in theatre. In their normative view, sound should not intervene with the text, unless one seeks a more stylistic approach, abstracting from a reality or conveying an absurd/surrealistic effect. Kaye and LeBrecht generally call for a balanced sound design in favour of some realistic notion: “Some of these sounds can become obtrusive, and placing them in an ambiance could be inappropriate” (Kaye & LeBrecht 1992: 26). In this study I will illustrate that sound is by definition always obtrusive, and that the realistic notion in the representation of sound is cultural-historically defined by conventions in the listener’s discourse and aurality.

14 In a letter dated 19 August 1883 in Gossensass, Tirol, Henrik Ibsen demands that in order to receive his permission to perform ‘Ghosts’ in Christiana, the play should not be accompanied by an orchestra, “neither before the performance, nor between the acts” (Samlede Verker XVII, p.521ff). Likewise in the Russian naturalist tradition, music was seen as the enemy of the word. Anton Chekhov’s letters are known for its criticism about Stanislavsky’s efforts to create atmospheres to support the drama. Chekhov was not too fond of the use of theatrical tricks and sound effects, such as the offstage sounds of dogs barking, birds singing, frogs croaking, etc. In the twentieth century, there has also been much controversy about the stagings of Samuel Beckett’s plays. Jon Whitmore (1994) describes how JoAnne Akalaitis’s production of
Tuning into the Frequency

ideally fine-tuned for the purpose of carrying and mediating the sound of a voice to the spectator in ideal circumstances that would not disturb this mediation. Post-dramatic theatre, however, marks an important shift in the role of music and sound for the theatrical communication than its tradition allowed for. The Wooster Group consciously disrupts this dramatic tradition by making the music not only the ‘soundtrack’ of the film narrative, but also by overlaying it in acoustic excess, which frustrates the spectator’s insistence to follow the narratives.

In post-dramatic theatre, combinations of text and music often have such a self-critical and destabilising impact on the creation of a narrative by the listener such, as I observe in De Overstroming (2002) and De Helling van de Oude Wijven (2002-2003), as discussed in chapter three. Lehmann (1997) connects musicalisation to the issue of narration: it can be used as a strategy to create an ‘auditive landscape’, a space or universe that is not controlled by hierarchical structure but that can give rise to a ‘meandering narration’. As a response to this environment, the spectator-listener feels an urge to synthesise the elements.

When we apply this idea to De Overstroming, we find an explanation as to why the listener feels compelled to synthesise Handke’s short story with Kuijken’s musical composition. Likewise, in De Helling van de Oude Wijven by Walpurgis there are tendencies towards narrativisation through the programme booklet that should help the spectator to interpret the wordless vocal communications of two women and the spatialisation of pre-recorded sounds and voices in the background as an imaginary, auditive landscape, which is not unlike the one described in the novel Pedro Páramo (1955) by Juan Rufo. The collage of songs in different languages in this performance, moreover, adds to the ‘meandering narration’ that breaks with any telos towards fixed meanings and a logocentric development. Correspondingly, the texts of the novel in the brochure or in the songs lose their privileged position as constitutive for the performance and should not drive to one focal point or meaning. Rather, the linearity of text and performance is short-circuited and fragmented by musicalisation, thereby commenting upon its fabrication by the listener.

As introduced earlier, the idea of ‘synthesis’ finds its most influential model in the Gesamtkunstwerk as realised by Wagner in the nineteenth century. Music theatre seems so often to distinguish itself from that tradition, while at the same time incorporating the same questions and solutions of synthesis in its construct. As I discuss in chapter four, the concert staging of Béla Bartók’s 1911 one-act opera Blauwbaards Burcht (2006) by Muziektheater Transparant and DeFilharmonie demonstrates a self-critical stance towards this synthesis. I will show how in this performance the concert

mode of staging with visual technology creates awareness for its hybrid construct.

As a result of this consciousness, the listener’s private, auditory imaginations are exposed for their homogenising effects on the fragmented space in the ‘headspace’, thus constituting a ‘theatre in the mind’. The performance could be seen in a fairly recent tradition of small-scale music theatre ensembles staging opera with video projections as some kind of animate wallpaper, though in this staging of Bartók’s opera the projections play an integral part in stimulating an imaginative response in the spectator. Most importantly, the influence of film and video aesthetics on music theatre demonstrates how the definitions of opera and music theatre as different developments have become rather complicated, if not unnecessary.

As the hybrid nature of my objects of study displays, the traditional definitions and characteristics of music theatre are under constant revision. By opening up the musical score to the sonorous qualities of any possible sound and highlighting its performative impact, some of the music theatre performances I discuss might as well be conceptualised as ‘audio theatre’, a theatre purely of sound. As one example that fits the latter category I discuss in chapter four Eric Sleichim’s Men in Tribulation (2004-2006) by Muziektheater Transparant and the ‘Bl’ndman’ quartet. In this concert installation, the use of sound technology and electroacoustic feedback reproduces a sonorous envelope that can be interpreted by the listener as an imaginary body of sound, a ‘body without organs’ moving through an imaginary space.

Men in Tribulation embodies some of Artaud’s visions on the use of sound in his Theatre of Cruelty as a theatre of cruel dreams. As the epigraph to my study expresses, Artaud envisions his spectator as vulnerable in the hands of a surgeon or a dentist. The clinical analogy is rather tempting here in the context of a music theatre that exemplifies how auditory distress operates in our experiences of sound and music. The theatre I discuss has a critical role to play in the acute analysis of our listening experiences, imbued with our listening culture(s), which could differ interpersonally but is rooted in a cultural discourse. Even so, auditory distress could be said to play a medicinal role in attempting to ‘remedy’ our ears – Schafer speaks of an active ‘ear-cleaning’ – since they have grown deaf in our contemporary, urbanite, auditory

15 Such modern opera stagings with video projections share some similarities with Television Opera, such as experimented with by Bob Ashley in the 1980s, where television aesthetics were implemented in live-music performances. A recent trend in both opera and theatre continues on this line, like the film operas in the collaborations of Louis Andriessen with Peter Greenaway and recently with Hal Hartley, the cinema-operas of Wayn Traub and the stagings of music theatre with video work by Guy Cassiers, such as The Woman who walked into Doors (2001) with music of Kris Defoort, and Onegin (2005) with Dominique Pauwels, both coproduced by LOD. Cinema has often been said to have taken upon itself the dramatic role of opera in our lives (see Grover-Friendlander 2005), which this trend would reclaim.
environments. *Men in Tribulation* therefore makes use of amplified loops of sound that terrorise the ears. One perhaps coincidental but significant metaphor surrounding this performance fits the present investigation: the name of the ‘Bl!ndman’ quartet refers to a journal, entitled “The Blind Man”, that Duchamp published in New York in 1917, and that was based on a Dadaist idea of a blind guide who guides tourists through exhibitions. Like this story, I chose the blind brother of the *De Overstroming* as my audio guide throughout this study, who informs me about his audile perceptions and critical questions about what there is or could be seen in the imagination as part of every subjective experience of music theatre in relation to our culture(s) of listening.16

As a final note before I embark on the first chapter, it is necessary to clarify the central metaphor that became the title of the present study, ‘The Frequency of Imagination’. I initially started my research with the question: Could we speak of a wavelength that would tune the listener’s imagination, such as in a ‘blind’ experience of sound? The title is meant to capture this enigmatic question surrounding the acts of imagination in the course of listening. Of course, the answer to my question cannot surpass the level of metaphor. However, rather than regarding the ‘frequency’ as a metaphor for passive receptivity, I propose to read the associated metaphor of tuning the frequency of imagination in an unpretentious sense of sensitising and activating the listener in most persuasive ways.17

16 An *audile* is a person who favours the auditory sense and ‘auditory images’ above visual or tactile stimuli, as Jonathan Sterne explains the notion: “An audile is a person in whom auditory knowing is privileged over knowing through sight. As an adverb or adjective, it means ‘of, pertaining to, or received through the auditory nerves’ or ‘of or pertaining to’ the noun sense of audile. Therefore, the term is useful because it refers to a physiological, process-based sense of hearing (as opposed to older terms like auricular) and because it references conditions under which hearing is the privileged sense for knowing or experiencing” (Sterne 2003: 61-2). Sterne draws attention to the cognitive and physiological aspects of knowing through sound. An audile would have a different sensitivity or awareness to the auditory resonances in the theatre than a visually oriented person. Though we can never accurately reproduce this sensitivity for sound in academic scholarship, the auditory experiences of the audile and the congenitally, totally blind are the ‘auditory frequency meters’, as it were, of this study.

17 With these preliminary considerations, I do not wish to suggest, nor extend any mystical connotations of the idea of tuning, as suggested by the Greek philosophical theory of the ‘celestial monochord’, introduced by Pythagoras (580-500 BC). In this theory, the planets were believed to create distinct vibrations at their rotation around the Earth, depending on their size, velocity, distance. Pythagoras saw evidence of this idea in the mathematical calculations on a single, stretched, vibrating string, producing regular relations between distance and vibration. The theory was developed further in *Harmonice Mundi* by Johannes Kepler in 1619, claiming a relation between musical harmony and the distances of the planets to the sun. R. Murray Schafer takes up this idea in his book *The Tuning of the World*, which he finds in a drawing of a book entitled *Ultruisque Cosmi Historia* by the English mystic Robert Fludd in 1618, showing a divine hand tuning the orbits of the planets in the universe as a one-string instrument (a
The Frequency of Imagination

Michael Forrester (2000) provides us with a conception of ‘tuning’ in a concrete sense by referring to the workings of the ear as a structure that is sensitive to the slightest differences in frequency:

Different parts of this structure are tuned to different frequencies, so that when a frequency is presented to the ear, the corresponding part of the structure vibrates—just as when a tuning fork is struck near a piano, the piano string that is tuned to the frequency of the fork will begin to vibrate. This idea proved to be essentially correct; the structure turned out to be the basilar membrane, which unlike a set of strings, is continuous (Atkinson et al. 1990: 143; qtd. in Forrester 2000: 35).

This understanding of how the basilar membrane in the cochlea of the inner ear is tuned to different frequencies substantiates the idea of how sound and music can sensitise us, calling for a reaction, a response.

Taking auditory distress as a departure point of my investigation, I intend to reveal how auditory experiences in music theatre can activate our imagination, by urging us to respond to the ‘unsettling’ frequencies. I will indicate then how auditory distress urges us to position ourselves. This positioning involves an active mode of relating to the music theatre. I will demonstrate that this way of tuning us as listeners can infect our ears with resistance as much as with desire towards what is (to be) experienced as meaningful in the theatre. Hence, I contend that auditory distress lies at the thumping heart of how music theatre makes sense to us today.

As recent history suggests, the question of auditory distress seems so inherent to a notion of music theatre that is defined by ‘distress’ in its own development and continuity, a crisis that calls for repeated reinvention and redefinition according to the discourses of its times. As such, music theatre participates and engages significantly in present-day aurality. By implication, my case studies aim at discussing these relations through the concepts, consequences and responses they invoke, which are rooted in both personal and discursive histories. It can thus be assumed that the crisis of music theatre reflects the very crisis of the contemporary listener as a listening subject, as I will introduce now in chapter one.

monochord). Though Schafer’s ideas play a significant role in the beginning of this study, my contribution to the metaphor of tuning does not aim at reviving or perpetuating any mysticisms.
Detail Photo n-Cha(n)t © Don Lee

*Computer Voices / Speaking Machines*, 2001

Courtesy of the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada
Chapter 1
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

The sense of hearing cannot be closed off at will. There are no earlids. When we
go to sleep, our perception of sound is the last door to close and it is also the first
to open when we awaken. These facts have prompted McLuhan to write: ‘Terror
is the normal state of any oral society for in it everything affects everything all the
time.’ The ear’s only protection is an elaborate psychological mechanism for
filtering out undesirable sound in order to concentrate on what is desirable. The
eye points outward; the ear draws inward. It soaks up information. Wagner said:
‘To the eye appeals the outer man, the inner to the ear.’ (Schafer 1977: 11)

My aim in this chapter is to conceptualise auditory distress as a particular,
 défining aspect of listening that opens up new perspectives for the discussion
of many of our auditory experiences in the theatre. I have chosen the above
epigraph from soundscape-analyst R. Murray Schafer, because it resonates
with the arguments and objects that I will outline in this chapter. Following
Schafer’s line of argument, I want to develop the concept of auditory distress
as an effect of an inevitable and constitutive intervention of sound on our
perception.

In this chapter, I focus on our mechanisms for coping with auditory
distress as part of our daily, aural competences in general, and, in particular,
on our engagement with sound and music in the theatre. As I will explain,
music theatre specifically highlights something very essential to listening in
our aural encounters with the world, namely that sound is always distressing,
and that therefore, the ear needs to be selective. In order to make this claim, I
first conceptualise auditory distress as a fundamental aspect of our experiences
of sound in general, which has both a physiological and psychological
explanation. For the purpose of my study, I am interested in the latter.

I will then examine the concept of auditory distress through an interactive
installation, n-Cha(n)t (2001) by David Rokeby. This installation particularly
demonstrates some primary consequences for the ways we cope with auditory
distress in terms of address and response. By means of this case study, I argue
that auditory distress is the product of an undesired excess of auditory stimuli,
which urges the listener to take position as a subject in relation to three factors:

- the listening environment;
- the cultural discourse shared by the members of a certain acoustic
  community;
- the individual aural competences of the listener.

As I will explain, these aspects are individually related to the way we respond
to auditory distress. However, they must also interact with each other in
different combinations. Drawing on the notion of the ‘modern auditory self’
The Frequency of Imagination

(Connor 1997) in psychoanalysis and phenomenology, I then show how a sense of self or auditory ‘I’ is effected by the address of sound in relation to the sounding environment as a result of an envelope of sound. As a response to this ‘sonorous envelope’, the listener feels a need to confirm one’s auditory ‘I’ by way of positioning her or himself through aural competences.

Subsequently, I focus on Ruhe (2007), a music theatre performance by Josse de Pauw at the Antwerp-based Muziektheater Transparant (Belgium). Through this performance, I illustrate how the responses in listening are even more likely to be in the sensory deprived contexts of the theatre, because the excess of intensities is marked by a lack of meaning. The context of deprivation then complements and intensifies the urge of the listener to respond. As a result of this lack of meaning, the listening subject can be said to be in a perpetual crisis of signification that compels the listener to respond. However, hearing and listening are imbued with a fundamental insufficiency that needs to be complemented by signification and discourse in such a way that it makes the auditory experience meaningful.

Through both case studies in this chapter I demonstrate the need for our coping mechanisms in response to auditory distress. I then present how our aural competences are vital for the responses in listening to make our auditory experiences meaningful in discursive ways. The music theatre performances I discuss in the course of this study reveal aspects and implications of these discursive responses.

1. Enter the Ear: Auditory Distress

In the above epigraph, Schafer claims through Marshall McLuhan that a society ruled by orality and, therefore by sound, is characterised by a certain level of ‘terror’. Despite the heaviness of such a phrasing and its political resonances for our contemporary context, I want to argue along with this claim as it supports my thesis that sound is always distressing because of its intervening nature. In its physical and acoustic occurrence, sound is always intervening since it essentially exists as compressed energy due to pressure changes of air molecules and resilience of surface bodies that mediate that energy. The intervening nature of sound is also necessary in order to be perceived. Distress is thus inherent to every auditory perception.

Schafer’s claim about the terror of sound in listening is based on the common argument that the ears have no lids like the eyes. Each auditory perception is therefore based on the ear’s indisposed receptivity. Paul Rodaway (1994) and Hillel Schwartz (2003) have taken Schafer’s argument further on phenomenological grounds. Schwartz, for instance, confirms Schafer’s claim by specifying that the ear is

unreflectively accumulative, and naively open to even the most harmful of loud, high, or concussive sounds. [...] [T]he ear lacks the most rudimentary of
defences: it has no equivalent to the eyelids that protect vision; the lips and tongue
that protect taste; the nasal hairs and sneezes that protect smell; and the general
mobility that protects touch and proprioception (2003: 487).

The openness of the ear to the accumulation of all sound, I argue, turns the
interventions of sound into auditory distress. As such, auditory distress forms
the basis of every hearing or listening experience.

Certainly, I could have phrased the ‘intervention’ of sound more neutrally
in terms of a sensory stimulus, a stimulation of both ear and body, as most
experiences of sound in music theatre are rather harmonious and pleasurable.
However, the term ‘distress’ highlights a fundamental aspect of the address
and the reactions of the listener to the objects I discuss and, as I will
demonstrate, of every auditory perception in general. The term then suggests a
necessity of the listener to respond due to an excess of intensities that poses a
threat to us.

McLuhan’s earlier reference to ‘terror’ effects communication on a rather
intersubjective level between producers and perceivers of sound, where
“everything affects everything all the time”. This idea applies to the modern
soundscapes that affect us on a daily basis. Schafer defines the notion of the
‘soundscape’ in resemblance to a landscape as a sonic environment. It could
also sometimes refer more abstractly to musical compositions when considered
as environment (Schafer 1977: 274-5). The soundscape notion makes us
aware that we are always surrounded by sound, in our daily encounters, and
likewise in the theatre or the concert hall. This implies that the ear is
perpetually vulnerable to interventions of sound that could have a disturbing
effect.

Schafer suggests above that we try to filter out any disturbance that is
‘undesirable’ in order to concentrate on the sounds that are desirable. He
thereby places the ear in a relationship of desire towards what is (to be) heard.

18 In French, the soundscape translates as ‘paysage sonore’, a sonorous landscape. Rodaway
(1994) speaks of an auditory geography, thereby highlighting our engagement with the
environment. According to Rodaway, the auditory geography “relates specifically to the
sensuous experience of sounds in the environment and the acoustic properties of that
environment through the employment of the auditory perceptual system. The ear forms the
main sense organ in this perceptual system but [...] geographical experience is multisensual and
ecological, that is[,] we can ‘hear’ with more than our ears and the context, or environment
itself, plays a key role in what or how we hear” (Rodaway 1994: 84).

19 Schafer’s notion of the soundscape forms the basis of the study of Soundscape analysis and
Acoustic Ecology, which he initiated in the late 1960s at Simon Fraser University (Vancouver)
in connection with his World Soundscape Project. His study is, however, infused with the
idealistc idea – based on psycho-acoustic data – that disturbing sounds with damaging effects
should be traced in order to remedy them. My investigation does not subscribe to such an
ideological project, but rather takes Schafer’s ideas a step further to discuss the intervening and
distressing nature of all sounds as a general aspect of our auditory experiences, which also has
implications for the listener in the theatre.
The Frequency of Imagination

The imperative of listening to desirable sounds even has erotic implications for Schafer:

The ear is also an erotic orifice. Listening to beautiful sounds, for instance the sounds of music, is like the tongue of a lover in your ear. Of its own nature then, the ear demands that insouciant and distracting sounds would be stopped in order that it may concentrate on those which truly matter (Schafer 1977: 11-12).

In Schafer’s view, desirable sounds are thus the ones that ‘matter’ to us. A consequence of the ‘orifice’ of the ear being unprotected from the outside, however, is that sound always intervenes and disturbs. Following Schafer’s logic, we do not want these interventions at all times. Therefore, unnecessary, distracting sounds that produce excess are to be avoided. As a result we have, over time, elaborated some psychological – I would like to include ‘cognitive’ – strategies to filter out the unwanted stimuli. This filtering out of distracting sounds should be understood as a result of the auditory distress that is caused by the inevitable interventions of sound. By implication, this filtering out as a primary response to auditory distress is inherent to every hearing or listening experience.

In opposition to this idea of filtering by way of protection, I want to pose Robin Maconie’s (1990) assertion in The Concept of Music that, due to its never-ending receptivity, the human ear is not a ‘well-tempered’ receiver in the ways it is affected:

So the ear is not strictly like an ideal microphone (although there are microphones in production which behave in a similar way). It is a biased instrument, but the bias is useful and also practical: it makes communication easier and, by burying the ear-drum down a narrow and self-damping tube of human tissue, helps protect a sensitive mechanism from ever-present dangers of acoustic overload (37).

Unlike a microphone, the ear is a biased instrument that favours or prioritises certain sounds subjectively. Complementary to Schafer’s idea of a psychological mechanism that would protect us internally, Maconie argues for a physically induced bias that is necessary and practical to make auditory perception and communication possible. Maconie, moreover, points out that the need for protection is constituted by a latent ‘danger’ of acoustic overload in the ‘sensitive mechanism’ of the ear.

This threat of excess in listening supports my thesis of auditory distress, as initially argued through Schafer. When considering the connection between Schafer and Maconie, I conclude that there is both a physical bias in the structure of the ear and a psychological (or cognitive) mechanism in the way we channel and block the intervening sounds that necessarily cause auditory distress. Both are interrelated in our defence mechanisms to auditory distress and account for the ear’s selectivity. As a common denominator, both Schafer
and Maconie stress the interiority of the ear as a sensitive mechanism that impels protection. In this context, Schafer draws a difference with an assumed exteriority of the eye in the way the ear processes the perceived intensities as information: “It soaks up information”. In other words, the ear is immersed and permeated by the acoustic information that the sound conveys. Maconie suggests then that the ear needs to be biased in order to be a useful ‘instrument’ for communication. This instrumentalisation of the ear suggests an issue of control over the ephemeral and heterogeneous intensities it registers.

Schafer’s soundscape studies generally make use of the physiological argument that the indisposed receptivity of our ears and the ‘terror’ of intervening sounds imply a threat of damage or loss of hearing. As Schafer points out, medical science has determined standards of hearing thresholds between frequencies of 20 and 20,000 Hz, and continuous exposure to high noise levels of over 85 decibels can cause damage to the ear.20 Especially when we are experiencing physical pain, and a mild headache suffices, we become acutely aware of the distressing nature of our receptivity. There are also circumstances where the exposure to loud sounds can lead to physical or psychological damage.21 Beyond the danger of long-term exposure, there is also a cumulative effect when the exposure is merely incidental. The accumulative susceptibility of the ear, as earlier stated by Schwartz, means that intense sounds can damage the delicate hair cilia of the inner ear, making them unresponsive to future sensations. Since hearing loss is only subtle, we continue to ‘enjoy’ auditory distress, while inevitably and permanently losing acuity at various frequencies. The bias of the ear, as Maconie describes it, can then be understood in terms of the physical arrangement of the inner ear with the basilar membrane’s surface structure, which functions as a funnel.

20 To brush up on psycho-acoustical terminology: the unit of Herz (Hz.) is one cycle (of a sound wave) per second and expresses the pitch (frequency) of a sound. An ability to hear frequencies of 18 kHz or lower is seldom achieved and can drop dramatically with age and noise exposure (Truax 1984: 14; Schafer 1977: 183). Loudness of sound (volume, amplitude) is generally expressed in decibels (dB) and is achieved according to the energy put into the sound source. The decibel scale is logarithmic in order to reduce it to a difference of 120, which is the threshold of acute pain. Fletcher and Munson at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the US introduced most of these insights. They devised the model of critical bands that became most important to psychoacoustics, i.e. the study of auditory perception. Central to the latter study is the concept of ‘masking’, subduing of damaging or ‘annoying’ intensities of sound. 21 Douglas Kahn argues for the physical danger and limit to a notion of panaurality, embracing all sounds such as is experimented with by many composers in both pop and more serious musical work after John Cage: “Loudness brought awareness to bodies in a new way, but this did not prevent them from being suppressed. Nor could protection from injury be assumed, as the onset of deafness among a number of musicians who reveled in loudness during the 1960s has demonstrated. Loudness is ultimately governed by injury, and in this way, the body refuses to indiscriminately allow all sound” (Kahn 2001: 233).
mediating and filtering the ‘audible’ frequencies and intensities before they are processed cognitively (Truax 1984: 4).

However, in as much as this physiological explanation complements our understanding of how occurrences of sound urge for a physical, often automatic response by the ear, my study focuses on the psychological, or rather cognitive argument. Certainly, both physical and cognitive mechanisms are interrelated in just a split second. However, in order to understand auditory distress as a basic mode of auditory perception, I propose to detach this notion from the neuro-physical explanation of ear damage or psychosomatic pain as singular and extreme. Rather, the psychological defence mechanism explains how we try to make the auditory distress into a ‘meaningful’ auditory experience by defining what is necessary and what is not.

In order to make the connection between our coping mechanism and signification, Barry Truax (1984) has introduced the notion of ‘acoustic communication’ as his contribution to Schafer’s explanation of the psychological mechanism from an information and communication theory perspective. With this notion, Truax stresses that the ear searches for information in order to enable acoustic communication. The main assumption in soundscape-related research is, therefore, that sound is a carrier of acoustic information. Truax nuances Schafer’s assertion that the ear generally soaks up information, when he states that listening involves a more conscious processing of sound to the extent that it becomes “usable and potentially meaningful to the brain” (Truax 1984: 9). Michael Forrester (2000) provides a similar idea by stating that sound is “potentially confusing, degraded or redundant information made available to the ears” (35). Truax’s approach to

22 Our ears have some safety devices in our physical constitution against the damage that auditory distress could cause. Internally the ear is protected against enduring loud sounds by the automatic response of the stapes muscle (or stapedius), which is responsible for the contact between the stirrup bone and the middle ear. Additionally, as Sir James Jeans formulated in 1937, the oval membrane of the cochlea “serves as a safety device acting rather like the slipping clutch of a motor-car, which may save the oval membrane from injury, if the ear-drum is set too violently into sudden motion” (Jeans 1968: 245). These defence mechanisms are triggered by automatic responses in the structure of the middle and inner ear, but they only partially and temporally filter out the most harmful resonances.

23 My understanding of auditory distress opposes Walter Ong’s claim that sound can “register interiority without violating it” (1982: 71). Indeed, violation is too strong a term to conceptualise auditory distress as a basic condition of our auditory perception. However, with this notion I want to respond to the idea of ‘untouched’ interiority by arguing that sound leaves cognitive traces, which make us respond by channelling the ‘harmful’ or unwanted resonances.

24 Barry Truax’s (1984) notion and theory of ‘acoustic communication’ implies that listening is a way of understanding and communicating through sound in a dynamic, interlocking relationship with the listening subject and her or his environment. Truax therefore positions auditory analysis in communication studies, which do not rule out cognitive concepts, but his focus is primarily on the paths of information exchange through sound. He regards listening as the ‘primary interface’ between the individual and the environment (Truax 1984: xii).
what is ‘meaningful’ in listening is, however, very specific and relates to finding acoustic information about the function and effects of the soundscape within a given environment. Yet my study uses a different notion of meaning in relation to sound and listening, which is an implication of the responses by the coping mechanisms that both Schafer and Truax have developed, but which does not include specific information that can be used as analysable data as such. I will return to my notion of meaning in chapter two. It suffices to say here, that Truax’s contribution confirms the idea that sound creates excess in listening, and that through psychological and cognitive mechanisms we try to cope with this excess.

I tentatively conclude that the more that sound confuses the listener with redundant, unwanted and distracting intensities, the more the listener feels the need to filter and channel the sounds in terms of what is desired or ‘meaningful’ to her or him. I find support for this argument in Maconie’s rather throwaway remark: “There is no legislating for sensory distress: all sensory input is distressing, and we are engaged in a constant effort of keeping unwanted intensities of information at bay” (Maconie 1990: 23). Thus, the notion of ‘distress’ does not mean that the intervening intensities have to directly cause damage to the ear; nor is the concept directly intended in a psychological meaning as a symptom or a cause of a psychophysical pain. Rather, the concept of sensory distress explains a basic need to channel the unwanted intensities as excess in a productive, meaningful way.

Consequently, I demonstrate in my study that theatre highlights this process of gathering, channelling and filtering acoustic information as a means of response that depends on a specific relationship of authority in sound and the agency of the listener who imparts a sense of control. As I intend to show, this relationship is inherent to the particular constellations of address and response in listening. As a basis for this address-response system, I regard auditory distress as most fundamental as a catalyst of the psychological and cognitive coping mechanisms in the listener to relate to one’s auditory experiences. Auditory distress in the theatre can make us aware of the intensities of sound and the need to respond in order to regain control over the auditory interventions.

So far, I have conceptualised auditory distress in most general terms. As a first correlation with music theatre, Schafer refers to an idea by Wagner about listening, though through a problematic opposition between eye and ear epitomising outward and inward positions, as I quoted earlier: “To the eye appeals the outer man, the inner to the ear” (qtd. in Schafer 1977: 11). Indeed, I will demonstrate how the auditory distress incites introspection in the listener, marking an inward position towards embodied experiences and imaginative associations. However, assuming a fundamental opposition between the ear and the eye based on physical characteristics in terms of a boundary between inside and outside is not enough. Furthermore, it is rather
The Frequency of Imagination

inaccurate in order to establish a well-founded theory of auditory experience in the theatre, which is so dependent on correspondences between the two. Moreover, we should be cautious of any claims of interiority in terms of the Romantic idea of the ‘soul’ as far as they would ignore a historical understanding of such oppositions. Instead, Wagner’s claim should then be understood in the historical context of the emancipation of the ear and not as a physical or phenomenological truth.\textsuperscript{25}

I am tempted to further contest the ear’s acclaimed interiority by arguing that the cognitive defence mechanism spatially \textit{extends} and thereby externalises the act of listening.\textsuperscript{26} I will address music theatre’s differentiation today from the traditional conceptualisation of theatre acoustics on this matter at the end of this chapter, as this affects the sense of control in the listener’s coping mechanisms through such externalisation of the listening attention. What is important here is that the interiority of the listener as subject is at stake under the ‘terror’ or ‘threat’ of auditory distress. I thereby ask myself: How does the psychological defence mechanism, as mentioned by Schafer, function in tempering auditory distress? Which mechanisms or strategies are available? How can they be helpful in the discussion of listening in music theatre? Are there specific strategies for the theatre? Finally, what are the roles and the uses of our competences in these strategies?

I will elaborate on these questions through David Rokeby’s interactive installation \textit{n-Cha(n)t} (2001).\textsuperscript{27} This installation helps me to show how auditory distress comes about and bears implications on the ‘desirability’ of sounds in our hearing experiences. Through the installation, I demonstrate some primary strategies of coping with auditory distress. I then discuss the implications of the mechanism that \textit{n-Cha(n)t} shows for the constitution of a listening subject in relation to a lack of control and competence. For the purpose of listening in music theatre, I subsequently discuss the music theatre performance \textit{Ruhe} (2007) byJosse De Pauw for Muziektheater Transparant, in order to demonstrate more preliminary issues of the specific strategies in listening that \textit{n-Cha(n)t} does not raise. I thereby show how the relation

\textsuperscript{25} Theodor Adorno (1952) makes a similar opposition between eye and ear when discussing Wagner’s ‘emancipation’ of the ear in relation to the differing histories and developments of the senses: “The eye is always the organ of effort, work, concentration; it apprehends something specific in an unambiguous way. The ear, in contrast, is unconcentrated and passive. Unlike the eye, it does not have to be opened” (Adorno 88-9). Such simplifications would make even Adorno’s epistemological ears curl when taken out of context. His claims should be read in the context of a Marxist criticism on the production of meaning in Wagner’s music drama.

\textsuperscript{26} Schafer regards hearing as a way of “touching at a distance” (1977: 11). The psychological defence mechanism that he conceptualises could therefore be seen as a kind of touching the environment, similar to bats gathering spatial information through ‘echo location’: a way of receiving acoustic information about the environment through reverberation from a distance.

\textsuperscript{27} David Rokeby’s \textit{n-Cha(n)t} (2001) was commissioned by the Banff Centre for the Arts and won the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica for Interactive Art 2002. I visited the installation at the DEAP04 Festival 2004 in Rotterdam.
between auditory distress and the responses of the listener through her or his competences hold the key for understanding some of the experiences of sound and music – and how the listener makes meaning of them – on the contemporary music theatre stage.

2. \textit{n-Cha(n)t}: Enchanting or Endangering the Ear?

Most contrary to what the title of David Rokeby’s interactive installation \textit{n-Cha(n)t} perhaps suggests, it is not in the nature of sound in the first place to \textit{enchant} or to pleasurably sooth the senses. Rather, sound has the power and authority to interfere and intervene in the human receptive system, which is the catalyst for the interactivity in this installation.

The installation consists of an indefinite \((n)\) number of computer systems, set up randomly in the exhibition space and equipped with a microphone, a loudspeaker and a TV monitor. The monitors each display a human ear with an index finger that either cups or closes the ear to show when it is susceptible to sound. Initially, the systems capture and repeat the resonances that reach into their microphones, based on voice recognition, free-association and language recognition. A feedback system is thus created through the process of channelling the reproduced sound back as input into the other systems, and so on. When all systems appropriate and reproduce the same sound through their respective microphones and loudspeakers, a level of unison is established in the \textit{feedback loop}, which sounds similar to humming or ‘chanting’. This sound has the mesmerising effect of a ritual or a trance. However, within the network each receptive system is equipped with its own speech-recognition and word-association technology analysing the resonances that are captured from its immediate environment, the visitors of the installation space, and its fellow systems. By speaking into one of the microphones, the visitor can distract and isolate one of the systems. This, in turn, disrupts the coherence, since the system begins reproducing the intervention of sound.

In this way, the chant is continuously threatened by new interventions. Every acoustic stimulus is marked by its disturbing effect on the temporary equilibrium that all systems seem to desire. In so doing, the installation gives a perspective to understand McLuhan’s rather problematic statement as cited earlier by Schafer: “Terror is the normal state of any oral society for in it everything affects everything all the time.” Whether or not Rokeby intended that the computer entities represent human beings or social groups in some sort

\textsuperscript{28} The installation is a further elaboration of Rokeby’s project ‘The Giver of Names’, which stands for an intelligent entity with a reasonable amount of ‘subjectivity’ and linguistic capacities. As the artist claims, the title and concept of \textit{n-Cha(n)t} was inspired by Rokeby’s desire to create a community of computers as ‘Givers of Names’ that would speak together, \textit{chatting} and \textit{chattering} as if indulging in a language game, or as if \textit{chanting} in a secluded religious space.
of intersubjective relation with one another, this interactive installation demonstrates two implications of the ‘terrorising’ nature of auditory distress. Firstly, the installation reproduces the workings of auditory distress as indispensable for perception: just like the human ear, the computer system is susceptible and vulnerable to ‘unwanted’ resonances. Therefore it needs to be biased in capturing and processing the resonances that are relevant and eligible enough to pass them on to the other systems and create a new harmony or consensus. The status of that coherence is placed again under the constant pressure of another auditory intervention. Secondly, the installation displays how a community formed by the sounds that surround it is in a perpetual state of crisis. The continuous association and reproduction of sound in search of coherence demonstrates how an acoustic community can be formed as an instrument or a way to cope with the auditory distress.

I will now develop both implications of auditory distress through the installation by focusing on the ear as a vulnerable but necessarily ‘biased instrument’. I shift Maconie’s phrase, however, by applying it to the psychological explanation of the listener’s responses to auditory distress, since the ultimate object is signification. First, I discuss how auditory distress and the ear’s bias are in an interdependent relation with signification processes and the conception of a listening subject. Second, I examine the implications of auditory distress on the experience of an acoustic community through an enveloping soundscape: a sonorous envelope. I thereby develop the approach of soundscape-analysis further against a computational and stimulus-response model, which this installation exemplifies. I will specifically explore the significance of the listening environment, the cultural discourse within an acoustic community and our private aural competences in our responses to the auditory distress that is caused by the envelope of sound.

2.1. Cupping the Ears: Channelling Auditory Interventions

As one can see in _n-Cha(n)t_ (see figure), the monitors in the installation reproduce the workings of our human auditory system by showing an ear. When one of the computer systems captures a sound through its microphone, it first cups the ear to focus, then presses the ear with one or two fingers to show that it is ‘thinking’. In this state of mind it processes the sound signals in an attempt to recognise speech and reproduce it as text on the screen and as sound through a loudspeaker. When the system reaches a point of saturation through the accumulation of sounds that come either from a visitor speaking in the microphone or the sounds of the other systems, it covers the ear with a hand on the monitor. All of the neighbouring systems, in turn, will try to appropriate the new input, and with no further interventions the coherence can be restored.

The images of cupping and covering the ears epitomise the human auditory system, its receptivity and defencelessness. They validate the claim
that the ear is, in a sense, always in a state of ‘forced’ or indisposed susceptibility to sounds. The installation shows, however, that pain levels do not have to be reached or transgressed in order to feel the urge to cover the ears. The gesture of closing the ear when the system reaches saturation suggests that a disturbance is caused by an overload of acoustic information or what simply cannot be processed cognitively at the time. In this very simple gesture, the installation shows how this accumulation of sounds causes distress to the system. Similarly, in our perception, when sound disturbs our ability to process cognitively the received stimuli, the overload is generally experienced as noise.29 In the human ear, however, there are many more factors that can make a sound into noise as it is based on a rather personal, subjective judgment.

However, the subjective sense of sound as ‘noise’ is not of direct interest to my investigation of auditory distress in the experience of all types of sound, which I consciously detach from neuro-physical considerations. In Rokeby’s installation, noise and permanent hearing loss are, likewise, not at stake. Though it simplifies the representation of the human auditory system from what appears outside, the installation highlights the mechanism of coping with the overload of information. It shows that the excess of stimuli, which urges a response from the listener to keep the unwanted intensities at bay, causes auditory distress. Robin Maconie points out two ways of avoiding unnecessary stimuli that I propose to compare to this installation:

We are born listeners, and remain ‘switched-on’ listeners for the whole of our lives unless released prematurely form the clamour of a noisy world by the onset of deafness or by voluntarily retreating to a quieter and more contemplative environment. As long-suffering listeners, we learn willy-nilly to control what we hear, not so much by excluding the possibility of unwanted sounds (the only tactic available in the formative years of infancy being to fall asleep, which makes people who fall asleep at concerts seem rather sympathetic all of a sudden) – as by manipulating the auditory environment. That manipulation of the auditory field is expressed in two main strategies: (1) physical movement which changes the intensity and positional relationships of events in the perceptual field, and (2) vocalization or other sound production (including music) which introduces a controllable and dominating element into an otherwise uncontrolled auditory environment (Maconie 1990: 24).

Whereas the visitor of the installation who has the freedom to move away from a sound source of unwanted intensity could well perform the first strategy, it is usually not possible for the listener in a theatre audience. The second strategy is demonstrated by the computer systems in n-Cha(n)jt by reproducing the sounds collectively to the extent of their ability to recognise and reconstruct

29 Roland Barthes articulates in this context a position close to my understanding of auditory distress when he states: “Irregular noise disturbs our ‘aural comfort’” (Barthes 1991: 248).
them as speech. When sounding together as ‘unisono’, the systems in the feedback loop dominate and control the space in which the visitors are marked as the uncontrollable element, disturbing the chant.

Rokeby’s installation, moreover, draws our attention to the necessity of acoustic and auditory interventions in order to enable communication with the visitors and among the systems themselves. This installation thereby demonstrates the idea in Soundscape studies that sound needs to intervene in order to be picked up from the background hubbulb, to surpass a threshold of hearing and attract attention. Acoustically, sound is dependent on the acoustic space and the air molecules to resonate and mediate. The environment determines which sounds will stand out. Truax expresses this idea in his notion of the ‘acoustic horizon’:

The presence of a steady level of sound reduces what we may call the ‘acoustic horizon’ of an environment, that is, the farthest distance from which sound may be heard. The steady sound masks low level sounds, thereby producing a reduced sense of space. In the most extreme case, each individual is surrounded in a cocoon of sound with no aural contact with others. There is also an accompanying reduction in the variety of sounds that will be heard, because only a few of the stronger ones will rise above the ambient level (Truax 1984: 23)

Truax stresses the aspect of ‘masking’ in the acoustic horizon. This idea applies also to the soundscape in n-Cha(n)nt since the sounds in the feedback reduce the acoustic horizon for both the visitors and the receptive computer systems. The masking through steady sounds in the constant loop can therefore be understood as a strategy to cancel out unwanted intensities of sound that would cause distress. The disruptions, however, are also constitutive for the chant as the sounds are repeated until another sound intervenes and disturbs the loop. Hence, the installation confirms that auditory distress is necessary in order to be perceived and enable communication. Sounds that catch the listener’s attention are always pitched against their respective acoustic horizons, which already mask certain intensities of sound in the listening environment. The listener, in turn, relates to the acoustic environment by dealing with the auditory distress, by moving away or by filtering and processing the overload of intensities, shutting out the excess to make it bearable, enjoyable and most likely ‘meaningful’.³⁰

³⁰ In neuro-cognitive science, the place in our brains where we filter out and define which stimuli are necessary/wanted as information is located in the limbic system: “The limbic system gives salience to events so that we either ignore them as mundane and unimportant, or take notice and act. It is also the place where value, purpose, and desire are evaluated, a process referred to as assigning negative or positive ‘valence’” (Cytowic 1993: 168). The intersections with studies of cognition could also open up new perspectives for the study of listening in the theatre. The cognitive aspect of my study, however, is limited to what I can describe from the cultural experience of the objects that I select as case studies.
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

The acoustic horizon of an environment is constitutive for the perception of a certain soundscape. Both notions suggest an inherent sound-space relationship: we are always in soundscapes through which we relate to our surroundings. Underlying this idea is that sound has a propensity to fill, form and fix a space, which always creates a certain level of sound in the background. To this acoustic horizon in the background, every sound is tuned. This argument brings us to two related notions, which I will now discuss. First, the acoustic horizon has social implications for the inhabitants of a certain soundscape that assign meaning to the sounds. Schafer defines this as an 'acoustic community'. Second, the environmental aspect of sound surrounding the listener relates back to the earliest childhood sound experiences of the 'sonorous envelope'. Both have implications for the constitution of the listener as subject.

2.2. Enter the Listening Subject:
Acoustic Community and Sonorous Envelope

Rokeby’s installation highlights that sound is necessarily intervening in order to surpass and be picked up from an acoustic horizon. It also demonstrates how sound can be used tactically as a way to protect and filter out unwanted or excessive intensities. In *n-Cha(n)t*, the computer systems create a network of individual agents that connect through the soundscape of the chant. This soundscape, in turn, creates an auditory environment that stabilises the latent auditory distress veiled by the temporary unison. Steven Connor has formulated a similar argument in his article “Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art” (2005) about sound in installation art: “Sound is here erected as a barrier against the disordering, extinguishing incursions of sound itself” (53). This statement seems to apply well to *n-Cha(n)t* as the installation presents us with the protective properties of sound against its own disordering incursions. But what are the implications now for the listener in this interplay between auditory distress and the mechanisms against it? I want to argue here that the listening environment and the ‘community’ of listeners that occupies it play a significant role in this, both acoustically and socially.

Soundscape studies have highlighted the correlations between the listener and a particular sound environment in what is called an ecological approach. Schafer’s ‘Acoustic Ecology’ regards the soundscape as primarily significant for the community that inhabits it: the acoustic community. Through the relations and positions within the soundscape, the individual listener is always part of such a community. Schafer therefore defines the acoustic community

31 Connor’s article, published in *FO(A)RM* 4 (2005), was originally given as a lecture in the series *Bodily Knowledges: Challenging Ocularcentricity* at the Tate Modern, 21 February 2003.
The Frequency of Imagination

as an ideal social entity along acoustic lines. He observes that the acoustic community stands in relation to a spatial definition of a certain community with regard to its soundscapes, which is evidenced, for instance, by noise abatement by-laws and changing acoustic values in our (post-)modern environments (Schafer 1977: 215-6).

Rokeby’s installation shows how the soundscape creates a sonorous and auditory environment, which serves as a *sound habitat* for the sound-makers that produce and exist within that environment. The soundscape binds them together as members of a community. However, the sounds that the computer systems reproduce also mutually enable them to exert power and control over the environment. In this way, the acoustic community ascribes to or imposes certain values on its soundscapes. The constant sound of unison chanting could be experienced by the visitor as a protective wall that is restored after each disruption of new acoustic information, just as humming or any other sound routine can shelter and physically enclose people. The soundscape thereby mutually defines the acoustic community.

Schafer and Truax’s respective approaches offer a framework for considering how the soundscape functions in a specific cultural context for a specific acoustic community. More precisely, Truax’s communicational model aims to show “how sound, in all its forms and functions, defines the relationship of the individual, the community, and ultimately a culture, to the environment and those within it” (Truax 1984: 3). His model stresses the influence of the cultural network to which the individual listener relates and metaphorically ‘tunes’ into by being a member of a certain community. What Truax illustrates using this model is that sound and the auditory environment are both part of the socio-cultural matrix (the discourse), which mutually influences the listener in her or his responses.

I argue that the responses by the listener to auditory distress are always subjective but are embedded within the socio-cultural network that she or he inhabits: it is a response of a culturally contingent and historically specific listener. Rokeby’s installation demonstrates how the distress caused by the overload of information and auditory intensities compels the computer system to respond. Through its soundscape, the installation shows how each individual perceptive and responsive system attempts to regain control in response to the caused disturbances. Correspondingly, the visitor responds by listening to the caused soundscapes. I want to argue here that these responses in order to control the auditory distress render the listener as subject: a *listening subject*.34

---

33 In chapter four, I will provide an extreme example of the enclosing propensity of sound in terms of ‘audio autism’. This characteristic draws us more inward to our bodies and ourselves.

34 My study concerns the act of listening in music and audio theatre, and as such with a main focus on the listener as subject. The ‘listening subject’ is therefore a function of my analysis of the case studies to the extent that it embodies certain modes, habits, competences and
Steven Connor helps me to define and conceptualise the listening subject. In his chapter “The Modern Auditory I” (1997), he defines a ‘modern auditory self’ in phenomenological terms of embodiment and subjectivity in relation to the sounding world:

The auditory self is an attentive rather than an investigatory self, which takes part in the world rather than taking aim at it. For this reason, the auditory self has been an important part of phenomenology’s attempt to redescribe subjectivity in terms of its embodiedness: ‘My “self”,’ declares Don Ihde, the most enthusiastic of audiophile philosophers, ‘is a correlate of the World, and its way of being-in that World is a way filled with voice and language. Moreover, this being in the midst of Word [sic!] is such that it permeates the most hidden recesses of my self.’ (Ihde qtd. in Connor 1997: 219).

Connor describes the modern auditory self in terms of being attentive, constantly on the alert. He thereby suggests that the sense of ‘self’ does not intervene in ‘the world’ as such but takes part in it: not from a distance but within it. The world is to be understood here primarily in terms of sound, as a sounding world. The sense of self is then an embodied effect of our relation to the world as it enters us through sound. In this way, world and self constitute each other. Don Ihde’s above-cited phenomenological perspective brings to mind the assertion by Walter Ong (1971) that the world of sound places us in the ‘midst of things’. We inhabit sound as it happens to us, but the sound necessarily is just as much in us for it to be audible (Connor 2005: 53).

The ‘threat’ of sound, as discussed earlier, is made particularly compelling by sound’s tendency to expand and surround us. As such, sound has the capacity to penetrate and permeate us. Because of this characteristic, it has been compared by different scholars to a gas or an odour (see Chion 1994: 79; Connor 2005: 48). Seen this way, the necessity of sound to spatially intervene...
The Frequency of Imagination

in order to be perceived, as described by Truax, can imply that the listener feels invaded by the sound as it creates auditory distress. This, in turn, can effect her or his sense of ‘self’. The listening or auditory self is affected by the way the listener positions oneself.

Connor, moreover, adopts Don Ihde’s phenomenological approach to the embodiment of subjectivity. Connor emphasises that the feeling of being permeated by sound correlates with our sense of being in the midst of the world. Although Ihde focuses on the primacy of sound in our relationship with the world, the sounds that permeate a sense of self, according to Ihde, are foremost construed by language, by words. This explains the apparent slippage between a Heideggerian being in the World and being in the midst of ‘Word’. Behind this slippage resides the rather problematic contention that language constitutes the subject from an early age. This contention has been formulated and studied in psychological studies, psycho-analysis, cognitive linguistics and phenomenology, among others, through a notion of sonorous envelope, which designates the early sound experiences of an infant being primarily surrounded by the motherly voice. These early experiences of an envelope of the voice sound – combining sound with language – are seen as constitutive for our sense of subjectivity.

The sonorous envelope has its origin in these early personal sound experiences, which give rise to associations and feelings of pleasure against auditory distress and excess. The ‘envelope’ means that auditory perception is wrapped up in affective and emotional response (Forrester 2000: 40).

Didier Anzieu has indicated the psychoanalytical importance of the sonorous envelope, which he describes as a bath of sounds that surrounds us from infancy and that stabilises the infant-subject from early on. He has expressed this idea in his concept of the skin-ego, which was first presented in 1974. The concept is a further elaboration of Freud’s throwaway statement in The Ego and the Id (1923) that the ego could be seen as the mental projection of the surface of the body. It suggests that the ego can contain the psychic apparatus in a similar way that the skin contains the body. This skin-ego is developed in the first months of infancy, when the skin of the baby is still relatively open and vulnerable. The skin-ego is formed by the envelope of sound as container,

---

56 The idea of ‘being in the midst of Word’ is, for instance, reflected in William S. Burroughs’ (1914-1997) tape recordings in which the author rebels against the constant interior monologues in our thoughts (or the ‘subvocalisations’ when we read) and the idea that language is the body’s ‘other half’ as reflected in and resounding around the self (see N. Katherine Hayles 1997). According to Burroughs, the virus-like qualities of language need to be broken up in order for the subject to ‘desubjectivise’.

57 Michel Chion speaks in this respect of ‘wrap-around superfield’ and ‘acoustic aquarium’ in modern cinema (1994: 131). This surround-sound materialises the sonorous envelope in most popular and technically advanced ways. We are most familiar with the opening screen stating “The audience is listening” while being bathed in loud, vociferous and multidirectional sound effects framing and branding the act of listening under the Dolby® label.
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

to which the baby does not yet differentiate in the imagination. Anzieu locates the development in a sonorous or acoustic ‘mirror-stage’, much earlier than the visual mirror stage that Jacques Lacan described. By referring to this early mirror stage in terms of a sound, Connor refers to the concept of the skin-ego as an imaginary envelope to explain the constitution of an auditory ‘I’:

This imaginary envelope is the auditory equivalent of Lacan’s mirror-stage, in that it gives the child a unity from the outside; it can be seen, therefore, as a ‘sound-mirror or [...] audio-phonic skin’. Without the satisfactory experience of the sonorous envelope, the child may fail to develop a coherent sense of self; there will be rents or flaws in the ego, leaving it vulnerable to inward collapse in depression, or invasion from outside, leading to the formation of an over-protective artificial skin in certain forms of autism (Connor 1997: 214).

Connor suggests that the skin-ego functions as a ‘sound-mirror’ and artificial skin – an ‘acoustic-phonetic skin’ – with which the subject can recognise itself in relation to the interventions of sound from outside. He thereby regards Anzieu’s concept as a defence mechanism that constitutes and reflects the modern auditory subject at an early stage. The skin-ego functions then as a protective shield in relation to the outside (sounding) world.

However, through the early sonorous envelope bathing in the motherly voice, the child does not only feel protected and contained by feeling at one with the outside world, she or he also steps into the discourse of language constituting her or him as a separate subject. The envelope of sound, as Connor formulated above, constitutes a sense of being in the midst of *Word*, instead of ‘World’. Language plays an important role in separating the subject from the surrounding world. According to Anzieu, the skin-ego therefore has a significant function “in the psychic apparatus of the acquisition of the capacity for signifying and symbolizing” (Anzieu, qtd. & trans. Schwarz 1997: 38).

David Schwarz explains Anzieu’s hypothesis of a sonorous mirror in relation to the Lacanian mirror-stage: “The acoustic-mirror stage is the precursor of the visual mirror stage, in which the child ‘recognises’ itself in the mirror and face of the mother. The acoustic- and visual mirror stages are part of what Lacan calls the Imaginary Order; it is the division of the child’s experience into binary oppositions [...]” (Schwarz 1997: 16). The sound-mirror would permeate the child with the symbolic discourse and binary relations earlier than through recognition of the body as visually separate from the mother in the mirror.

Forrester remarks that though there is no immediate evidence connecting sound deprivation in early infancy with later psychopathology, our primary ‘sensation environment’ is tactile and auditory before it becomes visual: “We feel and ‘sound’ our way into the world before we perceive that world visually” (Forrester 2000: 41). The concept of an ‘audio-phonic skin’ addresses further the *haptic* qualities of sound (in terms of a ‘haptic space’). ‘Haptics’, as related to the sense of touch, is central to haptonomy: the study of the affects for their therapeutic value of restoring the relation of the human subject with her or his environment through stimulation of the senses and body movement. I will return to Anzieu’s concept of the skin-ego and the so-called ‘acoustic mirror’ in relation to auditory imagination and my notion of ‘audio-autism’ in chapter four.

---

36 David Schwarz explains Anzieu’s hypothesis of a sonorous mirror in relation to the Lacanian mirror-stage: “The acoustic-mirror stage is the precursor of the visual mirror stage, in which the child ‘recognises’ itself in the mirror and face of the mother. The acoustic- and visual mirror stages are part of what Lacan calls the Imaginary Order; it is the division of the child’s experience into binary oppositions [...]” (Schwarz 1997: 16). The sound-mirror would permeate the child with the symbolic discourse and binary relations earlier than through recognition of the body as visually separate from the mother in the mirror.

38 Forrester remarks that though there is no immediate evidence connecting sound deprivation in early infancy with later psychopathology, our primary ‘sensation environment’ is tactile and auditory before it becomes visual: “We feel and ‘sound’ our way into the world before we perceive that world visually” (Forrester 2000: 41). The concept of an ‘audio-phonic skin’ addresses further the *haptic* qualities of sound (in terms of a ‘haptic space’). ‘Haptics’, as related to the sense of touch, is central to haptonomy: the study of the affects for their therapeutic value of restoring the relation of the human subject with her or his environment through stimulation of the senses and body movement. I will return to Anzieu’s concept of the skin-ego and the so-called ‘acoustic mirror’ in relation to auditory imagination and my notion of ‘audio-autism’ in chapter four.
The Frequency of Imagination

20). Through language and voice, we constitute our auditory ‘selves’ at an early age.

In his psychoanalytically inspired book *Listening Subjects* (1997), David Schwarz connects the notion of the sonorous envelope to the issue of communication for the purpose of music. He identifies that the double sense of protection and separation emerges because the child hears the illusion of producing the sounds by the mother in one’s own body (Schwarz 1997: 20). Schwarz explains this undifferentiated state: “The voice of the mother produces at once the model for communication with and separation from the external world” (21). His remarks on the sonorous envelope can be understood in relation to the argument that auditory distress is necessary for perception and communication, even when the sounds are experienced as pleasurable. Here, the sonorous envelope could be said to create an excess which both gives rise to experiences of coherence and separation in relation to the sounding world.

The sonorous envelope therefore marks two opposing qualitative dimensions of sound in general from an evolutionary point of view. Forrester describes these dimensions as “one nurturing, supportive and indicative of comfort, care and safety the other dissonant, disruptive and likely to provoke anxiety” (2000: 33). Both are dimensions of the sonorous envelope that constitute the listening subject in relation to the world’s soundscapes. In relation to this sound-mirror, the disruptive aspect of sound can be regarded as most fundamental to our auditory experiences as it helps to differentiate our auditory selves. In this sense, auditory distress is not only limited to the loud disruptive noises that indexically and culturally presuppose danger in our modern soundscapes. Although nurturing sounds (like the mother’s voice, baby-talk, but also sounds of blood-flow, relaxation ambient music, etc.) tend to have immersive, sleep-inducing and embodying properties, they also always impinge on the listener’s sense of self. In this sense, Maconie remarks that the reflex of falling asleep during a concert for instance can also be understood as an infant solution to auditory (and sensory) distress.40

Examining Anzieu’s psycho-analytic approach through the different perspectives from Connor, Forrester, Schwarz and Maconie helps me to explain why the sonorous envelope of the looping chant in *n-Cha(n)t* can strike a pleasurable chord in often unconscious ways. The protective gesture of masking sound by sound in the never-ending soundscape of *n-Cha(n)t*, can be understood in terms of a sonorous envelope that reminds us of the acoustic

---

40 Connor also connects immersion to Anzieu’s concept of the sonorous envelope as we have all experienced in maternity and infancy: “Didier Anzieu find[s] an analogue for this immersion in what he calls the ‘sonorous envelope’, or bath of sounds, to which all of us are subject[ed], first of all as foetus[es], in which sound and tactile sensation are powerfully intermingled, and then the experiences of the young child [sic!], in which the sensation of being held and embraced continues to cooperate with the lulling and lalling, all the gentle hubbub, with which the child is surrounded” (2005: 51).
mirror stage. In order to make the connection between the psychoanalytical argument and the experience of this specific sound envelope in the soundscape of the installation – or any piece of music for that matter – I want to add Guy Rosolato’s perspective on the matter.

Rosolato (1974) has suggested that the acoustic mirror is the first model of auditory pleasure and that music would nurture nostalgia for this model as “a sonorous womb, a murmuring house” (qtd. in Schwarz 1997: 8). Rosolato suggests that the sonorous envelope in music reminds us of the desire of an imaginary unity of the body to compensate for the split in our auditory self. In so doing, he highlights the aspect of separation, which we want to overcome through the sonorous envelope. Rokeby’s installation could give rise to a similar idea. Our associations with early experiences of the sonorous envelope turn the individual computer systems into separate auditory entities. The looping chant surrounding the visitor could then be understood as simulating a ‘murmuring house’ which the computer systems as well as the human visitors both temporarily constitute and inhabit. Seen this way, n-Cha(n)t could make us aware of how the sonorous envelope marks our temporary ‘cohabitation’ as audience in the space of listening. Moreover, the feedback between sound producer and receptive systems creates a sense of acoustic community that marks a distance with the visitor as both an observing and intervening outsider. In this sense, the installation makes apparent the position of the human listener who eavesdrops, but also takes part in the sound world thus created. The acoustic community then seems not only to function as an instrument to mask and gain control over unwanted intensities of sound, but it also helps to find one’s identity in relation to the community and the larger socio-cultural matrix.

Soundscape studies confirm the connection between a sense of self (identity) and acoustic community. Along these lines, Truax comments on the modern soundscape: “the soundscape is not an alien force but a reflection of ourselves” (1984: 106). The sonorous envelope and the soundscape share that they both constitute and reflect us as listening subjects or ‘auditory selves’. The listening subject is the effect of our ways of making sense of the world as we sound out our presence through our knowledge, ingrained memories and

---

41 Guy Rosolato (1974) originally states: “On peut avancer qu’elle est le premier modèle d’un plaisir auditif et que la musique trouve ses racines et sa nostalgie dans une atmosphère originelle – à nommer comme matrice sonore, maison bruissante”. Kaja Silverman translates Rosolato’s phrase in her book The Acoustic Mirror: “One could argue that it is the first model of auditory pleasure and that music finds its roots and its nostalgia in [this] original atmosphere which might be called a sonorous womb, a murmuring house” (Rosolato, trans. in Schwarz 1997: 8; qtd. in Silverman 1988: 84-5). Anzieu’s notions of the ‘imaginary’ bubble of sound, a Lacanian ‘acoustic mirror’ as materialised in an ‘audio-phonic’ or ‘acoustic-phonetic’ skin, or Rosolato’s idea of a ‘sonorous womb’, a ‘murmuring house’, are all metaphors to explain the particular connection between our auditory selves and the soundscapes which we inhabit in relation to our early experiences of separation through sound.
assumptions. In this context, Truax points out the significance of feedback in the relation of self and our surrounding world in both listening and sound production:

Therefore, what the listener/soundmaker hears is a simultaneous image of self and environment. Unlike the passive quality of ‘being seen,’ the listener must make an active gesture to ‘be heard.’ The feedback of acoustic information is necessary for orientation, and in the most general sense, the awareness of self in relation to others (Truax 1984: 20).

Truax claims here that the listener is not so much idle or passive in taking part in the world, but that she or he makes an active effort. Sound making then correlates with listening in an equally active response to the sound environment. The feedback loop of the chant in *n-Cha(n)†t* demonstrates a similar implication: the sound systems perpetually adjust themselves through sound production in relation to the intervening sounds and the auditory environment of the chant. In this situation of being listened to and reproducing the interventions of sound, the installation can function as a sound-mirror for the human visitors whose sounds could make them aware of their position in relation to the acoustic community, the other visitors, and by implication the outside, sounding world.

Connor’s notion of the modern auditory subject contributes to the arguments of soundscape analysis that acoustic information does not only help us to relate to the sounds in meaningful ways through the qualities and relations of the objects (like texture, density, resistance, porosity, absorptiveness, and so on) (Connor 2005: 52). Our modern soundscapes also place us in a physical and cultural environment that enters us through the enveloping sounds. The sonorous envelope then makes us aware that sound has expansive and voluminous characteristics. It not only gives us acoustic information about our position or distance towards the sound sources, but also anchors us spatially and determines our relationship to our physical position and to others in our immediate environment. The way we relate to this environment and to others is constituted and influenced by the cultural discourse in which we perceive. Connor’s approach thus opens up a perspective for understanding the conceptual node of the listener as subject, the sounding world and the cultural discourse that is shared by a community.

In the following section, I will elaborate on how the listener’s personal competences or aural literacy are of crucial importance in the establishment of a listening subject as anchored in a specific cultural discourse. I will argue further that the listening subject presupposes a discursive position in relation to sound and its sonorous envelope in terms of address and response. Discourse and discursivity in listening then constitute a way for the listener to respond to auditory distress. However, as I will show, this response depends heavily on the listener’s competences in relation to a cultural discourse.
2.3. Exit the Listening Subject: Positioning through Aural Competence

Connor suggests that the modern listening subject is mostly attentive, though receptive in taking part in the urbanite and industrial soundscapes of the everyday. Rokeby’s *n-Cha(n)t* pairs the recipient to an active agent that intervenes through sound in a feedback loop. The installation suggests that the receptive systems are equipped with certain competences that help them to position themselves towards the auditory events. It demonstrates another aspect of our human auditory system: the response towards auditory distress necessitates aural competences. I define aural competences as the cognitive means and mechanisms that enable us to adequately respond to auditory distress in constructive, efficient and most often meaningful ways (which also includes a broad notion of ‘literacy’ in our ability to understand and create meaningful experiences). The aspect of effectiveness of our responses implies that such competences can be developed and improved over time.\(^{42}\)

Soundscape studies are generally based on the assumption that contemporary aural competences are generally undeveloped or lacking. To remedy this, Schafer has devised *ear-cleaning exercises*. This does not ignore the fact that we already possess a certain level of aural competency and literacy, which we have developed out of necessity. Being constantly ‘switched-on’ as listeners, we are used to our volatile, urbanite spaces that are acoustically impermanent and permeable under continuously changing environmental conditions, and that face the occasional and sudden danger of becoming undesirable interferences. As a consequence, we have learned to filter out and select what we want or need to hear in relation to our modern acoustic horizons as a necessary survival mechanism. However, as I will now show through *n-Cha(n)t*, this is not always a flawless process. I want to argue that despite an assumed lack of aural literacy as claimed by Schafer and Truax, creating meaningful experiences or searching for significance through listening is part of our defence mechanisms against auditory distress and it imbues us with certain competences. Through auditory distress we feel addressed and incited to search for signification. I argue here that creating meaningful auditory experiences helps us to regain control over the distress.

In my view, listening is embedded in discourse through its inclinations to make meaningful auditory experiences. Neither Schafer nor Truax, however,

\(^{42}\)Auditory or aural competences (apart from ‘musicological’ literacy) should not be conflated with being an ‘audiophile’ or an ‘audible’ person, preferring listening above looking, though they can reinforce each other. The difference lies in the adaptability and trainability of our competences. Schafer and Truax have devised ‘ear-cleaning’ exercises to train, what they call, ‘sonological’ competences. Others, like Michelle Comstock and Mary E. Hocks (2003), have referred to ‘sonic literacy’ as an embodied knowledge in composition studies. My understanding of competence, however, involves exclusively the listener’s capability to respond effectively in listening, and therefore relate to sound or music. I will return to the issue of competence at the end of this chapter.
The Frequency of Imagination

offer a sufficient definition of the cultural discourse in which the soundscape is implanted. Though their theories are also based on the discursive propensities within the listening act, their focus is rather on acoustic information of the actual sounding environment that surrounds us. Therefore, I propose to look at the study of discourse of language. In her book *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), Kaja Silverman gives a useful definition of discourse, in which she distinguishes two levels. On the one hand, discourse covers all semiotic practices and epistemological attitudes that enable us to communicate and think (the ‘functional aspect’, according to Bleecker 2002: 30). On the other hand, discourse also contains all the assumptions that impose how we make sense of the world (the ‘regulative aspect’). According to Silverman, “signification cannot be isolated from the human subject who uses it and is defined by means of it, or from the cultural system which generates it” (1983: 3). This cultural system generates the discourse in which the human subject is embedded for all its assumptions and attitudes with which it makes meaning of the world. In this way, the subject cannot be detached from the discourse. Silverman bases her study of discourse, among others, on the linguistical-communicational model of Emile Benveniste in his book *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971). I also regard this model as crucial to conceptualising the particular address of sound that urges the listener to make the auditory experience meaningful.

In Benveniste’s model, discourse is a ‘signifying transaction’ between two persons in a linguistic sense: a speaker or referent who addresses the other, namely the addressee or referee. On those terms, the signifying transaction determines a relation of an ‘I’ towards a ‘you’. According to Benveniste, the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ stand for ideal images of referents and referees. However, as the French philosopher Louis Althusser has explained, the discourse is not necessarily an exchange among actual people. It is rather an exchange between cultural agents that transmit ideological information (Silverman 1983: 48). These agents, expressed in the relation of an ‘I’ as opposed to a ‘you’, can then be understood as ‘subjects’ as a result of this relation in the signifying transaction. Through signification, the subject defines her or himself as being addressed by the other (as addressee). Silverman concludes from Benveniste’s model that the subject only exists in relational terms as constituted through the discourse. She therefore defines subjectivity as a ‘set of relationships’ (1983: 52).

For Silverman, the signifying transaction, moreover, takes place in language. She poses language at the centre of the subject’s establishment in

---

I am greatly indebted to Maaike Bleecker’s understanding of Benveniste’s communicational model that she discussed in relation to her notion of the ‘subject of vision’ in her dissertation, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (2008). My argument fully agrees with her approach and contributes along similar lines to an understanding of a proper ‘subject of audition’ or ‘listening subject’ as complementary to Bleecker’s notion.
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

signification. Based on the psychoanalytical aphorism of Lacan that the unconscious is structured like a language, Silverman asserts that language constitutes the subject in a relation of interdependency. She claims that language and subject are correlated through discourse: “language can only be activated through discourse, within which the subject figures centrally” (1983: 72). Language, however, does not need to suggest verbal content. Benveniste’s model focuses rather on the positions of the referent and referee that are constituted by the discourse and that make any meaning in that relation possible. This approach conceptualises ‘meaning’ as a position that materialises the subject as the addressee of an address. This opens up a new perspective for an understanding of the address of sound towards the listener and her or his subjectivity. Language is not the prerequisite for the formation of a listening subject in the act of listening. Verbalisation is, likewise, not necessary in order to interpret sound but, due to our compelling relation to it in our thoughts, language plays a large part in the functional and regulative aspects of discourse.

Following this line of argument, sound necessarily intervenes in the listener – thereby causing auditory distress – which makes her or him feel addressed as auditory ‘I’. In this way, sound affects a sense of self in listening that is reflected in the way the listener relates to the sound and positions one’s self. This communicative model is also demonstrated through the feedback system between sound producer and perceptive system in n-Cha(n)t. In the installation, the visitor’s intervention and its reproduction by the computer systems constitute a relation of an intervening I and a receptive you that becomes in turn an I in the feedback system for the other perceptive systems (you). The I-referent is then the sound-making agent that copies the sound it registers. The receptive agents that constitute and attempt to restore the acoustic community constitute the you referees.

Benveniste, in addition, suggests a third category, which is indispensable for his communicative model to be sufficiently flexible: the category of the ‘spoken subject’, the subject who is constituted through identification with the subject of speech. By analogy, in the context of auditory experiences in which the object is not speech but sound, we can identify a subject of audition as a category of a subject that feels addressed by the sound(s). For matters of clarity, I will further address this subject in my study as listening subject. The listening subject is constituted through the address of the sounds that catch the listener’s attention and that make her or him identify one’s position with the subject position that is implied. This subject is produced through the discourse that makes any signification in the act of relating through listening possible. This category of the listening subject also highlights that the subject is

---

44 In chapter three, I will show how language plays a role in narrativisation without the necessity of verbalising meanings ascribed to sound or music by the listener.
foremost a discursive position that is embedded in the ways we relate to and make sense of our surrounding world.

By reading Connor’s notion of the ‘auditory self’ through Silverman’s subject notion, I conclude: an ‘auditory self’ comes about in complying with or positioning oneself towards the cultural discourse in which the listening act takes place and which necessarily involves interventions of signification by the listener. As I have already introduced through Schafer’s and Truax’s arguments, signification in the act of listening involves interplay of the listener with both the environment and the acoustic community to which she or he relates. Correspondingly, Silverman reminds us that we also need to take into consideration the cultural discourse in which the listener is embedded. Depending on the degree of compliance to the values, habits and regimes of listening that belong to a cultural discourse, the listener can find gratification in ‘grasping’ sound with and within this matrix.

As it comes to meaning, sound, in its physical manifestation, is nothing more than vibrations, meaningless resonances. The listener, however, attributes meaning to sound in relation to a cultural discourse and context in which the act of listening takes place. Through its feedback system, Rokeby’s installation n-Cha(n)t illustrates how signification comes about in relational terms between the human visitors, the computer systems and the environment of the installation space. The computer systems try to copy the sounds picked up through the microphones as faithfully as possible by means of speech-recognition protocols. As such, the systems reproduce the human urge to ‘grasp’ the perceived stimuli in terms of information that is significant with regard to meaningful categories defined by language. The speech-recognition software overdetermines this urge by comparing all the acoustic information with its linguistic ‘knowledge’ of speech. As a result, the acoustic interruptions are immediately filtered through linguistic parameters to reproduce them in loops of syllables. However, as the loops are initiated by various interventions of sound, their internal meaning is rather idiosyncratic and becomes redundant. It is the human visitor who attributes meaning to the sounds when judging the outcome.

In order to attribute meaning to the feedback loop, the human visitor of n-Cha(n)t needs to feel addressed by the sounds to do so. After the visitor has created an unbalance in the feedback system by producing a sound in the microphone, she or he could first feel observed as a sound producing ‘I’. She or he may then gain a sense of being a ‘third’ subject in-between the computer systems when they close off from outside sounds and turn to themselves to restore the unison in reproducing the registered sound. As a third party, the visitor could then relate to the systems through comparison of the sounds that are reproduced. Though the interrelation is manifested by a reproduction of sound, the communication some interesting flaws. First, the installation highlights only those words that are recognised by the speech recognition...
software on the screen. In so doing, the system often fails to recognise the exact words according to the English speech patterns and grammar it has been programmed for. This demonstrates a dynamic relationship between the perceptive system and processes of signification that are entangled with language. Second, the produced ‘errors’ call into question how we subjectively and individually attribute meaning to what we hear, which does not have to be governed by language. The comparison between sound and meaning is realised by the visitor who judges the results. The reproduction of the sounds could then be judged in terms of the linguistic categories of human speech, though the listener might as well listen to the soundscape for its musical and aesthetic properties. Some may judge the failures to be linguistically wrong, while others may regard the feedback loop as entrancing.

The errors in the reproduction of sound make us aware that language drowns the individual listeners into a discourse that is selective in the processes of filtering and attributing meaning to the auditory stimuli. In this context, the installation’s soundscape could be seen in relation to the early auditory exposures of language in the sonorous envelope at an early age. Similarly, the chant functions as a sonorous envelope that facilitates communication between the systems and creates a sense of coherence, whereas every sound intervention demarcates the systems as separate entities. The feedback system then represents a nostalgic gesture to restore the sonorous envelope and drown out the separating act of language. However, the visitors also interact with this sonorous envelope by introducing a cultural discourse through their judgments.

The judgements turn the visitors into ear-witnesses of the acoustic community that is established by the chant, while at the same time allowing them to take part in it through both interventions of sound production and auditory reception. In so doing, they assert their role and position as listening subjects. In this context, Benveniste’s model could shed light on how the visitors position themselves in the feedback system, shifting from intervening to a sense of being intervened by sound. In this reciprocal system, the soundscape gives rise to a feeling of ‘self’ as a way of positioning oneself in relation to the subject position that is implied by this mechanism. As the errors point out, the interrelations between computer systems and human visitors are embedded in a discourse through processes of signification. The discursive network defines the listening subject in terms of the relations that are continuously changing. As such, sound highlights the ever-changing nature of the interrelations and the effects they bear on the listener in her or his sense of self as listening subject.

Conversely, the so-called mistakes of the system are productive in demarcating the limits of the system’s ‘literacy’ as virtual intelligence. Through its limitations, it offers us a model for our own aural competences. These competences define how we deal with the constant changes in our
The Frequency of Imagination

position and relation to the sounds in terms of signification. The linguistic errors in the installation’s feedback system could then draw our attention to the fact that not only a shared cultural discourse and an immediate context define our processes of signification. It is our aural competences that enable us foremost to position ourselves in a particular way towards what we hear.

Schafer has drawn attention to ‘sonological’ competences in this respect. He describes sonological competence as a type of literacy of the listener to relate to and understand the surrounding world in terms of how she or he can express auditory experiences:

Sonological competence unites impression with cognition and makes it possible to formulate and express sonic perceptions. It is possible that just as sonological competence varies from individual to individual, it may also vary from culture to culture, or at least may be developed differently in different cultures (Schafer 1977: 274).

Schafer acknowledges that sonological competences are not only defined subjectively and can be trained, but that they are also culturally contingent. Schafer’s acknowledgment supports my argument that the cultural discourse plays a significant role in the acquisition of our competences in listening and describing our auditory perceptions. The concept of sonological competence therefore has a certain limit to the extent that we can actively develop our listening skills and attitudes individually through exercises.

Though initially defined as different from ‘musicological’ competences, Paul Rodaway (1994) argues for a shared value of Schafer’s ear training exercises in intensifying auditory perception:

It is commonly recognised that ear training enhances the normal hearing person’s hearing discernment or accuracy, as in music training (e.g. Schafer 1967) and that recognising a sound (as in language) heightens auditory experience. The incomprehensibility of a foreign tongue reminds us of this (97). 45

Schafer prefers the term ‘sonological’ to detach the listening experience from any aesthetic or structuralist judgment that would stem from a notion of ‘music’. (Consider, for instance, the old opposition between absolute and relative hearing, which in my opinion is rather a matter of speed in recognising the tones either in relation to a direct tonal environment or to one’s memory. Schafer formulates an alternative to the term ‘musicological’ with its claims in musicoecology of theorising music and musical listening as competence, such as Nicholas Cook (1990) has defined: “If by ‘musical listening’ we mean listening to music for purposes of direct aesthetic gratification, then we can use the term ‘musical listening’ to refer to any type of listening to music whose purpose is the establishment of facts or the formulation of theories” (152). Structural listening is most dominant in musicological literacy for the purpose of formulating theories. Sonological competence defies such approach with its main focus on sounds in relation to their environment, but with an acute ear for acoustic parameters. The latter finds its inspiration in the musique concrete with Schaeffer’s Traité des objets musicaux (1966).

In contrast, Theodor Adorno has written numerous critical essays on structural listening as opposed to ‘atomistic listening’ induced by popular music, i.e. a type of listening to music in
Rodaway’s analogy of listening to a foreign language implies that, when we are excluded from the meanings and the fine linguistic nuances, our search for recognisable and familiar sounds increases. Recognition of a sound heightens our experience of that sound. Likewise, ear training enhances our ability to recognise sounds and place them in relation to a certain acoustic horizon, environment and cultural discourse. Conversely, the discourse has a regulative function in our aural competences that constantly adapts and develops, according to the different situations we relate to, such as when we are confronted with a foreign tongue.

Rodaway further nuances Schafer’s conviction of the necessity of ear-cleaning exercises in arguing that we also use technological extensions to compensate for the insufficiency of our competences: “We compensate for our less acute hearing not only by training our ears – or ‘ear cleaning’ [...] but also by technological ingenuity and, in particular, various kinds of amplifier and other auditory tools” (Rodaway 1994: 92-3). The use of such technological apparatuses that assist our ears is, however, also embedded in cultural discourse and often necessitates additional auditory skills and regimes of perception.

Rokeby’s interactive installation provides evidence for how the reliance on technological means (microphones, computer processors, amplifiers, loudspeakers) creates a highly focused listening environment for both computer system and human visitor. In this ‘augmented’ environment, the lack of flexibility in the system creates an awareness for the errors, which questions both the competences and technological extensions in the installation to compensate for this deficiency. The limitation of the installation therefore confirms that competences are of crucial importance as a means to cope with sound by way of recognition.

Up to this point in my argument, Rokeby’s installation has helped me to discuss different aspects of auditory distress: its necessity in our perception and its role in coping, filtering and processing unwanted or excessive intensities. The installation demonstrates how our coping mechanisms to deal with auditory distress stand in relation to the particular listening environment with a certain acoustic horizon, the cultural discourse as reflected in an acoustic community, and the individual aural competences. I have also shown how the acoustic horizon, the acoustic community and the sonorous envelope can function as mechanisms themselves to mask certain intensities of sound and regain control over the auditory distress. However, n-Cha(n)t also presents limitations to the discussion of the coping mechanisms.

bits and pieces with a rather distracted attention (see for a comprehensive overview of Adorno’s work on music, Essays on Music, ed. by Leppert 2002; and in particular about atomistic listening, the essay “Little Heresy”, 1965). For Adorno structural listening is the highest form of music appreciation. In this respect, musicological competence differs crucially from ‘sonological’ competence, which would only partially give importance to structural matters.
installation highlights most specifically the implications of such mechanisms in relation to sound (re)production and language recognition in terms of speech. As such, it shows that recognition of sounds in linguistic terms is highly selective, and that speech is primarily sound before it is recognised as language. The system, moreover, lacks sensitivity for speech-acts and cultural discourse as the interventions of sound are merely electroacoustically reproduced for the purpose of stabilising the system. As a model for the human auditory system, the installation also fails in adaptability, which is so vital to the aural competences to effectively respond to auditory distress.

In what follows, I propose another case study that helps me to develop additional implications of the mechanisms that spectators can use in response to auditory distress in the theatre. I will discuss the music theatre performance Ruhe (2007) by Josse De Pauw for Muziektheater Transparant. I have already explained that an excess of intensities causes auditory distress, thereby intervening in the human auditory system. Like in n-Cha(n)t, the excess in listening in Ruhe is channelled through a sonorous envelope and a certain community constituted by sound. Through the performance, I will conceptualise how both aspects require a certain sense of authority in sound, causing new levels of auditory distress. Consequently, I will discuss further implications for the listener’s responses and agency in listening.

3. Ruhe: Exposures to Excess and Lack in Listening

So far, I have discussed how auditory distress is a general aspect of listening as a result of the necessary intervention of sound and its excess in intensities to our continuously susceptible ears. Now, I will consider the implications of auditory distress as specifically reflected in the music theatre performance, Ruhe. Earlier in this chapter, I stated, based on Maconie’s argument, that taking part in sound production or distancing oneself from a sound source, including its direct physical and social environment, are two ways of coping with auditory distress. However, these responses are most often not very well accepted in our modern theatres. As Connor also remarked, symptomatically for the modern auditory self is that the listener takes part in rather than takes aim at the auditory world. In most cases, as Soundscape studies have suggested, the listener responds through internal, cognitive mechanisms in

---

46 Ruhe premiered at the KunstenaFESTIVALdesArts in Brussels 2007, after which it toured through Belgium and the Netherlands. Its premiere in the Netherlands was at the Zeeland Nazomer Festival 2007 in the Van Riessen Houthallen in Goes. I attended the performance at the Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam on 26 January 2008. Josse De Pauw has developed a type of text-based music theatre, often as narrative concerts, with LOD and Het Net, among which, Die Siel van die Mier (2003-4) and Liefde/Zijn Handen (2007-8). As an actor, he was also recently involved in music theatre productions such as Dédé le Taxi (2006-7) for Theater Antigone, La Compagnie du Tire-Laine and De Veenfabriek, and Babar/Le Fils des Étoiles (2008-9) for Muziektheater Transparant.
listening with which she or he positions one’s auditory self. The listening subject then emerges as rather an effect of this positioning. As a result, the listener creates meaningful auditory experiences.

Through Ruhe, I will examine why the listener in the theatre feels urged to turn auditory distress into a meaningful experience. First, I elaborate on how the excess in listening through the sonorous envelope is particularly constitutive for auditory experiences in music theatre that call upon our competences to respond. Then, I will observe how, complementary to this excess in listening, our aural competences in the theatre are related to a crisis of signification that is reinforced through a lack of visual and other sensory stimuli (visual and sensory deprivation). This helps me to explain how signification is enhanced by this fundamental lack or insufficiency in listening. Ultimately, this mechanism shows the specific role of the theatre context in highlighting auditory distress and the soundless responses of the listener in relation to one’s aural competences.

3.1. Authority of the Sonorous Envelope

Josse De Pauw’s Ruhe contains monologues based on the novel De SS-ers (1967) from the Dutch authors Armando (pseudonym for Herman Dirk van Dodeweerd) and Hans Sleutelaar. The novel was written based on interviews with Dutch ex-SS-officers who volunteered in Nazi-Germany during World War II. It caused quite a stir in post-War literary criticism in the Netherlands.
towards the end of the 1960s. In the interviews, former SS volunteers talk freely about their motivations as to why they collaborated with the German army and the National Socialist Movement, the Dutch ‘NSB’. Their motivations, though historicised in the ideology of National Socialism, however, sometimes sound very topical and plausible today.

In De Pauw’s performance, two actors perform a selection of these testimonies as monologues. The monologues are paired to a selection of songs by Franz Schubert performed *a capella* by a male choir, the Collegium Vocale of Ghent (Belgium), consisting of twelve singers. The songs have the contrasting effect of pleasurably soothing the senses through harmony in the perverted context of the politically laden monologues. At the end, a newly composed piece by Annelies van Parys is performed, which disrupts the original tonality of Schubert’s “Wie schön bist du, freundliche Stille, himmlische Ruh” (*how beautiful you are, friendly stillness, heavenly silence*), to which the title of the performance also refers). *Ruhe* demonstrates that the sense of unison is all the same based on auditory distress, marked by the contrastive interventions of words in the monologues and dissonances in van Parys’s piece.

An important aspect of the listening experience in *Ruhe* is the spatial arrangement of the staging. The audience shares the same space as the singers and the actors. Upon entering the performance space at the beginning, the singers have already begun singing a Schubert song in charming harmony. When walking through the corridor leading to the performance space, the audience can already hear the songs in the distance. Each audience member picks one of the wooden chairs that are positioned in a circle. The singers are scattered among the audience and stand upright on their own chairs in the same circle. Their perspective above the seated audience gives them a sense of authority, while the proximity of their sounding bodies creates an intimate feeling of being in the middle of the musical performance as in a chamber concert. This creates an unusual listening situation in the theatre, which at first sight does not favour any ideal point of listening. One can choose to sit closer to a bass-singer or to any of the other higher-pitched voices. However, once the listener is seated, any temptation to change places is resisted, as this could disturb the listening experience of the fellow audience members. Despite the free seating, the performance is still based on an ideal listening situation.

47 The authors are said to have voiced and portrayed the SS-volunteers too humanly, which was criticised by some critics as being hidden Nazi-propaganda.
49 Any noise, like snoring, for instance, could catch the attention of the neighbouring listeners and break the cohesion of the musical experience. The same holds for walking away or vocalising in Maconie’s strategies of response to auditory distress. This reminds us of John Cage’s well-known composition 4′33″ which made the audience members aware of the social context of the listening situation by using ‘silence’ or rather, its phenomenal inexistence, as the
The singers are evenly divided within the circle of chairs, which gives the listeners the intimate feeling of being enclosed in sound. The beguiling harmony of the Schubert songs heightens the effect of a sound ‘blanket’, literally covering and captivating the listeners in a sonorous envelope. Though creating auditory comfort and pleasure, the sonorous envelope also creates excess, which could result in a new kind of auditory distress as a result of an intemperance of sensory stimuli and text. Besides the appeal of the harmony in the songs, the lyrics in the German language occasionally catch and distract our attention away from the stillness (the ‘Ruhe’) that is conveyed through the harmony. As such, this distraction shows that musical harmony also creates auditory distress as there is always the looming anxiety that the concord could be broken up at any time. The combination of lyrics and music in a song is therefore always in a vulnerable equilibrium and can produce excess in listening. The envelope of sound constitutes this excess. As the controlled spatial arrangement highlights, sound engulfs the listener from different sides. Though experienced as pleasurable, this sonorous envelope can make the listener aware of the excess of intensities that affect her or him in the most forceful of ways. This excess and the listener’s awareness of it, as I will explain, have cultural, social and political implications.

Earlier in relation to n-Cha(n)t, I introduced Connor’s argument, in line with Don Ihde, that the auditory self is a correlate of the world, permeated by sounds and words. The sonorous envelope is likewise a correlate of our surrounding modern environments, which often overwhelms us with an excess of sounds, texts and images. Schubert’s romantic and pleasant-sounding songs in Ruhe then work rather as a counterpoint to this excess. In this context, Schafer has introduced his rather idealistic notion of the ‘soniferous garden’. He refers to the gardens in French Baroque that had water fountains with mechanisms producing sounds. This cultural-historical concept of the garden has a harmonious appeal to the senses: “A true garden is a feast for all the senses” (Schafer 1977: 246). Ruhe seems to aim at such a soniferous garden in the theatre through Schubert’s songs. The harmony between the singing voices creates a sense of an acoustically controlled space in contrast to the turbulent modern world.

Moreover, similar to n-Cha(n)t, the sonorous envelope of the songs in Ruhe draws our attention to the social functions of sound, bringing listeners together in an acoustic community. The male choir forms an acoustic community here. The performance shares similarities with n-Cha(n)t in showing how the channelling of stimuli plays a significant role in the essential component of the performance. Every cough, sigh or movement in the audience was marked by an enduring silence of a man sitting in front of a piano, opening and closing the lid, counting the measures and changing the pages of the score.

As the interactive installation n-Cha(n)t demonstrates, sound is a residue to vocally produced language or words causing excess that cannot be processed by the ears in its entirety.
The establishment of a consensus shared by a community; here materialised in the harmony of singing together. In so doing, the sonorous envelope is used as a defence mechanism to minimise the intervening effects of unwanted intensities causing auditory distress. In *Ruhe*, the listener is made aware of the exclusionary nature of such a community, defining and occupying the listening space. Steven Connor (2005) formulates this controlling power in terms most similar to my notion of auditory distress:

But sound is not all pleasurable permeation or erotic meeting of membranes. Sound, as Aristotle puts it, is the result of a pathos. All sound is an attempt to occupy space, to make oneself heard at the cost of others. Sound has power (56).

The enveloping sound of the Schubert songs in *Ruhe* demonstrates this overpowering claim of sound on space and, in so doing, on the space of the listener. This shows how the ideas of harmony and ‘stillness’ can be sensed as authoritarian and related to the supremacy, which the idea of ‘desired’ sound brings to bear on the listener.

The coherence the singers created through the harmony of the music thus evokes a power relation imposed on the listeners. The performance demonstrates how exclusionary and ‘totalitarian’ it is to be part of a choir. In this Nazi context, the sonorous envelope is therefore impregnated with an ideological statement. None of the singers can risk singing a false note or having a soar throat. Likewise, the harmony excludes any dissonant intervention. At the end of the performance, the coherence is broken by a new composition by Annelies van Parys, which deconstructs certain motives from Schubert, sliding into dissonances. For this final composition, the singers have left their chairs and relocated themselves further away from the audience in a more traditional choir formation with music stands and scores. The music performance then becomes a more conventional ‘concert’, which asks for a different type of attention.

Consequently, the harmonious Schubert songs and the dissonant composition by van Parys show two contrasting aspects of the sonorous envelope. On the one hand, the sonorous envelope is a powerful instrument to restrain auditory distress. On the other hand, the envelope causes, yet again, auditory distress as a result of its excess of certain intensities in listening. Through the immersive qualities of the envelope, we experience that sound has an authority to which we feel compelled to subject our auditory selves. Whether it is the chant of reproduced linguistic sonorities in *n-Chain(j)* or the Schubert songs in *Ruhe*, the envelope of sounds forces a state of responsiveness upon us, which affects our sense of self. In the sound-mirror stage, we learn to comply with the envelopes of sound from an early age, which results in certain habits, attitudes and competences that assist us as strategies to intervene and channel the excess through listening. So the sonorous envelope – with its inherent mechanism of separation between the
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

sounds and the addressee in the acoustic mirror stage – is itself based on an excess of intensities to which we automatically respond in order to keep the momentum.

Yet Ruhe demonstrates that auditory distress can equally be caused by the experience of the sonorous envelope. The envelope invokes first and foremost a “feel good” sensation, which is, however, turned into introspection when the music is interrupted by words and later by the dissonances in van Parys’s composition. In the Schubert songs, the lyrics are not as significant for their content as much as for the sound of the German language in relation to the Nazi context. Subsequently, the testimonies of the former SS-members intervene in the harmonious state of listening to the songs. The verbal interventions make us aware of the precarious coherence on which this harmony is based, which is broken down further in van Parys’s composition. Ruhe thereby attaches a critical dimension to the sonorous envelope as ideologically constructed in relation to the cultural discourse – and cultural memory – that is called upon and shared by the listeners.

As a result of this awareness of the auditory distress caused by words and dissonances, the sonorous envelope is exposed as a representation, which we only recognise as such when the coherence is broken. According to Schwarz (1997), the envelope of music can be seen as a representation of the pre-oedipal acoustic mirror. It brings pleasure but it cannot be accessed directly as an event, as it is always a representation of an experience, produced retrospectively (Schwarz 1997: 8). Ruhe makes us aware of the sonorous envelope as a representation, thereby holding a mirror to our own personal associations. Despite the enchanting experience, we can recognise the sonorous envelope as a representation, first and foremost through the spatial positioning of the singers.

By repositioning the singers to the background, the change of perspective makes us aware that the listening experience depends on how we read and relate to the representations in music. This affects how we construe meaningful experiences through listening. The urge to make the auditory

51 The actor literally interrupts the music by coughing and repeating ‘ja ja ja ja’ leading into the monologue.
52 Schwarz uses the word ‘fantasy’ to denote the sonorous envelope as thing and as space: “Both listening thing and listening space are always retrospective fantasies since we have direct access to neither events that structured our developing subjectivity nor historical contexts as immanent experiences of reality. These experiences and contexts have left traces, however, in how we listen to music” (Schwarz 1997: 4). Schwarz shows through his notion of sonorous envelope as fantasy thing and listening space how symbolic representations of the acoustic mirror in music are significant for the way they have shaped our responses. Among the representations, he regards the echo structures in music: “More specifically, there are many aspects of music that suggest an acoustic mirror: question/answer structures, statement/counterstatement, unison melodies, melodies doubled at the octave, inversion, imitation, theme and variation, echo effects in 1950s rock, etc.” (21-2).
distress meaningful is caused by the interventions of the words. The dissonances in van Parys’s vocal music extend the growing auditory distress in the listener that is constituted by the excess of meaning in the combination of music and words. In relation to the context of the monologues based on the testimonies of the SS-witnesses, the dissonances could then represent our anxiety with regard to ideological content. The music could anachronistically evoke the idea of ‘entarte Musik’ (degenerate music), which in the ideological context of National Socialism and Nazi propaganda could play upon a cultural memory of the ban on unacceptable music.

This shows how, in our responses to a sense of ‘excess’ in listening, meaning of music and cultural discourse are interconnected.

In contrast to the excess in listening, Ruhe has one more defining feature that accounts for our urge to make sense of auditory distress: a lack of sensory stimuli and semiotic content. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the notion of lack in terms of sensory and visual deprivation. I argue that deprivation has a reinforcing effect upon our meaning-making processes of sound and music in the theatre.

3.2. Intensifying Excess: Visual Deprivation and the Auditory Gaze

Josse De Pauw’s Ruhe creates a context of visual deprivation by minimising the visual stimuli, which puts extra emphasis on sound and the listening act. If the excess in listening finds its equivalent in the bodily experience of a totally deaf person who does not hear but is acutely aware of sound as vibration, visual deprivation has its extreme correlate in a totally blind experience: the blind individual’s auditory faculties tend to be more acute or more dominant in perception.

Theatre always creates a deprived context as it needs an impoverished environment – an ‘empty space’ (Brook 1968) – for creating a situation of control and signification. Like blindness, deprivation in the theatre urges the spectator to sharpen her or his auditory sense and listen in a more focused environment. Richard Wagner realised this principle by darkening the auditorium in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus for the first time in 1876. The darkened listening environment aimed at supporting the immersion of the spectator into the drama on the stage. However, the Wagnerian gesture of ‘blinding’ the listener only approximates the experience of the blind, to which

---

This verifies how meaning of music is very dependent on discourse and context as a result of an otherwise lack of direct meaning. I will develop this idea of lack later in this chapter.

Especially under the supervision of Heiner Goebbels as Minister of Propaganda, music was heavily controlled by the Nazi’s in the Third Reich, which led to the idea and the Munich exposition of ‘Entartete Kunst’ (1937) as part of the Nazi propaganda. At this exhibition, examples of ‘degenerate’ art and music were on display. In 1938, a musical equivalent, the exhibition ‘Entartete Musik’, opened in 1938 in Düsseldorf at the first Reichsmusiktage (Music Days of the Reich).
seeing people will never really have access. Besides, there are many degrees and types of blindness (like being born-blind and accidentally becoming blind), which would make a similarity with temporary visual deprivation in the theatre only superficially fitting. What matters here is that the comparison demonstrates how visual deprivation reinforces the effects of auditory distress caused by excess. Jacques Lusseyran draws an interesting parallel in And There Was Light (1963) between deprivation and excess in the experience of an accidentally blinded person:

Blindness works like dope, a fact we have to reckon with. I don’t believe there is a blind man alive who has not felt the danger of intoxication. Like drugs, blindness heightens certain sensations, giving sudden and often disturbing sharpness to the senses of hearing and touch. But, most of all, like a drug, it develops inner as against outer experience, and sometimes to excess […] (Lusseyran, qtd. in McLuhan 2004: 68).

The lack of visual and semiotic content enhances the excess in listening, causing an intensification that, in line with Lusseyran, can be compared to a feeling of ecstasy. As Ruhe shows, sharpening the auditory sense in the theatre through visual deprivation can likewise have such an ‘intoxicating’ effect. In the affective responses to the excess of intensities in the sonorous envelope, the listener is at first ‘deaf’ for its authoritarian power, becoming enchanted by the perfect harmony.

As Ruhe demonstrates, for deprivation to occur, the listening space does not need to be darkened completely. The context of deprivation comes about by dimming the lights and lightening the performance space with only a few light bulbs hanging from the theatre grid above. The light bulbs are completely dimmed only near the end when the video work of David Claerbout, entitled Raurlo, Bocuroschevweg 1910 is projected onto one of the walls. The sudden darkening relocates the observer’s attention to the projection, which shows an idyllic, undisturbed Dutch landscape, motionless like a postcard or a tableau vivant. The picture shows a mill and a big tree in the shadows of late afternoon. The composition by Annelies van Parys is performed in a low voice (quasi sotto voce). Gradually, while becoming accustomed to the light of the screen in the darkness, one becomes aware that the tree in the postcard is actually moving in the wind. The eye catches this

---

55 Although darkness is part of our modern theatres, many experiments with blindfolding the spectator have been performed to create new, embodied experiences that disrupt the traditional theatre and theatricality. Cilia Erens and Justin Bennet, for instance, in Blind Date in Shanghai (Rotterdam, 2001) have created an alternative theatre form with minimally edited soundscapes in the Netherlands to approximate the experience of the blind. The ‘blindness’, however, is only temporary for the duration of the performance and surpasses the differences between the experience of a person who is born blind and one who became blind at a later stage of life.

56 To discuss this feeling of intoxicating pleasure or ecstasy in listening, I will later introduce the notion of ‘aural bliss’ based on Barthes’s jouissance (see chapter four).
The Frequency of Imagination

miniscule change, when sounding dissonances disturb the stillness of the rustic landscape. The darkening of the space intensifies here the eye and the ear, urging correspondences between them.

The visual deprivation in the theatre shares much with the experience of the blind in that it creates a context that intensifies not only our auditory perception, but also our sense of space through sound. Based on the observations of psychologist James J. Gibson, Rodaway (1994) describes how the perspective of the totally blind can teach us some fundamental aspects of auditory perception:

In particular, the blind find their auditory capacity strongly influenced by the context of hearing and thus remind us of the important role of the environment in structuring auditory information (see Gibson 1968). The blind remind us of the sheer richness of auditory experience and the extent to which the environment itself structures the sounds reaching our ears (Rodaway 1994: 96-7).

The blind experience draws our attention to the influence of the environment on the act of listening. Apart from the acoustic information that the environment conveys, visual deprivation certifies the cognitive influence of how the environment structures our reading of the sounds through context. In this way, the darkening of the space in Ruhe creates an environment in which the final piece of music disperses the observer’s attention between foreground and background, between gazing and hearing.

This deprived context in Ruhe, moreover, leaves much to the imagination. The gradual movement of the leaves in the tree and the uncanny dissonances in the song make the attentive observer aware that nothing is what it seems at surface level. Visual deprivation enhances here the correspondences between visual image and sound. In literature, these correspondences between different senses have generally been discussed through the concept of synaesthesia. Richard E. Cytowic’s neuro-cognitive approach to synaesthesia, for instance, also includes the role of visual deprivation:

Normally, only some of the sensory input that constantly bombards the brain is relevant. Most of it is filtered out. Experience with sensory deprivation […] shows that removing all sensory input leads to psychotic thinking, perceptual distortions, and hallucinations. […] But the rule of thumb is that a brain deprived of external input will start projecting an external reality of its own, readily perceiving things that are ‘not really there’ (Cytowic 1993: 133).

[57] In particular, ‘acousmatic’ listening contributes to this effect, which I will introduce in chapter two. I will also return to this issue in chapter four when I specifically discuss how visual deprivation can stimulate auditory imagination.
Cytowic notes that sensory deprivation could cause perceptual distortion and psychosis, which confirms that deprivation brings along certain levels of distress. My study is, however, not aimed at the psychophysical effects of deprivation. Yet what Cytowic’s ‘rule of thumb’ does confirm, is that visual deprivation leads to an enhancement of auditory perception, and of our attention to the immediate environment. When the perceiver can only partially relate to an external context, she or he could respond to this lack of visual stimuli by filling in the gaps and projecting an external reality through the imagination. The “things that are not really there” should then be understood as imaginative gap filling in order to compensate for the context of visual deprivation.

In Ruhe, the visual deprivation plays with our perception of the projection. One could pose the question: is that tree really moving in the postcard? Or is it a figment of my imagination? The visual deprivation calls for a heightened perception of sound, which feels the need to be complemented by visual input. This implication of visual deprivation is supported by the notion of the auditory gaze, which Jean-Paul Sartre rather accidentally describes in L’être et le Néant (1943, trans. Being and Nothingness in 1956). This notion exemplifies how the intervention of sound in the ear borders on sense of spectatorship and voyeurism to the eye. Sartre describes how a sudden auditory intervention can disturb a visual experience by marking the other’s presence and gaze.

In a passage of Being and Nothingness, Sartre recounts how a man peeps through a keyhole, which completely absorbs him in his experience of intensities.

58 I want to make one annotation to Cytowic’s claims on the effects of deprivation in its most extreme forms. In addition to visual deprivation, it is also conceivable to consider auditory deprivation. John Cage’s oft-cited anecdote of his visit to the anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951 (a sound-proofed laboratory room without any reverberation) has offered us a corrective view. According to the anecdote, Cage heard, despite the total deprivation, a tone of high frequency, which he recognises as his nervous system, and a low tone produced by his blood circulation. This observation made Cage conclude that silence is inexistent in life. The anecdote, however, also shows that auditory deprivation does not immediately have to lead to ‘psychosis’ in case of a temporary exposure: rather, it heightens awareness for an embodied experience of intensities.

59 Neuroscientists have identified the cortex, the limbic system and the somatosensory nervous system as containers of in-grained strategies to make a model or representation of the world as a basis of comparison to external events (Finkel 1992: 404). When we are deprived of these external events, we produce or project a reality of our own according to such a model.


61 Different to looking, the word ‘gazing’ expresses more strongly a two-way relationship with the object of looking, as David Schwarz (1997) points out: “The gaze […] is an overdetermined look; it often bears an uncanny sense of looking and being looked at; subject/object relations are confused; the gaze often suggests judgment or being exposed to the whim of a threatening superego. The gaze is more than just ‘staring’; the gaze is the representation of a transposed look onto an object that ‘objectively’ cannot look” (Schwarz 1997: 64).
investigating gaze towards what is unfolding behind the door. Suddenly, the man hears footsteps in the hall behind him. The resounding though invisible footsteps are threatening to the voyeur’s gaze, as Dennis Hollier (2004) comments:

The gaze of the other, as Lacan praised Sartre for emphasizing, has entered the voyeur’s field of non-vision: it is an (offscreen) acoustic gaze, one experienced not visually, but acoustically, through the surprise of hearing another presence, of feeling him there acoustically, through one’s ears (164).

The concept of the acoustic or auditory gaze helps me to understand that sound as intervention in a context of deprivation can cause awareness for the auditory distress that is inherent to every sound. In the theatre, sound can equally intervene and ‘disturb’ a visual experience in being essentially ‘invisible’ and ‘a-topical’ (placeless), while urging for correspondences to what is seen.

Ruhe demonstrates this intervening propensity not only by placing the singers around and within the audience, but also through the sounds that puncture the image in the video art of David Claerbout. While the eyes are drawn to the slight changes in the leaves of the tree, a sudden dissonance disturbs the tonal scale of Schubert’s musical motives and makes us regard the ‘still life’ in a slightly different way. Similar to the auditory gaze, we suddenly become aware of the presence of the singers, as if the music is eavesdropping on us. This feeling of being listened to influences the auditory experience.

David Schwarz makes a further distinction in how we relate to and position ourselves towards music in terms of listening look and listening gaze:

There are no given acoustic equivalents to the eye/gaze structure, so I call the acoustic equivalent of eye the listening look and the listening equivalent of the gaze the listening gaze. The listening look is produced by the ear of the listener that maintains the binary distinction between the listener’s subjective position and a music’s object position. […] The listening gaze, on the other hand, is the music listening to us. How can music listen to us if we are silent listeners? By pinning us down (Schwarz 1997: 97).

Schwarz’s listening gaze is similar to Sartre’s auditory gaze. The listening look suggests a more passive relationship between the listener and the music in

---

62 Denis Hollier (2004) remarks that the body of the voyeur is reduced to what Jean Starobinski has called un oeil vivant, a living eye (164). Hollier, moreover, points to another occasion in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness where the observer feels caught by “a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence” (Sartre 1956: 346, qtd. in Hollier: note 5). Additionally, the punctured gaze established by the auditory intervention could perhaps be compared to Paul Claudel’s l’oeil écoute (which was the title of a book on Dutch paintings), conveying listening with one’s eyes.
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

terms of a subject-object relation. The concept of the auditory or listening gaze, on the contrary, stresses the authority of sound. When sound catches us unaware, we become distressed by the auditory intervention. As a result, it pins us down in space. Similar to this idea, and with the very first epigraph to my study, I referred to Artaud’s analogy of the theatrical experience in terms of a visit to the surgeon or the dentist. We can now understand how this implies that sound, due to its intervening nature, can make us aware of our presence, position and response. This idea forms the conceptual basis for my investigation in the following chapters.

4. Responding to Auditory Distress in the Space of Music Theatre

The case studies of n-Cha(n)t and Ruhe lay bare how auditory distress caused by the intervention of sound exerts a sense of authority in addressing the listener. I have discussed how this address incites an urge in the listener to respond and position her or himself discursively towards the interventions of sound as listening subject in order to regain control. Theatre in this sense subjects the listener to a certain structure, which is contextually, environmentally and discursively established. This structure channels the interventions and exposures of sound, and thereby influences the listener’s responses. The notions of the acoustic horizon and the acoustic community, to which the act of listening is pitched, illustrate how both the physical environment and discourse take part in structuring what we hear. This structuring is also implied in the idea of ‘acoustic design’ in the theatre as a way to control the auditory distress.

Robin Maconie (1990) indicates the aspect of control in relation to the auditory environment. In contexts such as the theatre, the acoustic environment is kept under control as a basic rule of acoustics and sound design:

First find an enclosure in order to minimize the possibility of uncontrolled air currents and the incursion of unwanted sound, then add temperature and humidity controls, and you have the makings of a useful auditorium (Maconie 1990: 83).

Maconie mentions temperature as an additional factor that needs to be controlled, since sound energy becomes heat when it is absorbed. Controlling the acoustics and all its related factors for sound production, however, does not mean that the effects within the auditory environment on the listener are controllable. Rather, sound as it is perceived is uncontrollable by its

63 I choose here the term ‘acoustic design’ above the more widely accepted term ‘sound design’ in the theatre, as the latter might suggest a control and modification of the soundscape by a sound designer through technological means. With the notion of acoustic design, taken from Schafer (1977), I aim rather to address the acoustic properties of the total listening environment.
The Frequency of Imagination

The Frequency of Imagination

The Frequency of Imagination

The Frequency of Imagination

The Frequency of Imagination

The Frequency of Imagination

intervening nature. The controlled environment mutually defines the interventional disposition of sound.

The traditional design of our theatres and opera buildings entails acoustically controlled spaces that are arranged in such a way as to keep out the disuniting outside conditions of modernity in favour of ‘ideal’ listening conditions according to varying subjective definitions (see Bellman 1983: 393). This idea is supported by Susan Buck-Morrs (1992), who historically connects the acoustic model that prioritises the filtering out of the ‘soniferous’ environment outside the auditorium to the Bayreuth Festpielhaus (1876) in Germany, envisioned and realised in the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk by Richard Wagner. Following Adorno’s arguments on this subject, Buck-Morrs argues that the spatial structure had to assist a superimposed unity of the senses against “the alienation and fragmentation, the loneliness and the sensual impoverishment of modern existence” (Buck-Morrs 1992: 26). In this sense, this spatial model of the Gesamtkunstwerk was devised, so to speak, to ‘anaesthetise’ the social aches of a specific perception of the modern listening subject.

Although in Ruhe the spatial positioning of singers and audience breaks with the traditional model of our theatre and opera spaces, it aims at an intensification of the same effects that Buck-Morrs addresses. The harmony, coherence and intimacy of the songs exclude modern feelings of fragmentation and solitude. The excess in the auditory experience of the sonorous envelope revokes a sense of impoverished ‘auditory self’ with a feeling of community: a perilous ‘we’ feeling in the historical context of Nazi ideology.

Despite the structuring that the theatre context and environment subjects onto the auditory interventions, Ruhe exhibits the necessity for the listener to respond to the authoritative power of the sonorous envelope. As I introduced in relation to n-Cha(n)jt, the listener owns certain auditory competences (listening habits) in relation to an idiosyncratic past and the cultural discourse (with certain dominant regimes of perception) in which the listener is born into. The subjectivity of the listener is therefore embedded in the discourse that determines the listener’s responses to deal with the auditory distress.

The necessity of aural competences in these responses directs the pathway for my investigation in the next chapters. I will elaborate on how aural competences help the listener to respond to auditory distress in the theatre. The main vehicle of these responses is attention balancing on a scale between states of passivity (unconscious, automatic responses in hearing) and activity.

---

64 There have been many countertendencies in theatre history that advocate different notions of the listening privileges of the audience in the theatre space, like the many experiments with site-specific theatre and performance art. Ruhe materialises in a sense one of Artaud’s well-known claims inspired by the Balinese theatre that the spectator should be surrounded by the spectacle instead of the other way around. But the performance does not aim directly at irritating the spectator through this acoustically realised surround-sound. I return to this issue in chapter four.
Auditory Distress: Interventions of Sound

(conscious listening). In this way, the listener’s responses towards sound’s authoritative inclinations in auditory distress is determined by the ways the sound catches her or his attention, and equally, how she or he deals with the exposures to sound as a result of the listening attention. In the next chapter, I will show how this listening attention in itself is steered by the regulative mechanisms and structures of the theatre.

In his work on sound in the cinema, Michel Chion (1994) stresses that there are aspects to sound that cannot be controlled through conscious attention:

But listening, for its art, explores, in a field of audition that is given or even imposed on the ear; this aural field is much less limited or confined, its contours uncertain and changing. […] There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what – especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it. Surely, our conscious perception can valiantly work at submitting everything to its control, but, in the present cultural state of things, sound more than image has the ability to saturate and short-circuit our perception (33).

Here, Chion argues for more agency in the sound than Schafer or Truax would allow. Soundscape studies presume that listening can be consciously controlled through conscious attention, as listening always implies an active involvement in a state of ‘readiness’, a global scope or a narrow focus on a particular source (Truax 1984: 16). However, Chion counter-argues that sound has the power to overwhelm and saturate our auditory perception that escapes our alert listening attention. Chion thereby argues against an overemphasis of control in our listening competences. The same holds for some of our aural experiences in music theatre. Due to sound’s omnidirectionality, and its physical and compelling nature (such as its suasions as sonorous envelope), the listener cannot control all aspects of sound (Chion 1994: 33). Auditory distress materialises this fundamental uncontrollability of sound. Sound therefore sustains leaky borders – to follow up on Connor’s terminology – between an active listening subject that aims at and a receptive subject that takes part in the auditory environment, as a result of the listener’s responses to the auditory distress.

In music theatre, we find ourselves in a perpetual responsiveness to the power of sound that can intervene, disturb and short-circuit our perception. To that end, our interpreting abilities give balance and stability to our ‘auditory selves’ as a response to the distress. Sound’s saturating suasions towards excess in listening, however, make aural competences as an embodied, ingrained practice of knowledge all the more compulsory. David Rokeby’s n-Cha(n)t balances precisely on the above mentioned borders in a movement of reciprocity, as it makes the sound-producing human trespasser aware of the power of the interventions of sound that are a threat to the stability of the
system. The responses of the monitoring ears then offer us a model of perception in which we can recognise our own filtering capacities of our waking consciousness and attention. The installation, moreover, draws our attention to the exclusive nature of an acoustic community that exercises as a filter to temporarily secure a desired consensus. Josse De Pauw’s music theatre performance *Ruhe*, conversely, shows how an acoustic community formed in singing can impose a harmony that would eliminate any dissonant sound. The interventions of text, however, put this discriminating nature of the acoustic community in a different perspective, thereby causing another type of distress in the listener.

Both case studies demonstrate how aural competences influence how we deal with aesthetic objects such as an installation or a music theatre performance. They also show that theatre can fulfil a critical function towards our listening competences by making us aware of the correlation with our personal horizons of interpretation and comprehension of the surrounding world, as well as of the discriminating nature with which we channel and filter our experiences. Although Soundscape studies focus mainly on our modern environments outside the theatre, one can hardly sustain to keep them separate. As I intend to show in the following chapters, the listening act in the theatre is, likewise, embedded within a larger discursive context that defines the listener as both a member and an observer of an acoustic community. In this study, I therefore propose to examine the aural competences that assist the listener in steering attention *inside* her or his perception of a performance, but not without the connection with an *outside* to the listening regimes in (post-)modern auditory environments, discourse and aurality.

Moving between manifestations of sound’s authority and the listener’s subjectivity in my case studies, I discuss the capacity or rather at times, the lack of ability, to respond discursively to the sounds that attract our attention. Among these potential responses, I discuss respectively the modes of listening attention (chapter two), narrativisation (chapter three), and auditory imagination (chapter four). Ultimately, these responses suggest competences that are anchored in aurality, which opens up possibilities in the epilogue to this study to discuss music theatre’s role today in either complying with or contesting our auditory regimes of perception. In doing so, the auditory spaces in music theatre I describe confront us with a site of contestation for questioning our perception, discourses and aurality, by showing the mechanisms of our interpretative acts in listening to the sounds and music within post-modern theatre.

In the next chapter, I develop the specific implications of navigating attention for the auditory experiences in contemporary music theatre. I argue that ‘managing’ listening attention is, apart from the listening environment, for a great deal determined by the specific construct and structure of the performance. The performance namely offers a structure of address that
activates and steers the attention in terms of predisposed, discursive positions that the listener can ‘take up’ in her or his responses to auditory distress. For the purpose of analysing listening attention in relation to these positions, I further develop the argument of Soundscape studies of how the attention determines our modes of listening as a first set of responses to sound and music in the theatre.
Photo John Young in *La Didone* © Delphine Cotereel
Artwork © Zhigniew Bzymek & Gabe Maxson
Chapter 2

The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

In chapter one, I argued that auditory distress is inherent to every auditory perception as a result of the necessary intervening and excessive nature of sound. This distress accounts for the urge of the listener to respond through listening. By referring to the ideas of Schafer (1977) and Truax (1984), I have introduced a cognitive mechanism in the listener’s aural competency that helps her or him to channel the auditory distress into desired intensities. Soundscape studies offer us further a conceptual framework for explaining a particular system of response to auditory distress in the listener: the modes of listening.

These modes or ‘modalities’ of listening materialise ideal ways of channelling the auditory stimuli as a result of our cognitive coping mechanism. In order to make this model operative for the analysis of the listener’s responses and meaningful auditory experiences in the theatre, a two-fold explanation is needed. On the one hand, it should encompass how the spectator feels addressed as listening subject by sound and its auditory distress in the theatrical situation, and on the other, why she or he feels compelled to make sense of this. What is particularly needed is a means to account for the listener’s position between the authoritative power of sound and the mechanisms of theatre that already imply certain positions in the process of signification.

In the present chapter, I will offer such an explanation through an understanding of the interplay between the listener’s ‘attention’ and the theatre’s ‘perspectives’ in the modes of listening. The modes of listening, as discussed in Soundscape studies, present us with a set of analytical tools to discuss the listener’s responses to auditory distress. These modes occur in our everyday auditory encounters and are perhaps uncommon to the music-theatrical context that purports a highly controlled listening situation. Nevertheless, I argue that these listening modes need to be questioned because of performance practices that make us aware of the ways we respond to auditory distress. Using The Wooster Group’s La Didone (2007) as my case study, I will demonstrate how a music theatre performance channels the auditory distress by itself, through its specific structure of address. In this address, the performance offers perspectives that manage the listener’s attention.

As a first step in the listener’s response to auditory distress, I will explain how the listening attention, directed by the theatre’s perspectives in listening, attributes to the way the listener relates to the sound or music in her or his listening modes. As a second step, I will argue that these modes involve a positioning of the listener, with which she or he makes the experience of sound or music meaningful. I will then show how this need for a meaningful experience is a result of the insufficiency that is inherent to the act of listening.
If, in the theatre, a perspective fails to provide a coherent structure or sufficient meaning to compensate for this insufficiency, the listener might become aware of the caused auditory distress, and of her or his role in responding to it. As such, this type of (music) theatre lays bare the positions and the concomitant signification processes in which the listener is actively engaged. Through the modes of listening, I then argue that in these signification processes the listener finds temporary stability as listening subject to the insufficiency or deficit of meaning.

Hence, in this chapter, I discuss the modes of listening as a means to understand how the listener deals with auditory distress in the theatre, and how music theatre can play upon this mechanism. As a departure point, I first take up the notion of the listening subject, as defined in the previous chapter, with which I propose a shift in my argument with regard to the listening modes from everyday soundscapes to the theatre. Central to this examination is how the listening modes are dependent on the listener’s attention, as suggested by Soundscape studies. Jonathan Crary (1999) provides me then with a general understanding of attention in relation to our modes of perception, including the listening modes. In order to make the shift to musical performance, I examine Ola Stockfelt’s (2004) argument, which claims that the modern listener generally holds an active but ‘idle’ attention towards music and sound. As a result, listening to music would necessitate certain ‘adequate’ modes of listening to respond to generic aspects in the musical performance.

After a critical examination of Stockfelt’s approach in comparison to Crary’s, I develop my notion of the culturally specific perspective that influences how the listener makes meaningful experiences of sound or music in the theatre as a result of an insufficiency in listening. I show how this insufficiency is foremost an effect of the listener’s attention moving between levels of unconscious hearing and conscious listening, which gives rise to a whole range of distinctions in the listening modes. Subsequently, I discuss acousmatic, reduced, causal, ambient, and semiotic listening modes, and relate them to the particular perspectives that theatre offers. Consequent to this discussion, I indicate the importance of such notions as the ‘auditory icon’ (Chion’s earcon), the ‘evenly hovering attention’ (Barthes’s psychoanalytical listening) and the ‘semiotic remainder’ (Turino’s semantic snowballing).

In order to consider the application of the modes as tools for analysis in the theatre, I offer one example of a perspective in La Didone: the ‘schizophonic’ listening situation, which is defined in line with the notion of acousmaticisation by a disparity between sound and its source or visual embodiment. This disparity highlights the placeless, frameless and restless nature of sound. I argue that this particular perspective can urge the listener in the theatre to resolve the auditory distress by placing the sounds in relation to one’s auditory self through the listening modes and through the frames of reference that the performance gives to a certain limit.
1. The Active Idle Listener: Shifting Attention from the Everyday to Music Theatre

Central to my thesis is the listener who makes her or his auditory experiences meaningful. In the previous chapter, I introduced Steven Connor’s idea of the ‘auditory self’ as taking part in rather than taking aim at the world that surrounds the listener through sound and its sonorous envelope (Connor 1997: 219). I contend that this sense of ‘self’ manifests itself only indirectly in the subjective ways the listener relates and responds to the auditory distress caused by the sounds. Drawing on the theorisations of Kaja Silverman, I explained how this subjectivity in the listener’s way of relating implies a discursive positioning. Through such positioning towards sound, the listener ‘tunes into the frequencies’ of the socio-cultural network with which she or he can attribute meaning to the auditory experiences. By embedding her or himself in a culture and discourse, the listener takes part and engages in the sounding world. I contend here that to position oneself in relation to auditory distress, and thereby to engage with sound or music as in a theatre performance, depends on one’s listening attention.

In his study of the cultural practices of managing attention, Jonathan Crary (1999) introduces the idea that we necessarily steer our attention according to our everyday environments: “[…] we are in a dimension of contemporary experience that requires that we effectively cancel out or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment” (1). Although similar to the arguments in Soundscape studies on this matter, Crary’s definition of attention applies to a wider scope of perception. According to Crary, the capacity of ‘paying attention’ is defined by “a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli” (ibid.). His notion of attention substantiates the idea that with modernity the increase of industrial, urbanite and traffic noise in our acoustic horizons has considerably affected our regimes of perception. The auditory envelope in our modern lives has increased in terms of acoustic, sensory and semiotic overload. More than ever

---

65 Although Crary’s earlier work is predominantly concerned with the historical changes in the ideas about vision in the 19th century, his concept of attention – like his notion of ‘observer’ – applies to perception in general, and also by implication to listening. In Suspensions of Perception (1999), Cray explicitly surpasses the visual tropes of knowledge by stating that the modern problem of attention is not primarily an issue of visuality: “Perhaps most significantly, attention, as a constellation of texts and practices, is much more than a question of the gaze, of looking, of the subject only as a spectator. It allows the problem of perception to be extracted from an easy equation with questions of visuality, and I will argue that the modern problem of attention encompasses a set of terms and positions that cannot be construed simply as questions of opticality” (Crary 1999: 2). Crary’s notion of ‘attention’ is most useful to my study as it connects with issues of discourse, semiotics and the meaning-making subject.
The Frequency of Imagination

we are trained to channel and block out the unwanted sounds, which cause auditory distress, by means of our attention.

Crary’s notion of attention is, however, not merely a safety clutch that we can apply at will, such as Soundscape studies have suggested. Crary defines attention as a set of terms, practices and positions that pre-exist to the perceiver. This definition verifies the argument that the listener tunes into a cultural discourse in listening and uses that discourse as a filter that manages her or his attention. Our ways of paying attention are shaped by this discourse, and, likewise, we reflect the cultural discourse in the ways our attention is managed through the objects of perception we engage with. In Soundscape studies, R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax describe a listener who actively and consciously makes use of aural competences to position her or his attention. They put forward the agency of an active listener in a range of listening modes, though they admit that we are not consciously aware of most of our listening habits and modes. Crary, on the contrary, emphasises the management of attention through the objects of experience we encounter, which diminishes the aspect of control and agency in the listener.

I want to take up Crary’s argument to suggest that the general unawareness of our modes and habits in listening stems from their pre-existence to our perception in the discourse that comes to us through our encounters with the sounding world. Crary’s notion of ‘attention’ can bear a perspective to Connor’s notion of the listener as ‘auditory self’ and the ‘listening modes’ as discussed by Soundscape studies. However, these concepts have been primarily formulated in a context of our everyday engagements with the environments of our sounding world. In order to extend these ideas to the perception of sound and music in a performative context such as the theatre, I propose to compare Crary’s argument to Ola Stockfelt’s approach to the modes of listening in musical performance. Stockfelt’s claims open up a way to conceptualise these notions in relation to each other for cultural objects such as music theatre.

Ola Stockfelt (2004) appears to confirm Crary’s argument to a certain extent, though with a specific emphasis on contextual aspects in the experience. She argues that the modes of listening imply a restriction, not only given by the listener’s personal abilities and competences, but also by the object of experience, its particular structure and historical context:

Which mode of listening the listener adopts in a given situation depends mainly on how the listener chooses to listen – that is, which mode of listening he or she chooses to develop or adopt. And yet this choice is neither totally free nor accidental. In part, every mode of listening demands a significant degree of competence on the part of the listener (and the competence will not be less by being shared by many), and no listener can have an infinite repertoire of modes of listening. The mode of listening a listener can adopt is in this way limited by the competences in modes of listening that he or she possesses or can develop in a
given situation […] In part, not every mode of listening is in any immediate way adaptable to every type of sound structure or even to every type of musical work […] In part, different modes of listening are in different ways more or less firmly connected to specific listening situations (Stockfelt 2004: 89-90).

Stockfelt claims that the use of the modes of listening is restricted, not only by personal choice or competence, but also, more importantly, by the nature of the address of the listener, as contained by the specific sound structure, the type of music and the listening situation. In this way, Stockfelt confirms Crary’s argument by claiming that the exercise of the modes is to a large extent contained by the object of experience itself, in this case, the music or the sound. However, she emphasises the contingency or dependence upon the context in which the music addresses the listener to adopt a particular listening mode.

In summary, Crary’s earlier argument helps me to claim that the structure of address is always contextually, culturally and historically dependent, as are the listening modes in retrospect. The listening mode that is adopted by the listener defines how and what the listener perceives from the auditory intensities as useful, desirable, relevant and meaningful within a specific listening situation. Stockfelt’s argument, in turn, emphasises the role of context in the listening situation.

Stockfelt specifically draws our attention to the application of ‘ideal’ or ‘adequate’ listening modes in relation to the particular, musico-historical genre of a work. According to her, each listening situation bears its own ideal relation between the music and the listener, as “presumed in the formation of the musical style – in the composing, the arranging, the performance, the programming of the music” (Stockfelt 2004: 91). Correspondingly, each genre calls upon a certain adequate mode of listening in relation to the social, cultural and genre-normative situation that specifies “the predominant socio-cultural conventions of the subculture to which the music belongs” (ibid.). Stockfelt indicates further that listening is related ideologically to “a set of opinions belonging to a social group about ideal relations between individuals, between individuals and cultural expression, and between the cultural expressions and the construction of society” (92). In so doing, she discloses the discursive mechanism in relation to which listening takes place.

The interdependence of the listening modes on a set of opinions, norms and conventions, shared by a social group, is in line with Crary’s argument. According to his argument, such a set is precisely what defines the attention in the observer’s perception. Consequently, depending on how the listening attention is managed, the listener connects to a social group in discursive ways. Listening attention then reflects what is defined as ‘meaningful’ within a specific context. Following Silverman’s argument on this matter in chapter one, the listening attention is produced in particular by the socio-cultural discourse in which both the meanings of sound and music, and the listener as
subject of these meanings are embedded. By implication, Stockfelt’s understanding of ‘adequate’ listening modes should already be rooted in and produced by the same discursive network, in which genre and context gain meaning.

However, Stockfelt’s ‘adequate’ listening modes suggests a normative attitude, which needs caution. She contends that her approach does not mean to imply that certain modes of listening are ‘more intellectual’ or ‘culturally superior’, but rather: “It means that one masters and develops the ability to listen for what is relevant to the genre in the music, for what is adequate to understanding according to the specific genre’s comprehensible context” (Stockfelt 2004: 91). This explanation reveals the discursive embeddings of the listener’s modes in function of the particular listening situation and a series of contextual, socio-cultural factors such as contained in genre. These regulative aspects surrounding musical experience are also relevant for an understanding of music theatre today. The genre of a particular piece of music could give the listener a frame of reference that defines how she or he can respond to auditory distress and channel what is relevant within that particular context.

Nevertheless, the kind of music theatre that I engage with in this study most often combines and blurs different genres, making the modes thus called upon either conflict with each other or making us question the importance of such sufficiency of ‘adequate’ modes for our understanding.66 Therefore, I propose to broaden the scope of Stockfelt’s argument. Rather than looking at genre as such, I suggest to look at a more general regulative mechanism in the theatre that has a similar contextually and culturally defined function as genre: the listening ‘perspective’. I regard this perspective in listening not merely as a spatial category but integrally as part of the particular dramaturgical principles the performance conveys. Just as theatre always suggests certain perspectives for vision, I argue that music theatre offers certain perspectives that channel the auditory distress and thereby structure the listener’s responses to it in defining ways. By definition, a perspective is a regulatory structure that defines and anchors a position for the spectator or listener to which she or he relates as subject. Perspective is then as much a regulative principle for the gaze as for the ear, which manages the positions the perceiver can take up through her or his modes of relating to the sounds or music.

Stockfelt, moreover, stresses the necessity of the listening modes as a way to gain conscious control over our auditory and musical experiences: “[…] we

---

66 As I problematised in the introduction, the music theatre I engage with tends to escape traditional genre distinctions and plays often with a multiplicity of musical genres. Still, in itself it belongs to a certain type or ‘genre’ of theatre, which has generally been characterised as post-dramatic theatre by Hans Thieß Lehmann, and which has also grown out of the artistic, idiosyncratic developments of the (music) theatre ensembles themselves. In a cultural-historical sense, this type of theatre brings along its own strategies that play upon the listener’s expectations and modes of perception.
must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active ‘idle listeners’” (Stockfelt 2004: 93). In so doing, she confirms the general assumption in Soundscape studies that our ways of listening are generally marked by an alert laziness as habits and automatic responses. However, Stockfelt’s phrase of the ‘active idle listener’ does not mean that there is no attention at all or that we block everything out automatically. As I argued earlier, our modern soundscapes call for a multiple or constantly shifting attention that often works unnoticeably to our waking consciousness. I therefore contend that this ‘active idleness’ is part of the defence mechanisms of the modern listener to excessive auditory distress. It is the effect of the coping strategies, sedimented habits and regimes of attention that have been established over time in relation to various sound occurrences and occasions.

The same can be said about the theatre. As I stated in the introduction, new music theatre came about due to a general dissatisfaction with theatre and opera traditions. The conventional structures of theatre and opera in a dramatic tradition have made the spectators into idle, receptive listeners. The music theatre that I discuss in this study, however, tends to re-activate the listener and stimulate her or him to take up a more reflexive and conscious position towards one’s own, subjective perceptions. This type of theatre questions the listening modes that the listener has acquired over time, thereby marking their peculiarity and cultural contingency. As I intend to illustrate in this chapter, managing auditory distress in the theatre plays a significant role in making the listener’s active idleness productive and meaningful by making her or him aware of the shifts between different modes of attention that the regulative mechanism of perspective calls for.

Stockfelt offers me the focus of my investigation and analysis in the current chapter: “An analysis must therefore begin from such shifts between modes of listening […] Hence we must develop our competence reflexively to control the use of, and the shifts between, different modes of listening to different types of sound events” (Stockfelt 2004: 92). In this chapter, I question Stockfelt’s claim about the listener’s (self-)conscious management of the modes of listening. Crary’s idea of managing attention through perspective then helps to nuance the agency of the listener. He argues that our modes of perception always depend on the perspectives that are historically and culturally embedded in the discourse through which our perceptions, in turn, become meaningful. I therefore argue, based on Crary’s argument, that the choice of the listening modes is not restricted to generic definitions, preconceptions, expectations that stem from a performance tradition, context, type or intent of the musical work as such. Rather, the modes of listening should be understood in relation to the discourse that works as an interpretive safety net in response to the auditory distress caused by the sound or the music. Aural competence then involves not as much a reflexive use of the modes of listening that helps the listener to respond ‘adequately’ to a certain
type of sound events, which Stockfelt purports. On the contrary, it involves a set of responses that necessarily shift our attention in accordance to our signification processes, which are guided by the regulative mechanisms as materialised in perspective. The consequence of my argument is that aural competency manifests itself in the listener’s responses to auditory distress that mark the positions the listener takes up. However, rather than claiming the agency of the listener in her or his competences, I argue that these positions are always already discursively inscribed by the perspectives of a given (music) theatre performance to which the listener relates through the modes of listening.

The Wooster Group’s *La Didone* provides me with a case study to demonstrate how the modes of listening can be used to cope with auditory distress. In this way, the performance serves to illustrate how the listening modes can be used as tools to analyse how we deal with auditory distress in the theatre. As I will show, the hybrid construction of the performance particularly offers a structure to our perceptions that creates shifts between our modes of listening. This structure is constituted by the perspectives that manage the attention in listening. *La Didone*, however, also demonstrates the limits to our modes of listening in response to these listening perspectives. As I will argue, the performance brings the idea of an ‘adequate’ way of listening in jeopardy due to a multiplicity of rapidly shifting modes and the lack of a proper ‘sound frame’ that can pin down all the sounds. As a result, the listener is presented with an excess of intensities that are not immediately coherent and meaningful. This excess highlights an insufficiency in the act of listening that is productive for the way the listener makes meaningful experiences of the sounds in relation to a cultural discourse. Both Crary and Stockfelt then ask us to look at the listener in relation to her or his competences and the regulative mechanisms that manage her or his attention to what is meaningful. I argue that because of a lack of stability in the perspectives and frames of a performance such as *La Didone*, the listener is given an active role in disclosing the veil of her or his idle attention and to productively shift between listening modes in relation to the perspectives. As a result of these constant shifts, the listening act is marked as an act of relating to the sounds and the music that stems from an inherent instability in the auditory self. Discourse, in this particular sense, does not mean to serve signification in the first place, but to confirm and stabilise the self, which defines the listening subject.

2. **The Modes of Listening as Response**

There is a longstanding tradition that distinguishes sound from music, predominantly based on the idea that music presumes some kind of organisation or arrangement of sound (objects and events), or the subjective
acknowledgement of a structure in listening as music.\textsuperscript{67} Music, in this sense, would receive its stability from its inner structure, which implies some type of arrangement of the auditory intensities, like a temporal (horizontal) and/or timbral (vertical) organisation. Sound in general would lack such an arrangement, which needs to be compensated by our perceptual mechanisms. However, due to auditory distress in every auditory perception no matter sound or music, the stability of an ‘inherent’ structure in music is debunked as much as for sound, which is commonly regarded as more incidental and semiotically arbitrary.\textsuperscript{68} Moreover, most sounds in theatre and music theatre are perceived as intentional and as part of a certain structure, with or without our subjective acknowledgment of musical properties. Sound and music therefore always imply an arrangement within their relation with the theatre performance that limits the ways in which we (are ‘afforded’ to) listen to them. This is what I call, a \textit{listening perspective}, which is as much embedded in the sound objects and events as in their (re)presentation in the listening context.

Previously in chapter one, I discussed the connections between Silverman’s ‘subject of semiotics’ and Connor’s psychoanalytically inspired concept of the ‘auditory self’ to conceptualise the listener as listening subject. I argued that the listening subject should be understood as a result of discursive positions with which the listener relates to sound or music in meaningful ways. In the following, I introduce how such a discursive position is inscribed by a \textit{perspective} within the object of experience. I discuss how the listener mediates between the discursive positions implied by the perspectives and her or his own positions by focusing her or his attention.

Hence, I consider the modes of listening as a set of tools to analyse the listener’s responses to an excess in listening that causes auditory distress. I explain what these modes ‘do’ in relation to auditory distress. As the latter is a general aspect of listening, I consider the applicability of the listening modes for our experiences in the theatre. I then contend that the theatre can play upon these modes in a specific way through its perspectives that manage the listening attention. Using examples from \textit{La Didone}, I illustrate further how these modes can help the listener to respond to auditory distress by creating meaning. As such, \textit{La Didone} showcases vital aspects of listening through the modes of listening it calls upon. It thereby also exemplifies how the listener makes her or his auditory experiences meaningful in relation to oneself through these modes.

\textsuperscript{67} Modern compositions (dodecaphonic, atonal music) often attempt to debunk the myth that the inherent structure of music is a homogenising system, contained by the ‘work’. Rather, the listener composes the music in listening through her or his experiences.

\textsuperscript{68} Historically, the conceptual parchment of music and sound was debunked in the \textit{musique concrète}.
2.1. Modes and Perspectives in Listening

Soundscape and Acoustic Communication studies have proposed a range of listening modes as analytical tools to discuss our engagement with the everyday auditory environment. A mode of listening is, by definition, a way to process the acoustic intensities as information to our brains. It involves a cognitive processing and filtering of the sounds that are meaningful to us. In so doing, the modes of listening help us to protect the sensitive auditory system against an excess of intensities, semiotic overload and, therefore, distress.

Contrary to the everyday soundscapes, theatre always compensates for the auditory distress through the perspectives it offers. The term ‘perspective’ implies in the first place a spatial position, which influences the way the listener perceives. A perspective can also be discursively and communicatively relevant, but it always posits a restriction in terms of a set of relations between the listener and what is to be heard. It defines how the listener will interpret the sounds and relate cognitively to a particular listening context. Pierre Schaeffer pointed out through his idea of ‘objects musicaux’ (1966) that the work as ‘musical object’ already has a relationship between subject and object inscribed in it, which the listener must accept in order to grasp it (Nattiez 1990: 98). A perspective expresses in this sense the subject-position of the listener from within the structure of address or construct of the musical performance or (re)production. I contend that in the theatre a perspective is always implied in listening to a sound or music in the way it is performed, produced and communicated to a listener. As such, it absorbs and produces the responses of the listener in often unconscious ways.

A helpful example of the regulatory function of perspective in listening is the recent phenomenon of MP3. As Jonathan Sterne (2006) suggests, MP3 is not only a conversion format but also a cultural artefact in the way it literally ‘plays’ upon its listeners. The basic idea behind MP3 is: discard data which we do not (want to) hear anyway. For the purpose of shrinking the size of virtual memory an audio file takes on a computer or any digital audio device and thereby increasing its portability, MP3 follows psychoacoustic rules about

69 Perspective is foremost a visual trope. Nevertheless, the concept can be extended to the realm of listening as long as it does not impose a visual episteme and blur conceptual differences. According to Theo van Leeuwen (1999), musical perspective was invented in conjunction with visual perspective and the picture frame in the Renaissance. Musical perspective was then mostly realised by means of dynamics. However, van Leeuwen also points out that perspective can be realised by the relative loudness of simultaneous sounds, which represents distinctions of figure and background, “regardless of whether this results from the levels of the sounds themselves, from the relative distance of the people or objects that produce them, or from the way a soundtrack is mixed” (van Leeuwen 1999: 23). Van Leeuwen, however, also acknowledges that silent sounds like a breathy whisper on close miking can catch our attention in the foreground, enhancing a sense of close presence to the sound source (van Leeuwen 1999: 25-6 & 28).
what we perceive and what we filter out in our auditory perception. Therefore, MP3 restricts our listening experiences and responses to a norm in the way it offers a highly regulative principle as ‘perspective’ on how we are (considered) to be listening. This perspective influences us on what to focus our listening attention. One could critique the normative effects of the way the listener perceives music through an MP3. Yet, as Sterne suggests, we are generally not aware of the differences with the original sounds of the recording or with the same recording on a compact disc, since we most often listen rather distractedly to the MP3 in noisy environments through headphones or poor quality speakers, or when a high-bit rate was used to make the MP3 (Sterne 2006: 339). Hence, digital audio such as MP3 should be understood in its circulation and listening contexts.

Though very different in its context and the listening attention it calls for, music theatre does something comparable to the MP3 in terms of our modes of listening: it always offers a perspective that already channels the auditory distress and manages the listener’s attention. The difference with MP3 is that music theatre’s regulative mechanisms are generally not only implied within the sound object, nor its modes of (re)production. Rather, the theatre adds other spatial, external dimensions to the perspectives in listening.

Soundscape studies stress the spatial aspect of a perspective in a sound or soundscape. In R. Murray Schafer’s approach to perspective, the listener generally distinguishes between a foreground (figure), a background (ground) and a context (field) in the listening space. Following on from Schafer, Theo van Leeuwen (1999) explains how the listener makes these spatial categories in relation to her or his listening attention, which constitutes a ‘three-stage plan’:

[A.E.] Beeby had ‘Immediate’, ‘Support’ and ‘Background’, [Walter] Murch ‘foreground’, ‘mid-ground’ and ‘background. Murray Schafer (1977: 157) uses yet another set of terms and definitions. He defines ‘Figure’ as ‘the focus of interest, the sound ‘signal’, ‘Ground’ as the setting or context, the ‘keynote sound’, and ‘Field’ as ‘the place where the observation takes place, the soundscape’. The ideas, however, are essentially the same. The ‘three-stage plan’ means dividing the sounds which are heard simultaneously into three groups and then hierarchizing these groups, treating some as more important than others (16).

Schafer’s distinction depends not only on the prominence of the sound (its volume or distinctiveness), but also on how the listener’s private, subjective and selective focus is embedded in a spatial organisation of how one is stimulated to listen. Listening attention, as van Leeuwen argues, therefore

---

70 According to van Leeuwen, the three-stage plan is “a typical ‘schema’ which can be realised in different types of sound environments and soundtracks’” (van Leeuwen 1999: 19). It can therefore also apply to our spatial experiences in music theatre.
hierarchises and prioritises what we want to hear in relation to how it is presented by means of a certain restrictive perspective. The sound which is foregrounded in our attention (the ‘figure’) mutually defines the background in the soundscape (‘field’). This, in turn, could serve as an acoustic context (‘ground’) for the listener to locate, connect and understand the foregrounded sounds. The interrelation between foreground and background in our auditory experiences depends much on the perspective contained in the sound. Such a sound perspective assists us in establishing a spatial hierarchy that influences which sounds will catch and receive our attention.

Van Leeuwen shows how the notion of perspective expresses foremost spatial positionings of the (implied) listener that result from her or his relations towards sound (van Leeuwen 1999: 12-3). The perspective influences the listener’s position towards the sound, as van Leeuwen suggests: “In all this we should also remember that sound is dynamic: it can move us towards or away from a certain position, it can change our relation to what we hear” (18). Van Leeuwen concludes: “The semiotic system of aural perspective divides simultaneous sounds into groups, and places these groups at different distances from the listener, so as to make the listener relate to them in different ways” (22). Hence, sound does not always have to give the impression that it travels physically through space by means of spatialisation over loudspeakers. Its inherent hierarchising aural perspectives suffice to give us imaginatively a sense of movement in our perception.71

Hearing spatial distinctions in sound demonstrates how perspective regulates the way we listen to sound in relation to a listening space. Aural perspective then manages the way we process the sounds in relation to ourselves, our sense of self in terms of distance and hierarchy. However, the above examples of spatial perspective do not account for the specific mode of listening that makes us hear these spatial distinctions. Moreover, we are not always consciously aware of our spatial distance to the sound events in our auditory experiences. Van Leeuwen therefore distinguishes perspective from ‘immersion’:

The opposite of perspective is immersion, wrap-around sound. Low frequency sounds (bass) are especially important here. They carry further (think of the foghorn) and fill spaces more completely. They are also harder to tie to a particular spot and seem to come from everywhere at once (van Leeuwen 1999: 28).

Immersion, in van Leeuwen’s understanding, pushes everything to the background of our conscious attention. He regards immersion in relation to

71 In chapter four, I will take this idea further to argue that spatialisation can be regarded as a result of the way the listener responds and positions oneself to auditory distress, rather than an inherent quality of the sound, its mediation and representation. Aural perspectives assist in this positioning.
wrap-around sound, i.e. the sonorous envelope, which masks any other acoustic intrusion. However, as I illustrated in chapter one, the sonorous envelope also creates auditory distress. Depending on its presentation (like in Ruhe), the envelope could paradoxically make the listener alert to its manipulative tendencies, and therefore, to a concealed perspective that aims to make the listener forget about its regulatory function. Immersion, as an unconscious effect on the listener, is then rather the result of a strongly manipulative perspective than an assumed perspectiveless, ‘immersive’ auditory environment. Immersion is not the opposite of perspective, as Van Leeuwen argues, though it does obliterate any conscious spatial anchoring by the listener in terms of spatial distance.

Though van Leeuwen’s discussion demonstrates how aural perspective moves the listener’s attention in a spatial sense, his understanding is limited to a mode of listening that focuses on spatial relations in the first place. I want to argue that, although our ways of responding to auditory distress through our listening modes incorporate a spatial relation to what is heard, the perspective does not merely affect a sense of space. I therefore suggest diverging from this exclusive emphasis on spatiality to examine how a listening perspective suggests discursive positions for the listener to engage with, which results in different listening modes. In what follows, I discuss how a perspective can give rise to correlated modes of listening by means of a tension between what is given in the performance and how the listener relates to it through her or his attention. I then demonstrate how the listener’s position depends on how the perspective manages her or his attention, resulting in particular modes of listening. Consequently, I present an overview of the different listening modes in relation to the listener’s attention – as originally defined for daily experiences with sound – before re-ordering and analysing them for the purpose of music theatre.

2.2. Hearing versus Listening: Managing Listening Attention

Soundscape studies have put great stress on ‘attention’ as an instrument with which we channel the perceived auditory stimuli. Attention is an effect of the correlations between the modern environment and the listening subject. As I introduced in chapter one, we are used to being surrounded by our excessive, ‘messy’ and distracting soundscapes. Their permeability has made us on the alert most of the time. We choose to direct our attention to parts in the constant stream of sound. However, our attention frequently moves in unconscious ways in relation to (hidden) perspectives in the sounds. It is in this dynamic of consciousness and unconsciousness in our attention that listening can be distinguished from hearing in order to understand the listener’s response to a perspective in sound or music.
Based on Schafer’s earlier distinctions, Traux argues for the important role of attention levels in our auditory perception. He offers us an essential distinction between hearing and listening on the basis of attention. Traux also claims that hearing involves capturing a sound and analysing the physical vibration in terms of its frequency, its intensity (the energy distribution or the ‘spectrum’ of the sound), its physical orientation and modification in the environment (Traux 1984: 4; 15-16). Yet this happens in most unconscious ways. We do not perceive these acoustic parameters consciously as such, as they most often go unnoticed. Hearing is therefore rather an unconscious sensitivity with automatic responses. This is the main reason why Traux regards hearing as ‘passive’ when compared to listening. In line with information theory, he defines listening as the “processing of sonic information that is usable and potentially meaningful to the brain” (9). This implies blocking out the redundancies of information depending on a degree of repetitiveness and predictability (16). Listening in this definition suggests an active involvement in the hunt for information. Roland Barthes makes a similar clear distinction in his essay “Listening” (1976): “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act” (1991: 245). The former involves autonomous processes of perception that pertain to the physicality of our auditory apparatus, the latter to a rather psychoacoustic act of volition in our attention. The total lack of listening attention in hearing Truax calls ‘subliminal perception’, which works in most unconscious ways and can therefore be easily manipulated.

With regard to a proclaimed difference between conscious and unconscious responses in our auditory experiences, Connor (2005) discloses an intricate knot between the phenomenal sense of hearing and listening within the modern listening subject as appears through the spatial experience of sound. According to Connor, the spatiality of sound insists that we are never completely passive towards it:

---

72 Kaja Silverman’s (1983) subject notion confirms the influence of consciousness. She claims that subjectivity is a product of two signifying activities: on the one hand, unconscious and on the other hand, preconscious or conscious processes (Silverman 1983: 72). When we bring Silverman’s approach to bear on a notion of hearing, auditory perception is generally regarded as pre-discursive and pre-conscious as many of the auditory stimuli are discursively not interpreted, but filtered out by not paying attention. Listening could then be defined in terms of its pursuit of interpreting the sonorous stream that surrounds the listener in more conscious ways than hearing.

73 Most auditory perception research is based on information theory and signifying processes like Traux’s approach. As Michael Forrester (2000) points out, these theories are dominated by an idea of sound as ‘abstracted information’ in the sense of information processing through cognition (Forrester 2000: 36). I am however more inclined to approach auditory perception, in line with Connor and Crary, from a discursive point of view.

74 A similar argument holds for ambient listening, which I discuss later in this chapter.
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

We never merely hear sound, we are always also listening to it, which is to say selecting certain significant sounds and isolating them from the background noise which continuously rumbles and rattles, continually on the qui vive for patterns of resemblance or recurrence. As with sight, and following Wordsworth, the ear ‘half-creates’ what it thinks it hears. This language of sound is spatial. Why does the increase in frequency of a sound suggest that it is getting ‘higher’? In other words, the spatiality of sound is a reflex, formed by the projective, imagining ear, the ear commandeering the eye to make out the space it finds itself in. It is in this sense that ears may be said to have walls (Connor 2005: 53).

Earlier, in chapter one, I referred to Connor’s article in order to argue that the sonorous envelope creates a comparable wall in our ears. Yet here, Connor seems to suggest that the walls in our ears are inherent to our ‘imagining ear’. He argues that the modern listener is not just passively receptive, but that she or he is continuously selecting and imagining, ‘commandeering the eye’. Auditory perception is therefore never passively ‘hearing’ alone. It is constantly on the qui vive. Connor argues that attention in our auditory perception co-creates space, which is an effect of the workings of our imagining ear, filtering – or in phenomenological terms, ‘bracketing’ – our perception. Hearing and listening are therefore continuously intertwined.

Connor also offers the example of the Doppler-effect, that is, the psycho-acoustic effect of an increase in frequency when a moving object approaches the perceiver. Rather than a perceptual truth, he illustrates that this acoustic phenomenon is discursively produced through our expectations and habituations in listening that make us recognise the increase of frequency in the intensities of sound as coming closer. Discourse produces the connection between the increase of frequency and the sense of pitch, and in this case, distance and movement. Our imagining ear – or ‘auditory imagination’ as I call it in chapter four – recreates what we hear in relation to our ‘selves’. As an effect of the filtering activity of our attention, this projection can sometimes

---

75 Through an analogy with Warren McCulloch’s essay “What the Frog’s Eye Tells the Frog’s Brain”, Brian Eno describes how his experience of listening to Reich’s loop piece It’s Gonna Rain with several tape players steered his attention like frog eyes being constantly alert to small changes: “A frog’s eyes don’t work like ours […]. [A] frog fixes its eyes on a scene and leaves them there. It stops seeing all the static parts of the environment, which become invisible, but as soon as one element moves [usually its next potential meal!] […]. It is in very high contrast to the rest of the environment […]. I realised that what happens with the Reich piece is that our ears behave like a frog’s eyes […]. ‘The creative operation is listening’ (Eno, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 231). Similar to Connor’s argument above, Eno describes how our imagining ears are directly connected to our listening attention.

76 In a similar way, music can create spatial experiences through the discursive connections we make in listening, as Nattiez points out: “a progressive rise in tonal register, and crescendos of volume combine to engender a sense of space” (Francès 1958: 312-13; qtd. in Nattiez 1990: 123). So the sense of space is engendered by how we give meaning to the tonal system and volume (or intensity), as contained and enabled by discourse.
The Frequency of Imagination

work as a ‘wall’ against the excess of stimuli, rendering us necessarily ‘idle’ to cope with the excess.

Connor’s statement above, that listening attention defines in spatial terms what we (think) we hear, makes me conclude that our attention works as a vehicle, as a ‘tentacle’ with which we try to gain a cognitive grip on the listening space. Space is then created, not only in relation to the physical, acoustic space, but also as a response by the listener to auditory distress. This is an important aspect of listening that also applies to our auditory perceptions in the theatre. Depending on one’s aural competences, listening attention offers a fine-tuned means that enables the listener to zoom in on what she or he wants to or needs to hear. Following Connor’s argument, we need to question why it is that we ‘half-create’ only what we ‘think’ we hear in our active but often idle state of attention.

Paul Rodaway (1994) offers a provisional answer in his phenomenological approach for which he adopts Truax’s theory of ‘Acoustic Communication’. According to Rodaway, we compose the sounds ourselves by creating a hi-fi environment with discrete sounds depending on what we subjectively define as meaningful through our listening attention:

When we try to identify more precise composed elements, such as the melody, rhythm or key of a soundscape, we are composing the sounds ourselves, that is, making sense of what we hear. The sense or meaning of sound is therefore both relative to a possible source/activity and in relation to other sounds. More generally, sense or meaning is derived from previous experience of the same or similar sound and from the context of our experience, activity or intensity. The environment itself also structures what we hear (Rodaway 1994: 88).

Rodaway explains that much of how we make sense through listening depends on how we relate to sounds; how we relate what we hear to what we see, or even not see. This capacity to relate depends on previous experiences. In addition, Rodaway includes the role of context, the environment and the listening situation itself in the way the listener creates meaning and structure to her or his auditory experiences.

Forrester (2000) paraphrases Rodaway’s above argument by claiming that listening “implies active attentiveness to auditory information and the very act of listening draws attention to our desire to establish or mark out meaning” (Forrester 2000: 39). What is meant by ‘meaning’, however, is ambiguous to say the least. In Soundscape studies, sound is analysed in terms of its ‘information’, which Forrester’s claim also supports: acoustic data that often indicate environmental characteristics. In this sense, it can be understood that the environment literally lends structure to our auditory experiences. From a phenomenological point of view, however, Rodaway acknowledges the role and agency of the listener in this structuring activity as inherent to listening.
Rodaway seems to acknowledge a much older argument in musicology that by listening to music, whether in a concert hall, an opera or a private listening situation, the listener composes her or his own listening experiences. This argument is supported by the idea that there is no music without a listener. Music receives its structure in relation to the listener who tries to make her or his musical experiences meaningful. Meaning, in this context, refers to musical understanding and interpretation, which assumes certain musical or aural competences in the listener. This competency can manifest itself in structural listening, whereby the listener creates a sense of coherency in the musical experiences.

Auditory experience in the theatre follows a similar logic when auditory distress stimulates the listener to respond. Conceivably more compelling than in a concert situation, the theatre context often urges the listener to respond by searching for meaning. What is more, the type of music theatre that I discuss plays specifically on the listener and her or his insistence to take hold of the auditory space by making sense. By not giving any immediate, straightforward meanings or structure, theatre can give rise to a self-critical outlook, highlighting the listener’s efforts to (partially) compose her or his own listening experiences. Meaning is then marked as the gap that needs to be filled by the listener. It is not so much acoustic information, but a structure, a set of meaningful relations to which the listener can position oneself, which would give a sense of coherency.

As Schafer and Truax initially suggested, the general disparity between hearing as a passive or unconscious sensation and listening as an attentive and active enterprise also influences the way meaning is called for and produced because of an inner dependence. Soundscape studies have suggested that this disparity holds for all of our auditory experiences. Connor (1997) suggests then that this unsteady relation between hearing and listening contributes to a sense of insufficiency in the listener to make sense of what she or he hears. According to him, this insufficiency stems from the problem that sound and hearing can hardly be considered ‘autonomous’. The instability between hearing and listening contributes to an urge in the listener to complement the auditory experiences with more stable meanings that can materialise in visual images, associations, memories, structures, contexts that place the sounds in relation to oneself. Connor argues that this act of relating in our auditory perceptions is guided by questions: “We ask of a sound ‘What was that?’, meaning ‘Who was that?’, or ‘Where did that come from?’ We do not naturally ask for an image ‘What sound does it make?’” (Connor 1997: 213). Making sense of our auditory experiences then means that we relate the sounds to our ‘selves’, which always implies foremost a position. This positioning as a way to make the auditory experiences meaningful is required because of the lack or insufficiency that is inherent to hearing and listening.
When I relate this idea of a ‘messy’ intertwining of hearing and listening to Silverman’s theory of subject formation, I tentatively conclude that the disparity can cause a crisis in meaning, affecting the listener as subject. The type of music theatre that I discuss appears to emphasise particular aspects of this crisis in the way it makes us position ourselves by not offering us sufficient meanings. In the focused situation of the theatre, our auditory experiences equally adhere to this crisis of meaning due to the intertwining of hearing and listening. Auditory distress in the theatre can highlight this crisis by making us aware of our role in channelling the auditory stimuli as guided by the particular perspectives that help us to make the experiences meaningful. When these perspectives are at stake, it makes us alert to the crisis in meaning. As a general response to this latent crisis, we could feel an urge to confirm and thereby stabilise our sense of coherent selves as listening subjects through signification. This idea of a constant crisis that both produces and affects the subject is supported by Kaja Silverman (1985), who claims that subjectivity is defined and thereby stabilised through the intervention of signification (196-7). The creation of signification should then be understood in terms of the meaningful experiences that result from the listener’s way of relating to what she or he hears. The position that the listener adopts in this process of relating materialises the signifying intervention of listening.

Following Silverman’s approach on the matter of signification, the positions that the listener takes up by moving her or his listening attention to the sounds or music can be understood as culturally discursive. The discourse enables any signifying activity in listening, and therefore also the way listening attention is managed in the theatre. The necessity of managing attention stems from this latent ‘crisis’ of the listening subject caused by the instable relation with the sounding environment and the caused auditory distress. Attention then serves as a cognitive means that protects the listener as subject by the stabilising process of signification in concord with the discourse. Attention as a protective mechanism that moves hearing and listening is then inscribed in terms of the discursive positions the theatre offers through its perspectives.

In contrast to the receptive listener in our modern environments, contemporary music theatre calls for an active involvement from the listener in taking part as listening subject by taking up positions and making the listening experiences meaningful. The particular structure of address in the performance has an important triggering role in creating a listening situation that breaks through the active ‘idleness’ of our listening habits and defence mechanisms against the always latent auditory distress and insufficiency in listening. In this particular listening situation that music theatre creates, the listener feels encouraged to ‘hunt’ for meaningful experiences by means of her or his attention, though always in relation to the given perspectives.
2.3. The Listening Modes as Analytical Tools

As a result of our relation to the sounds according to how much attention we give them, we can distinguish between different modes of listening. Soundscape studies have brought to light a whole array of listening modes. Truax (1984) gives a simplified but coherent systematisation of Schaeffer’s (1977) distinctions, which in turn are partly based on Schaeffer’s *Recherche musicale* (1966) in the French language. I will begin with Truax’s simplified model to conceptualise the listening modes as analytical tools before elaborating on these modes for the purpose of listening in the theatre. At a later stage, I will complement his model with some necessary annexes by referring to Barthes (1991) and Chion (1994).

Truax distinguishes the following modes of listening, which he places on a scale of consciousness, depending on the acuity of the listening attention:

1. distracted or *background-listening* as the least conscious by merely being aware of the ambience;
2. *listening-in-readiness* as a mode of listening in which we are only aware of specific, mostly indexical sounds (associations with sounds that are built up over time);
3. and analytical listening or *listening-in-search* when we most attentively and actively probe an acoustic environment with our ears in search of information.

(See Truax 1984: 19-24)

Connor’s ‘modern’ auditory subject applies best to the first degree in listening attention: distracted listening, which also includes a high probability of immersion. Within this mode of attention, Truax further differentiates *background* and/or *ambient listening*. Though this type of listening can be functional in certain theatre plays today, it seems quite incongruous with the focused listening situations of music theatre. Nonetheless, I will show using *La Didone* that this mode of listening can be highly relevant to make sense of sound and music in the theatre. R. Murray Schafer calls this mode a rather naive mode of perceiving sound occurrences. He refers to it with Schaeffer’s term in French: *ouïr* (i.e. ‘to hear’ by merely paying attention).

The second degree of attention in the listening modes in Truax’s distinction involves *listening-in-readiness*. This mode sustains Stockfelt’s active ‘idle listener’. More active than the first one, this mode seems to be the most adequate, basic mode the modern listener uses as a survival strategy for instance in most of the theatre performances by Toneelgroep Amsterdam (directed by Ivo van Hove): music is often playing the background to the onstage events with the similar effect of a radio playing in a bar or a shop (see later 3.2. on ‘muzak’).
against the auditory distress of our volatile, urbanite surroundings when perspectives are not immediately given. Most of the time, the modern listener perceives in a state of continued being on the alert for auditory interventions that indicate danger or that phatically call for our immediate attention. In relation to this ‘ready’ mode of listening, which Connor calls on the qui vive, Schafer has proposed a further distinction between two specifically related modes: a reduced and an indexical mode of listening. The first notion, coined by the French composer Pierre Schaeffer in the context of the musique concrète, is a deprived mode that focuses the attention on specific qualities of a sound without reference to its source or meaning. Schaeffer refers to this mode using the French verb entendre (the common word for ‘hearing’ in the French language). The second, indexical mode of listening is concerned with causal listening. This mode explains why we always seem to ascribe causes to indexical sounds: we relate sounds to ourselves for survival purposes. Listening-in-readiness generally causes then affective, automatic responses in the listener’s active ‘idle’ attention. Schaeffer refers to this mode in French as écouter (the most general word for ‘listening’).

The third degree of listening attention involves a set of modes of an analytical or exploring nature, like ‘echo-location’ with which we receive information about a certain space through its echo or reverberation time. Schafer goes even further to describe the probing for information in this mode of listening-in-search as reading in a symbolic, semiotic or semantic mode of listening. In Schafer’s approach, this mode involves decoding or deciphering the transient and endlessly commuting relationship of sounds as signifiers to signifieds (auditory icons and sound indexes) by referring to sound objects and events in terms of a code. According to Michel Chion, this mode is often attached to a narrative. Schaeffer calls this mode in French, comprendre (‘to comprehend, understand’).

In the remainder of this chapter, I continue to discuss these modes of listening as analytical tools using my case study, the music theatre performance La Didone (2007) by The Wooster Group. The purpose of this is not to demonstrate the above model. Rather, my case study illustrates how sound and music in music theatre become meaningful to the listener in relation to the perspectives the theatre offers, which resolve the jumbled shifts of attention in the disparity between hearing and listening. I argue that perspectives in listening mediate between the particular sound or music and the listener’s attention, which influences her or his position towards it. This results in continuous shifts between different modes of listening as to make sense of what one hears. I thereby do not want to imply that listening is

---

79 Later in this chapter, I will connect this alert state of listening to indexical sound signals.
80 As I will argue later in this chapter, Chion points out that both modes can come about as a result of ‘acousmatic listening’, caused by a disparity of sound and the visual embodiment of its source.
identical to meaning-making, though they are interrelated in view of the latent crisis of the listening subject and the insufficiency in hearing and listening. Using examples from La Didone, I then demonstrate how attention serves as an ‘imaginary tentacle’ with which we can appropriate the listening space depending on what is given as perspective and to what we choose to attend to (or to turn our attention away from) in order to achieve a certain level of control over the auditory distress.

The modes of listening appear to sustain a promise of control and stability of the listener as subject. I want to emphasise here that ‘music theatre’, such as La Didone, makes us aware of the illusion of control as listening subjects by disrupting our signification processes with an overload of intensities. Consequently, the overload forces the listener to constantly shift between different modes of listening. This overexposure jeopardises, at certain instances, the channelling of the listener’s position through multiple perspectives, when its perspectival multiplicity prevents the establishment of a stable frame. The constant switching then shows that the listening modes are not as distinct as they may first appear as in Schafer’s or Truax’s models. Rather, these shifts are necessary for any meaningful experience to substantiate. As such, my arguments surrounding La Didone also imply a critique on the theories of the modes of listening.

By re-evaluating the modes of listening for the purpose of music theatre, I imply a discursive relation between the modern sounding world and music theatre. La Didone specifically bears on this relation in its structures of address and response. To illustrate my argumentation about how our responses to auditory distress depend on the performance’s perspectives, I first discuss how the perspective of a schizophrenic listening situation gives rise to acousmatic, reduced and causal listening modes. I will explain how these modes come about in relation to how our attention shifts between states of listening-in-readiness and analytical modes of listening. I will then discuss the modes of listening in relation to an ambience or a background as an effect of acousmatisation. I argue that ambient listening as an alert type of background-listening could develop into an ‘evenly hovering’ attention. Finally, I add another mode, which is perhaps the most important for the context of music theatre: a semiotic mode of listening as a specific type of listening-in-search for creating discursive structures. La Didone constantly makes the listener search for a stabilising frame and a hierarchising perspective. In so doing, the performance brings the listener’s ability to consciously control her or his attention as a defence mechanism against auditory distress to a border where the idle attention is at stake and meanings start to shift.
3. La Didone: Listening Modes in Response to a Schizophonic Listening Situation

The Wooster Group reworked *La Didone* from the original baroque opera under the same title from 1641 by composer Francesco Cavalli and librettist Giovanni Francesco Busenello.°° *La Didone* represents the first opera staging by director Elizabeth LeCompte and The Wooster Group, who are known for their ‘post-dramatic’ stagings of text-based theatre. The term ‘opera’ applies, however, somewhat anachronistically to this version of Cavalli’s *dramma per musica* due to the post-dramatic context of its staging.°°°° The Wooster Group’s performance is, as is common to their highly ‘mediatised’ or ‘hypermedial’ theatrical language which they have developed over the years, a meticulous dramaturgical experiment that combines image, text and sound in most inventive ways that are foreign to traditional, dramatic modes of opera staging. Rather, this constellation constantly disrupts coherence in fragmentation, simultaneity and deconstruction of the original baroque opera.

Peculiar to the structure of The Wooster Group’s staging is the combination of the antique, epic story of Dido from Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro) with the cult science-fiction film *Terrore Nello Spazio* (1965) by Mario Bava, better known under its English title as *Planet of the Vampires*. In addition, and barely recognisable as such, footage of *Queen of Outer Space* (Edward Bernds, 1958) has also been edited into the screening, which is projected in the centre of the background on a large screen (set design by Ruud van den Akker). By means of this unusual combination, The Wooster Group deconstructs the classic narrative and Busenello’s libretto in order to seek confrontations, hidden similarities and unavoidable clashes. This results in a bombardment of visual and auditory stimuli on the audience’s perception, playing upon its perceptive modes, attitudes and expectations in reading for signification through looking and listening.

I chose this performance as my case study because its hybrid construct manages the audience’s attention in ways that highlight the workings of the listening modes in response to given perspectives. The hybridity lies not only in the different media channels (a video screen, text projections, amplification technology) and the multiplicity of senses that are addressed through a bombardment of stimuli. It also specifically involves an unusual combination

°° The Wooster Group is located in Brooklyn, New York. The project initially came into being in return to an invitation of the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts in Brussels to stage works from Busenello. The performance was staged in Brussels from 19 to 24 May 2007. Following this, the production began its tour through Europe and was to be seen, among others, in Rotterdam at the opera festival, the ‘Operadagen Rotterdam’. At this festival, I had the opportunity to see *La Didone* on 30 May 2007 in the Stadschouwburg Rotterdam.

°°°° As contemporary to the father of music drama, Claudio Monteverdi who died in 1643, the original work by Cavalli and Busenello can be designated within the same tradition of *dramma per musica* in its early developments towards modern opera.
in the performance of Cavalli’s music on both acoustic and electronic instruments with voice amplification (music direction by Bruce Odland), and sound effects reproducing the sounds of crashing space ships and cosmic battles from Bava’s cult movie (sound montage by Matt Schloss). Setting the theorbo alongside the electric guitar and the electronic harpsichord sounds, the mixture of historical performance practice with popular sound idioms could sensitively pull a string in the listener, underscoring a tension between certain modes, attitudes and expectations in listening that are rather subjective.

My focus here is on the implications of the particular, spatial construct; namely, on how it always bears a perspective and thereby calls for the modes of listening. Though not my primary concern, I do not want to exclude the significant role that images and texts play in the ways they attribute to the perspectives and make the shifts in our attention meaningful. Precisely due to the juxtaposition of texts, images and sounds, this hybrid construct causes effects of doubling and splitting in the observer’s perception, which correspond to the two perspectives delivered by the narratives of Dido and the Planet of the Vampires.

On a narrative level, the juxtaposition of the two stories creates a meeting of two diegetic worlds. Virgil’s epic Aeneid (Book IV, circa 19 BC) recounts the arrival of Aeneas on the shores of Carthage, where the chaste Dido reigns as queen. In Bava’s 1965 cult movie, a spaceship with the Greek-sounding name ‘Argos’ crashes on the planet Aurora, and its crew gets caught in a frightening battle with zombies over a mysterious, all-powerful ‘meteor rejector’. The combination, so to speak, drops Aeneas’s ships onto the terrestrial landscape where an invisible danger plants fear into the hearts of the crew. The continuous attempts to escape from the zombie attacks that slowly eat the space crusaders one by one are also in close resemblance with Aeneas’s flee from the clutches of Dido, who is desperate to keep Aeneas on shore. The end of Busenello’s libretto diverges from Virgil’s version in that Dido marries her limping suitor Iarbas (added to the story) instead of killing herself. In the performance, this act of vengeance by the spurned lover, which was meant as a triumph of reason over love, contrasts ironically to the cartoonesque struggling gestures of the space crew members against the imperceptible 82

---

82 Busenello’s libretto was not only inspired by The Aeneid (most likely by Annibale Caro’s celebrated translation) but in all probability also by two sixteenth-century Italian tragedies of La Didone (by Giraldi Cinthio and Ludovico Dolce). The divergence to Vergil’s story in the libretto has been attributed to Busenello’s ideology as a member of the Incogniti, a Venetian society of intellectual noblemen obsessed with chastity. In this way the opera would reflect the moral outrage and demonstrates how the sinful behaviour of the woman can still be ‘mended’ when she turns to reason in marriage. The Wooster Group rather refrains from the sexist-moralist content by focusing on the destructive powers, which they see reflected in the story of Bava’s science fiction film. As they proclaim themselves, their version is “[a] 21st-century retelling of an ancient tale about the destructive (and redemptive) power of erotic passion and the sheer tenacity of human nature in the face of annihilation” (program announcement by The Wooster Group).
The Frequency of Imagination

forces on the planet. At this tragic ending, it is as if Aeneas and the crew have both been struck by the same gravitational force, fearing they will lose control. In the end, the space crusaders lose their individuality one by one by becoming zombies, guided by one mastermind.

On an acoustic level, the juxtaposition of classical and electronic musical instruments creates an unconventional listening situation, blending the baroque acoustic space with the modern electronic space. For the listener, this unremitting fusion of two auditory spaces creates a listening situation in which the constant spill-over of sound causes disturbances in each space that call for an active response from the listener. By following the two ‘tracks’ of baroque music and sci-fi sounds, the listener can trace the two narratives, connect to the projected images on the screen and the texts above the stage, and decide how to make sense of the connections that are offered. In this way, R. Murray Schafer’s term ‘schizophrenic’ (from Greek schizo ‘split’ and phone ‘voice, sound’) applies well to the space created here; it suggests a split listening situation, caused by removing and reassembling the sounds and their original sources. The splitting of sound is generally an effect of its enclosure in a recorded or transmitted medium.

With the term ‘schizophrenic’, Schafer refers to the process of splitting in a rather depreciatory way. His resistance towards divorcing sounds from their original context through their electroacoustic reproduction involves specifically the long-term effects of such a split on our (modern) ways of listening and perceiving. Through most common recording and communication devices – to which the Walkman, mobile phone and most recently, the iPod have contributed increasingly – schizophrenic sound has become part and parcel of our modern aural experiences with its common effects of temporal and spatial dislocation. Schafer clarifies that he picked this rather ‘nervous’ term “in order to dramatise the aberrational effect of this twentieth-century development” (Schafer 1977: 273). Schafer’s criticism comes forth from an idealistic and reactionary audio ‘puritanism’ in relation to our (post-)modern, fragmentary auditory experiences under the influence of sound’s electronic reproduction. In Schafer’s idea, the schizophrenic effects of electroacoustic reproduction can cause sound phobia, that is, a fear or dislike caused by the sound in the listener for a particular reason. In the case of electroacoustic reproduction, the newly reproduced sound replaces the old, familiar sound.

In La Didone, the sounds from the movie and from the amplified voices of the actors are ripped from their original contexts, while the musicians play in the left corner on the stage in half-darkness. In contrast to our general indifference to cinema’s inherence in splitting sound from image through

---

83 Schafer’s so-called ‘schizophrenic’ listening is a pejorative term for ‘acousmatic’ listening (see later in this chapter, 3.2.). Splitting sound from its source is called acousmatisation in Michel Chion’s theory. Reassembling it with a body is a process called de-acousmatisation.
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

loudspeakers, the schizophrenic listening situation in the visually deprived context of the theatre creates a rather triggering effect. It does so, not so much because of some ‘sound phobia’ for a displaced sense of sounds, but because divorcing the sounds from their specific contexts and stitching them to another space makes the listener in the theatre alert.\(^\text{54}\) La Didone then demonstrates how through its recuperating, reproducing and deconstructing strategies of sound – in relation to its disembodiment of visual sources – auditory distress plays a significant role in activating the listener’s attention. This, in turn, produces the perceptual glue between the many auditory and visual impressions.

I now propose to study how in La Didone this attention is managed by a schizophrenic perspective, resulting in specific listening modes. The modes of listening help me to make distinctions in the auditory perception, which contributes to the way the listener makes sense of sound and music. I illustrate specifically how the modes of listening can be used as analytical tools to explain the listener’s responses to auditory distress in the theatre, as it becomes apparent in the schizophrenic perspective.

In what follows, I use Truax’s rising scale in listening attention as the guiding thread for the development of my argumentation. First, at the lowest degree of our conscious attention, I critically assess ambient or ‘background’ listening as a consequence of the excess in the split perceptions, which brings me to two related notions: Chion’s auditory icon and Barthes’s evenly hovering attention (also called ‘psycho-analytical listening’). Then, I move on to the second level of attention in Truax’s distinction with a comparison of the modes that are related to listening-in-readiness: acousmatic, reduced and causal listening. I show how in music theatre like La Didone, these modes are inherently related and even entangled in the listener’s responses to the split perspectives. As a result, I argue that this ‘alert’ listening attention constantly shifts between these modes in order to make sense in the first place instead of always an (imagined) cause or index. Finally, I discuss a third related mode at the presumed highest level of conscious attention: a semiotic mode of listening. I demonstrate how this mode intersects with the previous ones as they all work together in the listener’s interpretative efforts as a continuous response or ‘free play’ with a ‘semiotic remainder’ in sound and music.

3.1. Ambient and Causal Listening:
Auditory Icons, Evenly Hovering Attention

The schizophrenic listening situation in La Didone divides sound from the visual image on the screen or from the gestures of the musical performance on the stage. The auditory space thus created has implications for the listener

\(^{54}\) With regard to this awareness, I account for the differences in the use and effects of ‘acousmatic sound’ in film and theatre with regard to our listening modes and attention.
who attempts to grasp the listening situation through her or his attention. Schafer’s rather negatively formulated concept of schizophrenia manifests itself in the performance as a strategy that calls upon the listener’s active attention, switching between conscious and unconscious levels of auditory perception. In our (post-)modern audio culture, we are used to the experience that sound is most often detached from its originating body or source and does not co-occur in vision at the same time in the same space. This dislocation is anchored broadly in our modern soundscapes due to all recording, play-back and transmissive, mediating technologies (subsumed under the so-called ‘phonographic’ tradition).

In La Didone the schizophonic listening situation gives rise to shifting perspectives that manage the listener’s attention and perception. These perspectives elicit at times Truax’s first mode of attention: a distracted way of listening, which manifests itself as background-listening as a consequence of an excess of information. Through my case study I intend to show how this mode can easily shift into a mode of listening-in-readiness, an alert listening mode triggered by indexical and iconic signals. Listening-in-readiness is in all probability the modus audendi of the modern listener, upon which the performances by The Wooster Group also play. The schizophonic perspective in La Didone plays upon the shift between a distracted and an alert way of listening, which reflects our everyday auditory experiences, by making distinctions between foreground and background of sound in the listener’s attention as managed by the given perspectives. Most of the auditory events in the performance therefore also have an iconic function. I argue that, in the theatre, such iconic sounds have a decisive function in either supporting or stirring the listener’s ‘idle’ attention. They make the listener attentive in her or his rather lingering mode of attention to infer connections, and as such, to create meaningful auditory experiences.

When the schizophonic perspective causes auditory distress through excess, I contend that causal listening fulfils a human need for temporary satisfaction in grasping hold of the auditory space. Causal listening is one of the most dominant manifestations of listening-in-readiness in Schafer’s and Truax’s tools of analysis. It answers to the most prevailing urge in the modern listener, namely to search for a stability in meaningful relations to the sound or music. Finding a cause, even when we cannot immediately locate it visually and imagine one, is, however, not identical to finding meaning. In causal listening we place a sound in relation to ourselves. Through its distance, this place indicates what the sound does or means to us in a particular situation. One practical example is our reactions in urban traffic: we obviously cannot pay attention to each sound in this particular volatile listening situation, and as a defence mechanism towards the auditory distress, we cancel out most of the intensities that are not of immediate importance to safely arrive at our destination. In this situation, listening-in-readiness rather makes us only pay
attention to those sounds that alert indexically an approaching danger, or as Barthes formulated it in his essay mentioned earlier:

[Listen]ing is that preliminary attention which permits intercepting whatever might disturb the territorial system; it is a mode of defence against surprise; its object (what it is oriented toward) is menace or, conversely, need; the raw material of listening is the index, because it either reveals danger or promises the satisfaction of need (Barthes 1991: 247).

The sound’s cause serves as an index of a threat. In Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic theory, an index expresses the relation between a sign and its object (or meaning) through its co-occurrence in an actual experience (Turino 1999: 227). Sound indexes, similarly, call for associations through co-occurrence with the objects and/or the cultural network of ‘interpretants’ (aka signifieds, objects or referents) in a specific context, situation or place. This also explains how we can recognise sounds as known categories that engender imagining the cause of a sound by means of causal listening. Once the association is established, co-occurrence no longer has to take place in order to trigger the association. As a result of our defence mechanism, however, we move those unnecessary sounds to the background or mask them from our attention. In this way, the schizophonic perspective can also trigger another mode of listening of very low conscious attention as a defence mechanism against the auditory distress: environmental or ambient listening, or what Schafer and Truax also denote as background-listening. In this mode, sound is put to the background of the listener’s attention and serves merely as an ambience, colouring a space in terms of its atmosphere. Most indexical sounds are not even realised as such when they sediment with the ambience. Background and foreground reinforce each other in this mode, resulting in constant shifts of attention.

La Didone demonstrates the applicability of Schafer’s and Truax’s concepts as tools to make distinctions in listening and understand how we make meaningful experiences. However, the performance also illustrates the

---

85 Schafer’s soundscape studies have a semiotic underpinning, which could be brought home to the Peircian triadic schema of semiosis: it consists of a sign vehicle or representamen (i.e. association of signifier with the signified), an object or referent (i.e. the thing to which the sign refers), and an interpretant or sense (i.e. the meaning made of the sign by the subject). On the level of the relations between sign and object, Peirce further distinguishes three categories: icon, index and symbol.

86 A sound index could also be established by the cultural discourse without actual co-occurrence as well. For example, no matter how politically incorrect it may sound today, the harsh sounds of the German language after the Holocaust and WWII might still trigger feelings of anxiety and associations with the past to people of the second generation who did not experience the war time at all. The sounds have become part of the cultural memory, which takes part in the post-trauma of the 20th century. Sound indexes can therefore operate in most unconscious ways as part of our understanding the world.
interdependency of these distinctions. The index appears on the fringe of blocking out the ‘harmful’, distressing intensities in the environment or ambience and an alert consciousness of these auditory interventions that catch our attention. The index, as Barthes proposes, explains how we make associations with objects or sources in our environment to make sense in relation to our ‘selves’ in terms of a menace or a need. In this way, as La Didone shows, a mode of background listening can easily shift into listening-in-readiness through perspective when it appeals to our attention by creating a distinction between foreground (figure) and background (ground). In its sound design (by Matt Schloss), the sound effects of Bava’s film are sometimes placed in the background, as if someone switches and zooms in on the sonorous world of the baroque opera on the audio board. At another instance, Dido’s heartbreaking lament, while Aeneas flees, ironically serves as background music to the battle of the space crew against the invisible terrestrial forces of gravity. The irony resides in the observation that Dido’s words no longer matter much and are lost in the naive ‘violence’ of the phoney space battle. In so doing, the switching between foreground and background in the schizophrenic listening situation plays upon a sense of menace and a need that cannot be fulfilled. The baroque music also bears a dramatic touch in a double sense, because it cannot escape our cognition even if our distracted listening places the sound in the background. Even the background music emphatically calls to be heard. However, our affective response becomes unremitting emotion when the music again bursts through the loudspeakers and drowns all cries for help. This dramatic moment could effect goose bumps when the music ensemble, playing from one of the dark corners of the stage, merges to the foreground in our auditory perception.

Historically, background music stems from the idea of a ‘musique d’améublement’, coined and practiced by Erik Satie in 1920, and often translated as ‘musical tapestry’. This type of music would occupy social space as furniture, namely as functional but not primarily intended for artistic contemplation. In the 20th century, the term ‘ambient music’ emerged, for which Brian Eno is usually accredited as the founder and first composer. Ambient music is a type of environmental music that is atmospheric in nature.87 It thrives on a schizophrenic listening situation and affects the

---

87 In his ambient compositions, Brian Eno has a sub-audio approach to it. He recounts the story of how the idea of ambient music came to his mind by an accident. After being hit by a taxi, he was hospitalised with a suspected skull fracture. A friend of his, Judy Nylon, brought him a gift a record of eighteenth-century harp music. After she left, he put the record on, but only when he was back in bed did he realise that the volume was not adjusted properly. Too weak to readjust it, he was annoyed at first, but gradually he started to listen to the quiet music mingling with the sounds of rain outside his window, while darkness of the day’s end set in (see Prendergast 2000; 2003: 119). David Toop comments on this pivotal moment: “As he did so, an alternative mode of hearing unfolded. Rather than standing out from its environment, like a ship on an ocean, the music became part of that ocean, alongside all the other transient effects of
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

listener’s behaviour in most unconscious and immersive ways. Schafer and especially Truax have often warned of the manipulative and commercial use of this type of music when it affects us in our most unconscious modes of listening. In its pejorative meaning, they use the terms ‘Muzak’ (or as Schafer also calls it, ‘Moosak’), generally known as elevator music. In the specific modes of listening that it triggers, ambient music socially restricts and defines a location in terms of mass behaviour and target audience. As such, it exerts the power of the unnoticed.  

_La Didone_ demonstrates how ambience in the schizophonic perspective manipulates the listener’s modes of perception spatially. However, it does not need to lead to the aforementioned negative effects. The ambient mode of listening in _La Didone_ rather draws the listener’s attention to the physical space that sounds inhabit. As I mentioned in chapter one, Chion has stressed the gas-like properties of sound: “In the case of ambient sounds, which are often the product of multiple specific and local sources . . . what is important is the space inhabited and defined by the sound, more than its multisource origin” (Chion 1994: 79). By calling upon an ambient mode of listening, _La Didone_ demonstrates how we create territories in our ways of listening and how music always composes and (re)produces space. The background sounds capitalise on our understanding of space, creating two simultaneous diegetic worlds of the vampire planet and Dido’s palace, which are at times colliding as two ‘parallel worlds’. As such, the ambience elicits an environmental way of listening with which we attempt to grab the auditory space as an imaginary tentacle in favour of the representation or the narrative. The territories thus created in our minds compensate for the latent crisis of the listening subject, offering it a temporary space of security.

One way to give sound this space of security, is through indexical listening, which simultaneously reinforces background listening. Michel Chion (1994) refers to another, comparable notion that explains how we treat ambient sounds in our modes of listening: we read them as ‘earcons’ (or ear-icoms). In Chion’s definition, an earcon is an auditory reference that implies a static, non-narrative and referential context, often juxtaposed to narrative light, shade, colour, scent, taste and sound. So ambient was born, in its present definition at least: music that we hear but don’t hear; sounds which exist to enable us better to hear silence; sound which rests us from our intense compulsion to focus, to analyse, to frame, to categorise, to isolate” (Toop 1995; 2001: 139-40).

Jonathan Sterne (2005) refers to Muzak in terms of a ‘non-aggressive music deterrent’, not just because it has been applied to commercially advertise detergents, but it has also been used to control space by scaring potential malicious youngsters away from parking lots, walkways, doorways, gas stations, parks and stores (6-7). A parallel world or universe (aka alternative reality) is a narrative strategy most common to science-fiction literature. It creates two diegetic worlds or ‘realities’ that are very similar and co-existing but that are also dissimilar in a number of aspects, usually within the character of the twin agents that live on both sides, or in alternate histories that stem from the same historical event.
functions. Ambience usually serves as a ‘mood-trigger’ in a direct, ‘unmediated’ way. However, as an auditory icon, the earcon relates generally to the image in a direct relationship or comes to represent a specific event, action or object. As the icon to the eye, the earcon implies an immediate affective response to the ear.\textsuperscript{90} It appeals to our referential sensitivity of making meaning in most automatic, unconscious ways. The function of the earcon further depends on an ‘archive’ of contexts or auditory environments typified by certain situations or scenes. Conventions and codes in listening play a crucial role in this type of signification, which inheres in the cultural discourse in similar ways to the sound index.\textsuperscript{91}

Though Chion has coined his notion of the earcon in the context of the sonic ambience in cinema, I suggest that it is not particular to the cinematic context alone and can also be considered for sound in (music) theatre such as in \textit{La Didone}. In the theatre, ambience is not necessarily imbued with narrativity. However, it does tune the mood for the audience in most direct ways. In \textit{La Didone}, the iconic use of the sound effects is recycled from the film and given another life on the stage. For instance, the sound of the Theremin has built up iconic value over time when it came to denote the tacky sounds of old sci-fi B-movies. Even so, when Dido’s lament serves as the background track to the re-enactment of the events of the movie on stage, it appeals to our attention in most affective and emotional ways. Cavalli’s music becomes referential in giving us a message beyond its lyrics: love ‘gravitates’ us as a universal force and drives us towards annihilation. The song in the background affects us, while, ironically, the crew acts as if it is fighting against the terrestrial force. In this way, the earcons elicit an affective response, while at the same time they call upon our capacity to make linkages between the double narrative and the different, parallel worlds of the movie and the baroque opera.

As such, the ambience in \textit{La Didone} is highly layered and detailed to minuscule proportions. It creates a constant acoustic horizon against which all actions and events are interpreted. In order for the listener to build up associations with the sound indexes and earcons it incorporates, she or he has to be in a mode of \textit{listening-in-readiness} at all times. However, as I

\textsuperscript{90} In the Peircean definition, an \textit{icon} is related to its object through resemblance or perceived similarity (Turino 1999: 226), and is therefore much related to an idea of ‘sound mimesis’. There are three types of icons according to Peirce: the image (i.e. a trace or a quote), the diagram (for instance, a map) and the metaphor. Imaginative listening to sound and music could provoke metaphors, as Thomas Turino (1999) suggests, but it could also involve sound images and musical quotes.

\textsuperscript{91} Like the sound index, the earcon reveals something of the discursive system in which it receives its interpretation and stability. Kaja Silverman states the relation of the icon and its discourse: “The history of perspective, Impressionist painting, Oriental lithographs, narrative norms, not to mention the examples always cited by Peirce – graphs and algebraic equations – show that we need to be schooled in systems of representation before certain signifiers will reveal their iconicity to us” (Silverman 1983: 24).
introduced at the beginning of this chapter, the modern listener is, by necessity, actively idle due to her or his defence mechanisms. This lazy attention is also culturally specific in our attitudes towards ambience that we spatially locate in the background. The above examples of the earcons in *La Didone* demonstrate that, even when we are not paying attention to these sounds but are rather distracted, there are always sounds that suddenly stir and appeal to our waking attention. The earcons or auditory icons in the ambience can have this effect in the schizophrenic listening situation of the performance, while at the same time spatially marking the atmosphere or mood within the narrative, in which we find ourselves immersed to a certain extent.

In *La Didone*, the earcons help me to indicate the movement of the listener’s attention between background listening and a mode of listening-in-readiness. These modes seem to predicate the instable relation between (unconscious) hearing and (conscious) listening, which are often entangled. It is only when a particular sound reaches out of the acoustic horizon of the ambience and appeals to our ears that we feel tempted to find temporary coherence in it through causal or indexical listening. Sigmund Freud coined the term for a category of listening that vacillates comparably between unconscious and conscious modes of auditory perception, which he conceptualised as ideal for the practice of psychoanalysis: ‘gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit’, or in English, *evenly hovering attention*. This type of attention allows the excess – and therefore the possible levels of auditory distress – in listening in most productive ways for our interpreting efforts. In this mode, the ear does not realise earcons or auditory indexes as such, but allows the sounds to ‘be themselves’, much like John Cage recommended the ‘panaural’ attitude by giving up the desire to control them (Cage 1961: 10).

Roland Barthes describes evenly hovering attention as a particular mode of ‘psychoanalytical listening’ by citing Freud’s 1912 essay ‘Recommendations for Physicians on the Psychoanalytic Method of Treatment’:

‘The analyst must bend his own unconscious [...] like a receptive organ toward the emerging unconscious of the patient, must be as the receiver of the telephone to the disc. As the receiver transmutes the electric vibrations induced by the sound waves back again into sound waves, so is the physician’s unconscious mind able to reconstruct the patient’s unconscious which has directed his associations, from the communications derived from it.’ [...] It is, in effect, from unconscious to unconscious that psychoanalytic listening functions, from a speaking unconscious to another which is presumed to hear. What is thus spoken emanates from an unconscious knowledge transferred to another subject, whose knowledge is presumed (Barthes 1991: 252).

---

92 Another example would be the involuntary but embarrassing moment when a mobile phone goes off in the audience. The sound triggers an immediate, affective reaction to the owner of the phone, and rouses her or him to switch off the phone.
Like the psycho-analyst ‘tuning into the frequency’ of the patient, the listener in *La Didone* needs to tune into the associations and linkages that the detailed soundscapes give way to when she or he listens in an open way, from ‘unconscious to unconscious’ as it were. This requires a certain level of openness in our expectations towards sound and music.\(^\text{93}\)

For Barthes, this mode of listening constitutes a modern way of listening, which is no longer an applied, semantic listening in search of fixed meanings, but rather a way of listening that allows for many contradictory meanings to emerge:

First of all, whereas for centuries listening could be defined as an intentional act of audition (to listen is to *want* to hear, in all conscience), today it is granted the power (and virtually the function) of playing over unknown space: listening includes in its field not only the unconscious in the topical sense of the term, but also, so to speak, its lay forms: the implicit, the indirect, the supplementary, the delayed: listening grants access to all forms of polysemy, of overdetermination, of superimposition, there is a disintegration of the Law which prescribes direct, unique listening; by definition, listening was *applied*; today we ask listening to *release*: we thereby return, but at another loop of the historical spiral, to the conception of a *panic* listening, as the Greeks, or at least as the Dionysians, had conceived it (Barthes 1991: 258).

Barthes suggests here that it is through the haphazard, spontaneous nature of psychoanalytical listening that true auditory events are able to appear. This mode ‘releases’ listening, thereby turning it into an event. It allows for auditory distress without the imposition of selection, sedimented meanings, and a known, secure auditory space. Rather than implying agency, intentions and control to the act of listening, psychoanalytic listening grants back authority and power to the sound. This would enable us to explore and play over our listening spaces through listening, to allow for many disintegrating experiences that can be meaningful at once. This mode also breaks with the idea of an applied and unique way of listening of the audiophile, the connoisseur, the musicologist. Allowing the auditory distress brings in a mode of ‘panic listening’ that reinforces over-interpretations, overdeterminations, and as a result of that, ‘too much’ meaning.

Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) also describes this mode of listening as a specific perceptual strategy in ‘post-dramatic’ theatre: “Rather one’s perception has to remain open for connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments, perhaps casting what was said earlier in a completely new light. Thus, meaning remains in principle postponed” (87). As listening mode in the theatre, psychoanalytical listening requires a willingness to be on the alert and not immediately interpret everything, but be

\(^\text{93}\) Douglas Kahn (2001) formulates this idea through the Cagean notion of *panaurality* (see chapter one).

108
open to unconscious associations. If not exclusively for the modern listener and post-dramatic theatre, this is perhaps also the most essential mode of listening for the theatre of The Wooster Group and more specifically, *La Didone*.

However, listening through evenly hovering attention presents us at this point with an indispensable paradox in the theatre. In chapter one, I argued how auditory distress is necessary for sound to come to existence, to surpass an acoustic horizon and to catch our fleeting attention. Here, I discuss how our attention is activated to respond through different modes of listening that arise by means of the ways we move our listening attention in relation to the listening perspectives in the theatre. This listening attention serves as a vehicle to manage the levels of auditory distress and (re)gain cognitive control over the auditory space in terms of indexes, icons, signifying events, etc. However, in particular the mode of attention that affects a spatial sense, in terms of foreground and background (ambience), calls for an open attitude not to be selective and controlling of our listening attention, as Barthes further suggests:

For as soon as attention is deliberately concentrated in a certain degree, one begins to select from the material before one; one point will be fixed in the mind with particular clearness and some other consequently disregarded, and in this selection one’s expectations or one’s inclinations will be followed. This is just what must not be done; if one’s expectations are followed in this selection, there is the danger of never finding anything but what is already known, and if one follows one’s inclinations, anything which is to be perceived will most certainly be falsified. It must not be forgotten that the meaning of the things one hears, at all events for the most part, is only recognizable later on (Freud, qtd. in Barthes 1991: 253).

Contrary to psychoanalytical listening, the modes of listening as discussed by Soundscape studies imply selection and control which are necessary for the listener to gain control as subject over the auditory distress. Paradoxically, this sense of control will never make us flee from our subjective expectations and pre-knowledge. Barthes, however, stresses through Freud’s concept that this control needs to be lost in order to truly listen and find meanings that are not yet known to us in our personal and cultural discourse. However, listening always involves a sense of being personally addressed by the acoustic intervention, which annihilates the auditory sense of self, and thereby the urge to create a meaningful experience to whatever extent, impossible.

As I intend to show in the following paragraph, this paradox needs not to lead to a deadlock in our modes of listening. Rather, *La Didone* demonstrates that the latent impasse in an excess of meaning is productive in making us constantly and necessarily switch between our modes of listening in order to search for meaningful experiences that have not yet materialised. An evenly
hovering attention then marks a listening situation where we have not yet solidified our experiences into meaningful relations according to what deserves our attention and what remains in the background. Ambient, environmental, or background listening thereby does not exclude a mode of listening-in-readiness, vigilant for meanings that can emerge according to the shifting perspectives.

3.2. Shifting Modes: Acousmatic and Reduced Listening

Central to the listening perspectives in La Didone is the schizophonic listening situation. Schafer connects this type of perspective with ‘acousmatic’ listening. Acousmatic sound and acousmatisation are most common to the cinematic apparatus. With the help of La Didone, I propose to rethink this process for the theatre in relation to the modes of listening it elicits. In this way, I demonstrate in which way we can apply the concept of acousmatic listening and its consequences to understand how we make sense of sound and music in the theatre.

In film theory, acousmatisation is generally defined as an effect of the mediation that marks the absence in ostension of an immediate connection between sound and its source. When looking at film we are generally unaware of the audio-visual split in the technical reproduction of sound and image due to its conventional, medium-specific strategies that neutralise auditory distress. These strategies have become conventions that make us ‘read’ sounds as originally and immediately connected to what we see or think we see in a causal way. In La Didone, acousmatisation also appears as a medial effect inherent to both the cinematic apparatus (of the film projections) and the operatic tradition, highlighting their convergences and differences in the ways they address the listener. The life performance of Cavalli’s music from the hidden corner, comparable to Wagner’s orchestra pit, is, however very different from what is generally understood as ‘acousmatic music’: the latter is comparable to ambient music due to its expansive claims on auditory space.  

Acousmatic and ambient music are often interchangeable for that matter.

94 Chion (1994) describes how the term ‘acousmatic’ has been applied “to designate concert music that is made for a recorded medium, intentionally eliminating the possibility of seeing the sounds’ initial causes” (72). There is, however, also a special type of electroacoustic music played through loudspeakers, which is often called ‘acousmatic music’. In 1974, Francois Bayle introduced the expression ‘Acousmatic Music’ while director of the Groupe Recherches Musicales in Paris, employing it to denote a specific kind of music: “This term designates a music of images that is ‘shot and developed in the studio, and projected in a hall, like a film’, and is presented at a subsequent date” (Dhomont 1996: 24). Though the imaginative and narrative properties have been theorised in studies of the acousmatic medium for the last decade, which I do not wish to reproduce here, it suffices to say that the deprived context stimulates the listener in the theatre to use the imagination as a response to the lack of visual stimuli. See for recent studies, for instance, the perceptual approach to acousmatic music in Windsor 1995; or the study on the personal stereo (Sony’s Walkman ®) in Bull 2000.
Regarding its effects, acousmatic music has been theorised and often uncritically idealised for its property to ‘free’ associative ‘mental images’ due to its liberation of its immediate visual context, and due to its deficiency of logocentric, ‘explanatory’ or semantic ways of listening. The acousmatic context would assist the listener in gaining access to more unconscious levels of sensation and emotion. However, there is also a great impulse for narrativisation as it draws on a cinematic experience. ‘Acousmatic music’ has therefore been referred to as ‘cinema for the ears’ by the French composer Francis Dhomont: “Acousmatic art is the art of mental representation triggered by sound” (Dhomont 1996: 25).

Although not composed as ambient or acousmatic music as such, through the use of microphones and loudspeakers the acousmatised sounds of Bava’s film and the musical sounds of Cavalli’s baroque opera could call upon such mental representations in the listener’s mind. Though associations and mental images are never excluded, the acousmatisation in La Didone rather supports the doubling and splitting of the visual representation in the cinematic images on the screen and the actor’s gestures on stage, which resists any attempt of a homogenising imagination. In other words, when the theatre explicitly incorporates temporal and spatial dislocations between sound and its source, acousmatisation can have the opposite effect than in cinema. Since sound and body are usually present together in the theatre, splitting them sharpens the listening attention. In relation to the acousmatic listening situation, a plethora of listening modalities have been theoretically proposed, which I discuss here to show how the listener in La Didone responds with her or his attention to these so-called ‘disembodied’ sounds.

The origins of the word ‘acousmatic’ trace back to 1955, at the beginning of the musique concrète, when the poet Jérôme Peignot coined the French adjective ‘acousmatique’ from Greek akousma meaning auditive perception, or literally ‘what is heard’. The Greek word has an ancient reference to the Pythagorean venues (6th century BC) where the Master taught his pupils orally from behind a curtain – like an oracle – as to not let his physical appearance and presence distract their focus from the spoken word, and thus the content of his message (Restivo 1999: 137). The Larousse dictionary refers to Diogenes 95 ‘Cinema for the Ears’ was also the title of a concert series organised by Birmingham University (UK) in the 1990’s, and it was used for the title of Ulli Aumüller’s documentary My Cinema for the Ears (2002) about the world of ideas and works of Francis Dhomont and Paul Lansky. Additionally, Robert Normandeau contributed extensively to the development of the term.

96 Peignot actually borrowed the term from the dictionary and referred to it in a radio programme: “Quels mots pourraient désigner cette distance qui sépare les sons de leur origine… Bruit acousmatique se dit (dans le dictionnaire) d’un son que l’on entend sans en déceler les causes. Eh bien! la voilà la définition même de l’objet sonore, cet élément de base de la musique concrète, musique la plus générale qui soit, de qui… la tête au ciel était voisine, et dont les pieds touchaient à l’empire des morts ” (In Musique animée, broadcast of the ‘Groupe de musique concrète’, 1955).
Laertius (VIII, 10) of the 3rd century AD: “[His pupils] were silent for the period of five years and only listened to the speeches without seeing Pythagoras, until they proved themselves worthy of it” (qtd. in Dolar 2006: 61). Pythagoras’ disciples thereby valorised the voice of a speaker over its visual presence, lending it their pure focus.97

After Peignot picked up the term ‘acousmatic’ from a dictionary and reintroduced it, Schaeffer chose the concept to designate the ‘objet sonore’ (the sonorous object) as developed in his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966). Through Peignot and Schaeffer, the term ‘acousmatic’ came to designate “sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause” (Chion 1994: 71). Schaeffer’s sonorous object can be regarded as the sonic equivalent of a photograph: “pieces of time torn from the cosmos” (qtd. in Toop 2004: 67). R. Murray Schafer (1977) discusses acousmatic listening in terms of – what he translates from Schaeffer as – the ‘sound object’, meaning a sound that we can hear without knowing its cause by obscuring, behind the impassivity of a playback apparatus and a loudspeaker, any visual associations it may convey.

After Schafer, it was chiefly Michel Chion who made most important contributions to theorise the concept further within film theory. He clearly defines acousmatic listening in terms of “a situation wherein one hears a sound without seeing its cause” (Chion 1994: 32). However, he stresses that acousmatisation and de-acousmatisation can both occur as cinematic processes in relation to one another. Although acousmatisation affects principally our auditory perception, it is defined in terms of its reliance on visuality in the first place: ‘acousmatic listening’ refers to perceiving a sound without ‘seeing’ its source or cause. De-acousmatisation brings the source or cause of a sound (back) into the image frame.

As *La Didone* shows, acousmatic sound in the theatre has, however, a different effect than in the cinema. To conceptualise its effect to listening in music theatre, I want to connect it to the concept of the auditory gaze, which I introduced in chapter one. The notion of ‘auditory gazing’ demonstrates how a sudden new perspective ‘frames’ our attitude of listening. Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of how a peeping Tom all of a sudden feels caught by an invisible sound of footsteps in the background illustrates how acousmatic sound foremost marks the presence of objects spatially in the absence of their cause.

---

97 Mladen Dolar (2006) explains how the curtain in the Pythagorean venues connects philosophy with theatrical performance: “The advantage of this mechanism was obvious: the students, the followers, were confined to ‘their Master’s voice;’ not distracted by his looks or quirks of behavior, by visual forms, the spectacle of presentation, the theatrical effects which always pertain to lecturing; they had to concentrate merely on the voice and the meaning emanating from it. It appears that at its origin philosophy depends on a theatrical coup de force: there is the simple minimal device which defines the theatre, the curtain which serves as a screen, but a curtain not to be raised, not for many years – philosophy appears as the art of an actor behind the curtain” (Dolar 2006: 61). Seen this way, acousmatic listening actually originates from the theatre before it was picked up to describe electroacoustic music or cinema in the 20th century.
or body. In Sartre’s example, the sudden sound disrupts the focused attention of the observer while looking through the keyhole, and brings to attention the surroundings as a new frame with a troublesome perspective: an invisible sound is approaching. Similarly, acousmatic listening invests in ‘virtuality’ as a fiction of presence, in which the listener ‘eavesdrops’ from an outside but feels addressed inside the auditory space by the sounds that are not (yet) framed. Sartre’s illustration certifies how sound bears its own perspectives on how and what to listen to. This perspective in sound pulls the listener into the auditory space, while the frame helps her or him to make sense of it. I contend that music theatre works, equally, through particular structures of address on the listener. The acousmatisation of sound in La Didone makes this structure visible by managing the listener’s auditory gaze and continuously switching between different perspectives that change the modes of listening respectively.

To conceptualise the effects of acousmatisation on the modes of listening, I follow Chion’s argumentation which makes claims about sound in film and in general. I then re-evaluate the application of Chion’s ideas in the context of the theatre. Chion initially compares the concept of acousmatic sound to Schaeffer’s notion of reduced listening (‘l’écoute réduite’), that is, listening to sound for its own sake as in recordings. Schaeffer’s reduced listening is closely related to the acousmatic listening situation. As Chion (1994) explains, reduced listening operates as a phenomenological reduction because it consists of stripping the auditory perception of everything that is not ‘it’ in itself so that we could hear the sound only in its own materiality, substance and perceivable dimensions. This mode of listening requires a listening attention that is highly focused and that targets the sound as contained in itself without reference, association, meaning, cause or context.

The act of removing all references and values that may be suggested is a voluntary though highly artificial act for the sake of analysis (analytical listening, in Truax’s tripartite). It allows us to clarify certain phenomena in our perception. David Toop (2004) comments:

Michel Chion describes Schaeffer’s concept of ‘reduced listening’ […] as an enterprise ‘that disrupts lazy habits and opens up a world of previously unimagined questions for those who hear it […] reduced listening has the enormous advantage of opening up our ears and sharpening our power of listening’ (67).

According to Chion and Toop, reduced listening is the key to unlock the ‘lazy habits’, which supports Stockfelt’s earlier argument about the development of

98 Marking the presence of objects in film is a typical Foley-effect (named after Jack Foley, one of the earliest practitioners in Hollywood), that is realised by sound artists artificially re-enacting similar, everyday, often indexical or enhanced sounds in an audio studio with a recording engineer and editing them together with the respective images in post-production.
a reflexive consciousness surrounding the active ‘idle’ listener at the beginning of this chapter. This is also the reason why Schaeffer’s reduced listening and sonorous object bear initial importance to Schafer’s ear-cleaning exercises:

Deliberately forgetting every reference to instrumental causes or preexisting musical significations, we then seek to devote ourselves entirely and exclusively to listening, to discover the instinctive paths that lead from the purely ‘sonorous’ to the purely ‘musical.’ Such is the suggestion of acousmatics: to deny the instrument and cultural conditioning, to put in front of us the sonorous and its musical ‘possibility’ (Schaeffer 2004: 81).

In this sense, it can be understood why the acousmatic listening situation in La Didone bears important implications on the listener’s attention: both the interventions of the sci-fi sounds and the musical sounds from the musicians in the dark corner create a focused attention for the sonorous environment and its musical qualities. This effect is confirmed by Chion (1994) when he states that reduced listening causes the listener to “separate oneself from causes or effects in favour of consciously attending to sonic textures, masses, and velocities” (32).

In La Didone the reduction in listening by visual deprivation also concerns sharpening the attention. However, this ‘reduced’ listening situation in the theatre differs from Schaeffer’s reduced listening, which pertains specifically to a laboratory environment where recorded sounds can be listened to and analysed as specimens, time and again. Chion explains: “Technically, this must be done in a relatively dead sound environment that is well isolated from outside noises – conditions which must be carefully arranged” (Chion 1994: 188). Reduced listening draws attention to the sound itself giving it a certain degree of autonomy. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1991) concludes that reduced listening therefore only relevance for analysing sound’s morphology: “[t]he acousmatic dictates that a sound be described less in terms of its origin than in terms of its heard morphological qualities (form, mass, profile, and so forth)” (92). The acousmatic sounds in La Didone do not aim at such context-free ‘morphological’ analysis as such, but rather elicit new homogenising relations with the auditory space, context and narrative. Rather, they highlight the new connections between sound and image, specifically in relation to its cultural associations.

Hence, criticism towards the relevance and applicability of Schaeffer’s notion of reduced listening can be understood in the theatrical framework. Schafer criticises the notion of the sonorous object as pure sound in that it cannot exist without the recording and play-back situation: “If there is a sonorous object, it is only insofar as there is a blind listening [écoute] to sonorous effects and contents: the sonorous object is never revealed clearly
except in the acousmatic experience” (Schafer 1977: 79). Schafer suggests here that the sonorous object is only specific to the acousmatic ‘laboratory’ situation. Similarly, Forrester contests that in our daily auditory experiences we do not phenomenally ‘hear’ pure sounds as signals or waves as such, nor its intrinsic characteristics expressed in acoustic parameters (like pitch, amplitude, colour, texture, etc.); we hear events (Forrester 2000: 33). In the theatre, as La Didone demonstrates, the acousmatic sounds make us aware of the acoustic events and their relatibility as far as our attention allows.

Reduced listening, moreover, has an effect of what John Corbett (1990) has termed, ‘fetishistic audiophilia’, which refers to the desire and fetishisation of autonomous sound as a result of the audio-visual split (Burston 1998: 210). The acousmatic listening situation in La Didone, however, demonstrates that the split does not need to fetishise sound for its own sake to the detriment of our subjectivity in signification. On the contrary, instances of acousmatic listening in La Didone make our subjectivity in switching our attention and tracing linkages even more acute. I conclude here that acousmatic sounds in the theatre do not induce reduced listening in the Schaefferian sense, but most often they stimulate us to make homogeneous connections in our interpretations.

Chion (1994) supports that the acousmatic situation does not merely inhere in reduced listening by claiming that another, more fundamental mode of listening necessarily comes to the fore:

[The acousmatic situation intensifies causal listening in taking away the aid of sight. Confronted with a sound from a loudspeaker that is presenting itself without a visual calling card, the listener is led all the more intently to ask, ‘What’s that?’ (i.e., ‘What is causing this sound?’) and to be attuned to the minutest clues (often interpreted wrong anyway) that might help to identify the cause (32).]

Acousmatic listening can leave us with an unfulfilled satisfaction to know where the sounds come from. In this sense, the sound’s inherent auditory distress comes to the fore as the visual absence of a source urges us to look for its source through our attention so that we could regain control over the

99 The necessary reduction has, however, made the sound object into a laboratory specimen that lends its ‘body’ to electroacoustic media for cutting and slicing (but also for artistic alteration) in a dead sound environment with an artificially arranged acoustic horizon. Schafer goes on to suggest that the sonorous object is perhaps based on an impossibility, when he states: “To avoid confusing it with its physical cause or a ‘stimulus,’ we seemed to have grounded the sonorous object on our subjectivity. But – our last remarks already indicate this – the sonorous object is not modified for all that, neither with the variations in listening from one individual to another, nor with the incessant variations in our attention and our sensibility” (Schafer 1977: 2004: 81). Schafer seems to hint here that reduced listening would require cancelling out our subjectivity and the changeability of our attention. In its most extreme shape, the sonorous object exists then outside perception, which is then rather a philosophical concept if not an aporia.
auditory space. As Chion suggests, questioning the source can turn into a *listening-in-search* mode for the purpose of gaining information about the sound source. In this mode of listening, our attention in *La Didone* could carry us away to the dark corner of the stage where musicians play Cavalli’s music on unusual instruments, like the electric guitar, the electronic keyboard or the accordion. However, as I already noted earlier, causal listening (aka sound source recognition or identification) occurs most of the time as a mode of *listening-in-readiness* that ascribes immediate indexical meanings to the sounds in relation to ourselves.

According to Chion, the mode of causal listening makes the listener actively and intently “attuned to the minutest clues (often interpreted wrongly anyway) that might help to identify the cause” (Chion 1994: 32). This corresponds with the claims in Soundscape studies that the human perceptual system hunts for information, even when it leads to a wrong interpretation. Connor acknowledges this urge and concludes that there is no proper ‘disembodied’ sound as acousmatisation would make us believe: “[…] sounds, though always on the move, are hungry to come to rest, hungry to be lodged in a local habitation that they can be said to have come from. Sounds are always embodied, though not always in the kind of bodies made known to vision” (Connor 2005: 54). So despite sound’s omnidirectionality, causal listening would place sound back to a defined space or body, even if the sound’s original source cannot be identified. In the latter case, we might even *imagine* a source, similar to what I claimed in chapter one with respect to visual deprivation (Cytowic): when we do not see the immediate cause or source of a sound we often instantly imagine one fictitiously, whether we recognise it directly as an icon or an index for the real source or not.

Yet acousmatic listening presents us with a major difference between film and theatre: conventional film strategies depend on fitting sight to hearing, as a consequence of cinema’s technical limitations. Theatre generally does not depend on such a split, but rather on the opposite of simultaneous presence. My thesis that auditory distress is inherent to every sound could therefore shed new light on Chion’s theory about acousmatic listening: in offering connections between sound and image, while hiding the real source (the loudspeakers), cinema solves or neutralises the auditory distress in the mediation. The image gives a perspective and a frame that helps to channel the sounds. In the visually deprived context of the theatre, such a frame contained in an image is generally not present, nor relevant. But when no strategy or perspective is given, we look for a cause or an association in our mind to solve the distress. In this way, tracing a sound source is a necessary but subjective and imaginative enterprise that gives temporary balance to the listening subject, depending on context and the listener’s cultural repertoire of imaginable sounds. Forrester (2000) denotes: “a great deal of our knowledge comes from the available cultural discourses about sounds and their causes”
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

(34). Acousmatic and causal listening are thus not only contingent to the listener’s sound memories. These modes are also culturally contingent and discursive in the sense that they bear a perspective on sound perception, namely a relation and position of the listener towards the acousmatic sounds. The reduced listening mode, on the contrary, would defy such discursivity and signifying activity.

The acousmatic listening situation in La Didone challenges the listener’s causal listening. By suddenly switching between different perspectives, the de-acousmatising effect of causal listening is at stake. An example of this is when the actors on stage double the gestures of the actors in the movie and move their lips to the voices on the soundtrack. And vice versa, the dubbed voices are sometimes subdued and superimposed by the amplified voices of the actors. These displaced sources of the voice give rise to the uncanny effects of lip sinking and ventriloquism. The actors appear to speak in some sort of double voice and confuse the listener constantly about its precise location and origin. This confusion creates the impression that the characters can easily be exchanged between cinema and theatre, and between the respective narratives. It also questions the very basis of causal listening: can we really pin down a sound to a source?

Mladen Dolar (2006) takes up this question to claim that the acousmatic is part of every sound – he calls it the ‘ventriloquist’ nature of sound – and not only an effect of its electroacoustic mediation as Chion would make us believe. He refers to the atopicality of the human voice: “The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma” (Dolar 2006: 70). This makes him paradoxically conclude that “there is no such thing as disacousmatisation” (ibid.). In the context of La Didone, Dolar’s conclusion applies to the voices as objects that are mediated between the performers and the film but do not exactly fit either of them. This also has further reaching implications for sound as ‘object’ in the theatre in general.

Connor challenges the notion of the sound object by arguing that because the sound’s embodiment is most ambiguous, there is no such thing as a proper sound object in the way we use it for its referential propensity in language. He sees this reflected in sound art:

If some of sound art is concerned with what Pierre Schaeffer has called the ‘acousmatic’ dimensions of sound, namely sound produced without visible or even definable source, other kinds of sound art are interested in the ambiguous

---

100 Dolar uses the term ‘disacousmatisation’, though ‘de-acousmatisation’ is referred to in Chion’s work. For the remainder of this chapter, I will use both terms depending on the author I refer to.

101 Dolar (2006) concludes: “So the voice as the object appears precisely with the impossibility of disacousmatisation. It is not the haunting voice impossible to pin down to a source; rather, it appears in the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause” (70).
The Frequency of Imagination

embodiments or fixations of sound. Ambiguous because, despite all our instincts to the contrary, there are no sound objects. We say, hearing a sound, that is a siren, or, that is the sea, but objects are only the occasions for sound, never their origins. And there is no sound that is the sound of one object alone. All sounds are the result of collisions, abrasions, impingements or minglings of objects (Connor 2005: 54).

According to Connor, there are only ‘occasions’ of sound, which should not be conflated with the origins or sources they embody in our mind or language. In this way, Connor concludes that there is no such thing as a proper ‘sound object’ (in the Schaefferian sense): there are only events as a result of constant collisions between objects. Earlier Connor stated that “[…] sounds, though always on the move, are hungry to come to rest […]” (54). The acousmatic listening situation rather gives the so-called ‘disembodied’ sounds a new body where they can come to rest. However, this body is never a homogeneous one: it exists through these collisions and mingling of sounds, which retains sound’s uncertain spatial anchoring.

In my view, La Didone reflects Connor’s argument about the non-existence of a sound as a proper ‘object’ on many levels. On the one hand, the acousmatic sounds in the performance comprise all the prototypical sound effects of a sci-fi movie like bleeps, crashes, lasers, or even the wavering sound of a Theremin. On the other hand, acousmatisation affects the musical sounds from Cavalli’s baroque opera, causing an unheard blend of Baroque, Romantic and Modern instruments, like the theorbo and baroque guitar (played by Hank Heijink), the tambourine, recorder, and accordion (Kamala Senkaram), the electric guitar (Harvey Valdes) and keyboard (Jennifer Griesbach). The collisions between these sounds make the listener at times trace back her or his originating bodies in memory, outside of the double narrative and representation of the play. However, they can also come to rest within the narratives, making two diegetic universes collide.

118 The ‘sound object’ (l’object sonore) as formulated by Pierre Schaeffer has been often scrutinised and led to a conceptual messiness. Schaeffer’s notion of the sonorous object (1959; 1966) was originally meant to describe sound as object for human perception. Schaeffer’s sound objects were in reality recorded sounds. Schaefer (1977) picked up on the notion to discern “the smallest self-contained particle” of the soundscape as defined by the human ears, which can be analysed by its characteristics (spectrum, loudness and envelope). As Soundscape studies proclaims, the sound object as an object of study can only reveal information about its multisource formation by a trained ear in an analytical or reduced mode of listening. However, it would be an illusion to think that the acousmatic situation does not affect the sound in our perception of it, even in reduced listening. The confusion about the term ‘sound object’ further resides in how we call sounds in language by means of their origin. This confusion is reflected in Christian Metz’s definition of the aural object (1980). Contrary to Schaeffer’s concept, Metz’s aural object is indeed the aural source, namely the visible object that emitted the sound. In this sense, Metz points out that the sound proper is regarded as a ‘characteristic’, an ‘attribute’ and therefore a ‘non-object’ linked to the visible object which is the sound’s corresponding substance (Metz 1980: 26).
Moreover, the intrinsic qualities of the sounds resort a relation with the listener. In this relation, sound has a certain amount of ‘power’ to resist or interrupt the attention of the listener. By isolating sound from its original body, source or listening context, reduced listening, however, sets the boundaries between sound as object and the listener as subject. Consequently, this would leave the relation between them undecided or at least change the relation through the new listening situation. Reduced listening as analytical mode in this sense always obtrudes in this relation. On the contrary, in La Didone, reduced listening as heightening the listening attention does not obtrude in the relation between listener and sound (as object), but rather reinforces it. The collisions of sound – outmoded sound effects and musical sounds of different temporalities, textures and colours – create new, hybrid bodies of sound in the listener’s attentive ear, purposely confusing its explorations for their original sources.

The consequence of the inexistence of a proper sound ‘object’ and the constant confusion about the original sound ‘source’ is that Soundscape studies overrate the mode of causal listening. Instead of always looking for a source to stabilise the crisis and insufficiency of listening caused by auditory distress, we rather look for the meaning of the sound in relation to our auditory selves. Hence the urge to find linkages between sound and image should be regarded in terms of a crisis of meaning, rather than a need to know what caused the sound. The crisis of a stable, meaningful coherence in the elusive, placeless and abrasive effect of acousmatisation could, moreover, give rise to an uncanny feeling in the listener. Connor argues, by referring to Chion and Hull, that this effect of acousmatisation assumes a power relation with the listener:

Michel Chion has pointed to an odd convention about invisible sources of sound in cinema, namely that they are usually thought of as having the power to see other characters who cannot see them (Chion 129-30). This is perhaps because divinity is associated with invisible or sourceless sound, while mortality is associated with the condition of visible audition. As John Hull has so crisply put it: ‘When we say that the divine being is invisible, we mean that we do not have power over it. To say that the divine was inaudible, however, would be to claim that it had no power over us’ (Hull 1991: 127; qtd. in Connor 2005: 56).

Chion speaks in the context of this power relation of an acousmêtre, literally the master (maître) or a being (être) behind the sound, similar to the function of the curtain in the Pythagorean venues. Chion (1994) refers to three acousmatique and être (being). Chion often refers to the figure of the Wizard of Oz as the acousmêtre par excellence in early cinema. Another figure would be the Phantom of the Opera, the disfigured maestro of Gaston Leroux’s novel, whose speech from behind a mask or a curtain states his power through constant fear of
powers: “First, the acousmêtre has the power of seeing all; second, the power of omniscience; and third, the omnipotence to act on the situation. Let us add that in many cases there is also a gift of ubiquity – the acousmêtre seems to be able to be anywhere he or she wishes” (129-30). The acousmêtre, however, is a distinct figure both within and outside/above the narrative with powers that have an uncanny effect. This figure is not, in the first place, the source of sound, but rather constitutes a power over the process of signification. Dis- or de-acousmatisation, according to Chion, is then the process of dissipating the mystery and thereby, weakening the acousmêtre’s omnipotent power: when the voice gets attached to a body, it turns out to be rather banal, like in The Wizard of Oz (Dolar 2006: 67).

In La Didone, the acousmatisation of sound also creates an alienating, chimera effect that makes the danger of some invisible force in the space more tangible. This effect is in line with the double diegesis. The mixed auditory interventions of sound effects and baroque music often make us wonder about their location in the narrative: Are they part of the spaceship on the planet of the vampires or are they belonging to Dido’s palace in ancient Carthage? The images on the screen from Bava’s movie make the linkages between eye and ear even more palatable, forming some sort of perceptual glue that helps us identify the sounds with its source and location. However, the linkages are progressively disrupted, making the sounds stand alone as irritating disruptions to our listening attention, creating similar effects to what I have discussed as ‘auditory gaze’ in chapter one. The sounds become signals for an irretraceable, god-like presence, an acousmêtre behind the sound, the ‘other’ that metaphorically stares at us – a gaze on our shoulders like in Sartre’s description of the auditory gaze – while we listen to the reproduced sounds. In this way, causal listening helps to demystify this unknown, authoritarian power that imposes auditory distress on us.

La Didone shows how reduced and acousmatic listening are intertwined, constantly moving our attention between the modes of listening-in-readiness and listening-in-search. In the theatre, the reduced context focuses our attention on the musical qualities of the auditory events. The schizophonic situation forces us to look for linkages in the stories ourselves: one is the story of Dido who is spurned in love and in its absence marries out of reason; the other is a story of an invisible force that pulls the crew of a space shuttle and turns them into empty-headed zombies who tune into a collective mind. Sound and music are used in the performance to give shape to the feeling of the unknowable horror of his faceless face. The ‘power’ of the hidden master apparently also affected the first acousmêtre Pythagoras, as Dolar explains: “Pythagoras became the object of a cult in his lifetime; he was revered as a divinity (Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 11), and no doubt this was not unrelated to that device” (Dolar 2006: 62).

Dolar (2006) refers further to Chion’s comparison of disacousmatisation to a striptease: “it can be a process of several stages, the veils can be lifted one after another…” (68).
absence as a fatal desire in love on the one hand, and to oblivion as an unknown threat to reason and individuality on the other. In this absence, as the central theme of both narratives, I recognise a crisis of meaning and representation, which the listener tries to resolve through listening.

3.3. Listening to a Remainder of Meaning:
‘Free’ Play in Semiotic Listening

La Didone presents the listener with an excess of perspectives through its perceptual splits and a schizophonic listening situation that activates different modes of listening, between which grey zones exist. As I discussed in chapter one, Soundscape studies and Acoustic Communication studies suggest that due to sound’s redundancy of intensities, the listener needs to consciously channel the auditory stimuli in terms of abstracted information. I argued through the concept of visual deprivation – the carrier of the acousmatic listening situation – how listening in itself is always insufficient because of a lack of meaning. I also discussed how the sonorous envelope can produce both sensations of stability (comfort) and instability (discomfort) because of a sensory excess.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that there is an essential instability between hearing and listening, causing a crisis in the listener as subject. In this context, Connor (1997) questions the modern auditory subject in terms of such insufficiency in hearing and listening: “The sense of the insufficiency and insubstantiality of hearing makes the definition of the self through it a problem. How can the modern psyche be said to be organised around an ontology which is so regularly defined as the deficit of ontology?” (213). Because of this ontological deficit, the modern auditory ‘self’ feels compelled to stabilise its subjectivity through signification, which brings temporary coherence and stability.105

The insufficiency implies that the listener as subject is always in a state of instability. In response, we position our attention in order to create sense of what we hear (or want to hear), which could give coherence, pleasure or some kind of gratification to the listening subject. This search for meaningful auditory experiences is generally described in Soundscape studies as a semiotic or semantic mode of listening, which treats sound as a language or a

---

105 Earlier, I discussed the address and response system of our auditory perception in semiotic terms through Benveniste’s communicative model. Kaja Silverman comments on its influence on subject formation: “Within this semiotic model the viewer does not have a stable and continuous subjectivity, but one which is activated intermittently, within discourse” (Silverman 1983: 48). Silverman applies this idea of instability to the analysis of the cinematic text in relation to the viewer (inscribed as the ‘subject of vision’). I suggest that music theatre presents us with a similar instability in the listener as listening subject. An ‘illusion’ of stability, coherence and continuity is created to the extent that in our modes of listening towards the auditory events we conform to dominant cultural standards, listening habits and regimes of perception that are activated within discourse.
The Frequency of Imagination

code. Roland Barthes (1991) has explained a similar idea of listening for the sake of meaning in terms of ‘decoding’:

Listening is henceforth linked (in a thousand varied, indirect forms) to a hermeneutics: to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the ‘underside’ of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden) (249).

According to Barthes, listening involves making sense of something, as if cracking a code. This attitude of decoding closely depends on our competences of choosing the modes of listening in relation to the given perspectives. Therefore, rather than regarding this attitude as singular and independent, I argue that we can make use of all of the aforementioned modes in the theatre, consciously or not, to hunt for discursive information and reveal ‘hidden’ meanings in sound. In this way, causal and indexical modes of listening could also be adopted in an attitude of decoding: rather than looking for an index or cause, our ears explore discursive meanings as part of a code. As such, they help us to respond to the insufficiency in listening by filling in the gaps and tracing a source, even when imagined, through looking and auditory gazing. Similarly, in recognising earcons or auditory icons through ambient listening, we establish a comparable sense of stability in relation to the auditory space.

At this point, as became apparent through ambient listening and evenly hovering attention, the multilayered soundscapes of La Didone demonstrate that a conscious channelling and active interpreting as way to respond to the auditory distress and semiotic excess is not always possible. Rather, the address in sound creates polysemic, indirect, hidden and sometimes ambiguous meanings if only we allow for this ‘too much’ to play upon our senses, despite the rather dominant attitude of listening-in-search for signification. I want to argue here that this overload again causes auditory distress that is necessary to push our attention and interpreting efforts. As a result of the semiotic insufficiency in listening, sound and music are rather ‘poor’ signifiers, always creating a semiotic surplus. This surplus affects in us a sense of open-endedness, which can be as pleasurable as it is distressing.

The surplus of meaning – that which cannot be immediately conceptualised – is what Lawrence Kramer (2002) calls the ‘musical remainder’ in the context of music. In relation to this remainder, Kramer contends that interpretation never emerges “to close the gap or smooth out the excess; interpretation preserves these non-congruities in order to continue the production of meaning just as fantasy maintains a distance from its objects in order to continue the production of desire” (Kramer 2002: 170-1). Semiotic listening could in this way be said to secure the production of desire by allowing the auditory excess within its interpretative, cognitive mechanisms. Moreover, as Kramer suggests, the incongruities are necessary to maintain the
production of meaning. Behind this idea of a semiotic ‘remainder’ in music is a notion of open-endedness in our signifying processes, which Barthes (1991) also describes, specifically in the context of perceiving art and music:

In the third place, what is listening to here and there (chiefly in the field of art, whose function is often utopian) is not the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning: this phenomenon of shimmering is called signifying [significance] as distinct from signification: ‘listening’ to a piece of classical music, the listener is called upon to ‘decipher’ this piece, i.e., to recognize (by his culture, his application, his sensibility) its construction, quite as coded (predetermined) as that of a palace at a certain period; but ‘listening’ to a composition (taking this word here in its etymological sense) by John Cage, is it each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical signifying: by deconstructing itself, listening is externalized, it compels the subject to renounce his ‘inwardness’ (259).

The example of listening to a musical piece by John Cage would perhaps give the false impression that our signifying processes work in most linear ways from signifier to signifier. On the contrary, what Barthes appears to convey here is that our deciphering attitude in listening thrives on a dispersion of signifiers, or what he calls: “the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning” (ibid.).

La Didone, similarly, aims at such a shimmering through an overload of signifiers in our split perceptions of sounds, music, texts and images. Through this overload, the performance brackets or deconstructs listening as an event, which, in its call for a hermeneutic pursuit, stimulates us to put back together the sounds in different constellations and linkages that are unusual and continuously open to alteration. Due to this open-endedness, we constantly shift our modes of listening. Jean-François Augoyard (with Henri Torgue, 1995) coined the term ‘metabolic effect’ for this continuous switching movement. The interpreting listener is stimulated to move through the possible signifieds that sound seems to convey and adapt her or his mode of listening accordingly.

Barthes suggests that listening is taken out from its inward privileged position in the listener and externalised into the shimmering and open-ended play of signification. Jacques Derrida takes further Barthes’s idea of ‘the shimmering of signifiers’, similar to Kramer’s concept of the ‘musical remainder’, in his notion of ‘supplementarity’, which is inherent to signification due to constant slippage or displacement of ‘supplements’: “[…] there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’
supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement” (Derrida, qtd. in Silverman 1983: 37).

Regarding Barthes’s and Derrida’s approach towards the open-endedness of our signifying processes in conjunction, I conclude that in listening, the listener’s quest for coherence involves endless chains of signification. Auditory distress and the semiotic remainder in listening are then a necessary basis for meaningful auditory experiences. Correspondingly, the signified in listening is endlessly ‘commutable’ (cf. Peirce, Eco, Barthes). The insufficiency of listening enables ‘semantic snowballing’ (Turino 1999).\(^\text{106}\) Umberto Eco refers to this idea in terms of series of successive signifieds (or ‘interpretants’) \textit{ad finitum} (‘unlimited semiosis’). According to Silverman (1983), this idea is also similar to what Derrida has referred to as ‘free play’: one signified always leads to another, which in turn functions as a signifier (Silverman 1983: 37-8). The idea of free play is based on this endless commutability of the signified and “the assumption that the play of meaning has no necessary closure, no transcendental justification” (41). Evenly hovering attention in psychoanalytical listening particularly reinforces this free play of an endless commutability of rather poor signs without solidifying their direct meaning. However, it is not the only listening attitude or mode that bears on it. Rather, the endless commutability or supplementarity is the basis for any semiotic or interpretative mode of listening as an effect of auditory distress in both the perception of sound and music.

In \textit{La Didone}, the excess in listening gives rise to an ambivalent way of listening that either short-circuits the listener’s attention and renders her or him idle, or makes her or him acutely alert to hidden meanings in the connections one might infer, even when they lead to temporary contradictions. In this way, listening is externalised and turned towards itself: it makes the listener aware of her or his role as listening subject. The listener can experience flashes of awareness when the positioning of one’s attention is marked by the clashes between the listening modes and the inability to make sense of them. However, this does not go without the pleasure of suspending immediate meanings in an evenly hovering attention in order to be open for ‘new’ or at least alternative meanings to emerge. Auditory distress therefore plays a significant role in the interplay between perspectives and modes of listening in the listener. The listening modes help the listener to make sense of what one hears and listens to in relation to the perspectives. However, a continuous semiotic remainder retains the promise of meaningful experiences that have

\(^{106}\) In line with Peirce’s semiotic model for the purpose of music semiology, Thomas Turino (1999) uses Derrida’s idea of transmutability to claim that ‘musical indices’ can take on new meanings over time with the connections they make: “indices continually take on new layers of meaning while potentially also carrying along former associations – a kind of semantic snowballing” (Turino 1999: 235). With the concept of ‘semantic snowballing’, Turino confirms the idea of an endless commutability of signifieds in music.
not yet materialised and escaped a frame. I conclude this chapter with the framing aspect of the perspectives, which La Didone consciously disrupts.

4. The Discursive Response of the Listening Modes: Limits to Framing in Listening

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the modes of listening structure our ways of dealing with auditory distress. Theatre can play upon these modes through the perspectives it offers in the juxtaposition of sound and image, as I showed by discussing the consequences of the schizophonic listening situation on the listener in La Didone. I illustrated how, in response to auditory distress, the listener tries to find stability in such regulative perspectives, as reference points, to relate the sound or music to an image, a narrative, a context. La Didone plays specifically with the switching between listening modes, thus leaving the listener with an excess of intensities and information. At the end, the performance thus creates an unresolved semiotic remainder that escapes a frame of understanding.

With regard to the framing properties, Michel Chion (1994) has argued, with respect to sound in film, that there is no such thing as a proper sound frame: For sound there is neither frame nor preexisting container. We can pile up as many sounds on the soundtrack as we wish without reaching a limit. Further, these sounds can be situated at different narrative levels, such as conventional background music (nondiegetic) and synch dialogue (diegetic) – while visual elements can hardly ever be located at more than one of these levels at once. So there is no auditory container for film sounds, nothing analogous to this visual container of the images that is the frame (67-8).

By arguing that there is no pre-existing sound frame in film, Chion concludes that “there is no soundtrack” (68). By this he means that there is no fixed place or container – like the visual frame of the film screen that contains all visual images – for the sounds. Cinema offers a visual frame through the screen that delineates the way the sounds are perceived. Theatre, in this respect, is different since it does not share the necessity with cinema to join sound with an image despite a technical separation. In theatre, sound generally originates from various sources and sound bodies (performers, loudspeakers, musical instruments, amplified voices, etc.), and travels through auditory space in various directions. Therefore, the perspectives create a frame that connects the dispersed sounds to a listening zone, a narrative, a text, an image, an object, a character, a gesture on the stage or in the

---

107 On this issue, theatre inheres in a different relation to auditory distress and the necessity of a sound frame than cinema, of which its perspectives in sound are much more stabilised by the image and its optical frame.
The Frequency of Imagination

representational space. But as Chion suggests, sounds can stick to many different levels at once. In this way, cinema and theatre share a fundamental lack of a proper sound frame constituted in the sound itself. As a response, the listener creates a frame in relation to the given perspectives, with which she or he can resolve the auditory distress.

In listening, perspective and frame therefore mutually depend on each other. Erving Goffman (1974) has formulated this relation in his Frame theory through his notion of the ‘multiple-channel effect’ in the organisation of experience. This notion describes a similar effect as the seemingly frameless space for sound as described above:

When an individual is an immediate witness to an actual scene, events tend to present themselves through multiple channels, the focus of the participant shifting from moment to moment from one channel to another. Further, these channels can function as they do because of the special role of sight. What is heard, felt, or smelled attracts the eye, and it is the seeing of the source of these stimuli that allows for a quick identification and definition – a quick framing – of what has occurred (Goffman 1974: 146).

Goffman’s idea of frame and framing explains the need for anchoring the sounds in a listening space or zone. Although sounds in both theatre and film are not ‘contained’ as such, they do call for such stable frames which are given in the perspectives that function as channels to our attention. The ‘multiple-channel’ effect explains further how sound’s multi-directionality creates multiple perspectives as channels that shift the listener’s attention from moment to moment. Goffman suggests that sight has a stabilising function in visually tracing back a source for the intensities, which would support causal listening. He claims that the recognition of the source in an image gives a ‘quick framing’.

Using La Didone I argued that in theatre such quick framing by looking for a visual cause is not needed in order to interpret sounds meaningfully. Rather, the framing aspect of the perspective helps the listener to make sense in relation to one’s auditory self and the discourse within which one interprets the sounds or music.

Goffman’s theory of the frame seems to suggest Stockfelt’s ‘active idle attention’ when applied to auditory perception in (music) theatre. On the organisation of experience in ‘dramatic interaction’, Goffman claims: “[…] nothing that occurs will be unportentous or insignificant. Which implies, incidentally, that the audience need not select what to attend to: whatever is made available can be taken as present for a good reason” (Goffman 1974: 143). Goffman appears to trust the ‘exhaustive’ content of the theatrical sign. His claims, however, substantiate a passive attitude of a spectator that soaks up information as an ear witness in the audience that is immersed and distant towards the represented events. Goffman’s suggestion that the audience ‘need
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

not select what to attend to’ implies that the listener sits back and merely takes in what is offered to her or him. The role of the perspectives on our attention in theatre could indeed be given too much meaning, thus rendering the listener rather inactive.

However, Goffman’s stance does not take into account our constant need to select and channel the auditory intensities ourselves due to its implications of auditory distress. As I demonstrated in this chapter, sound and music need selection because they are insufficient or ‘poor’ signifiers in themselves. Moreover, the unstable relation between hearing and listening makes the framing function of the perspectives necessary but never completely ‘adequate’ in managing the modes of listening. Contrary to Goffman’s excessive stress on the frame as a container for all signifiers in the theatre, sound and music can play upon the listener’s necessary ways of selecting and reading in listening by always leaving a semiotic remainder.

La Didone specifically plays upon the listener’s interpretative abilities in listening by constantly splitting and reassembling sounds from its original bodies. This schizophonic listening situation presents us with the splits and cracks of perception and signification in our relations to sound. Looking for sources or images to embody the sounds is only one way to bring them to a rest temporarily. As I illustrated through the concept of acousmatisation, a gap within the sounds themselves always remains, making them constantly on the move, never really fitting a body or a signified. This movement and event-like nature of sound propels signification into an endless commutability of signifieds for us to fill in the gaps of our perception. I do not want to imply that listening always involves hunting for meaning as Truax argues, nor that semiotic listening fully resolves a lack of meaning in sound or music. Most listening modes in our everyday experiences are not involved in signification processes per se. Moreover, through La Didone I have demonstrated how these modes are not independent of each other, but have rather grey zones between them. Only in the focused context of the theatre do these modes receive specific significance in the listener’s urge to engage with the sounds or music in interpretative ways in order to resolve the gaping auditory distress.

As such, the response of the listening modes to this auditory distress is discursive. According to Rodaway (1994), the gap in our perception exists in the first place between sensation and recognition of sound as a potentially ‘meaningful’ event, for which sound constantly ‘leaks’ into the other sense modalities and carriers of meaning. Forrester (2000) recognises in this gap the important role of discursivity in listening: “Within this gap we have inserted discourses of sound, and thus a ‘sound as sign’ can only be understood with respect to the cultural discourses within which the sound is embedded” (49). La Didone, similarly, marks how our ways of listening with its distinctive modes are not only influenced by our personal attitudes and aural competences, but are embedded in a culture of listening, a discourse.
The Frequency of Imagination

This embeddedness gives stability to the listener as subject. However subjective the individual listener’s interpretations may be, Jonathan Crary states that the signifying system that makes up the listening act as discursive practice pre-exists the listener: both perspective and listening mode are discursively produced.

I have discussed how the listener feels a need to make sense of her or his experiences through the performance’s perspectives. The sound source is one response to satisfying this need, the sound index and auditory icon are others. Yet behind these responses remains the urge to relate the sounds or music to oneself through anchoring them in discourse and signification. The framing function of the perspective assists in this anchoring. However, *La Didone* presents us with shifting perspectives that challenge the listener’s interpretative ways of listening to such a degree that the modes cannot resolve the excess. An appropriate frame that contains the excess in listening is lacking. There is always a semiotic remainder that plays upon the listener to (co-)create meaningful relations that can be incompatible or that can be suspended temporarily by an evenly hovering attention. Characteristic of post-dramatic theatre, of which *La Didone* is an example, is that it often turns perception from the inside out and onto itself, making the listener aware of her or his own interpretative mechanisms. This awareness turns the attention on the endless ‘shimmering’ of signifieds in our perception that are constantly subject to scrutiny.

The constant auditory interventions in *La Didone* seize a self-critical and meta-theatrical function, which brings our listening competences and participation in signification at stake. The constant confusions and abrasions of sound in *La Didone* call into question the listener’s responses through the modes of listening in relation to discourse and signification. The discursivity of these modes anchors both the listener as listening subject and the meaningful relations she or he produces within a historically contingent and socio-cultural discourse. Yet *La Didone* draws our attention to the limits of the listening modes as a discursive response to resolving auditory distress. Rather, moments of unframeability in reading through listening still leave some questions unresolved. Therefore, I propose to look at one specific type of discourse that has not been discussed so far but that is highly relevant to the listener’s semiotic modes of listening in music theatre: narrative discourse, and its related signifying process, narrativisation.

In the following chapter, I propose the notion of a narrative mode of listening as one particular discursive response in music theatre to auditory distress and the listening perspectives in its particular structure of address. In the specific context of music theatre’s call on narrativity, I elaborate on the listening perspective further in terms of focalization. I argue that narrativisation and focalization present us with a very compelling mode of interpretative listening in relation to the ones discussed up to this point. In this
The Listener’s Response: Modes of Listening and Perspective

way, I aim to answer the short-comings in the theory of the listening modes in relation to signification, namely how these modes, in turn, create meaningful structures in the listener as a way to resolve the auditory distress in music theatre.
Photo Yvonne Wiewel (left) and Jan Kuijken (right)
in *De Overstroming* © Patrick De Spiegelaere
Chapter 3
The Narrative Response: Narrativisation and Focalization

In chapter two, I introduced the listening modes to explain how we respond to auditory distress. I showed how in music theatre the listener makes meaningful experiences of the distress through a continuous switching of listening modes. This process depends on how the perspectives, inherent to every theatrical performance, manage the individual listener’s attention. The theories surrounding the listening modes suggested that listening attention is a vehicle with which the listener channels the excess in listening in terms of what she or he judges and externalises as meaningful in relation to the implied perspectives.

However, the distinctions between the listening modes are not always as clear-cut as they may appear in theory. The mixed modes can lead to an impasse between experience (perception) and interpretation (signification) when the inexistence of a ‘sound frame’ does not provide the listener with enough contextual information about how to interpret, and, thereby, anchor auditory interventions. In this case, a semiotic remainder in one’s auditory perceptions can momentarily suspend interpretation by provoking an evenly hovering attention (Barthes/Lehmann) that allows for contradictory meanings. The impasse in listening gives rise to more questions about how we solve auditory distress through interpretation: How do we unravel the deadlock in the undecidability of where to focus, or how to interpret music? How do we come to a coherent understanding of what we hear or listen to in a performance, especially when a frame or certain logic is missing? Soundscape studies do not completely explain how we create structures in our interpretations within a semiotic mode of listening.

In the current chapter, I therefore propose narrativisation as a particular mode of semiotic listening in the listener’s search for stability in one’s auditory ‘self’, which structures meaning in a coherent way. Narrativity and narrativisation offer a temporary sense of coherence, which can be very dominant to our interpretations. I argue here that a music theatre performance can invite a narrative mode of listening, even if it does not provide us with a story in a conventional sense, or a representation of a narrative on stage. I dispute the idea that narrativisation in listening would only be activated by a narrative text (given in the performance or in a programme note). Rather, it could also be elicited by a context, an image, a gesture, a visual space or simply by listening itself. I then look at specific ‘impulses’ of the listener for narrative listening in terms of implied positions in the perspectives that the music theatre performance offers. I examine, in particular, when narrativisation becomes compelling as a specific response, which offers the listener temporary resolution to auditory distress.
In what follows, I propose narrativisation as an interpretative mode that can be activated in a music theatre performance through a text or through the listening situation itself. First, I introduce Monika Fludernik’s understanding of narrativisation as a departure point, the purpose of which is to examine how this notion can function to surpass the impasse between perception and interpretation in a more comprehensive sense. Then I relate this notion to the perception and interpretation of music in the theatre. I argue how narrativisation through listening is a specific response of the listener, which calls for a reconsideration of what narrative is with regard to music (and sound in a more general sense), and how it relates to the modes of interpretation I have discussed so far. In this context, I explain how narrativisation bears a new perspective on what ‘narrative’ and ‘narrativity’ means in relation to interpretative listening. In so doing, I define what is meant by a ‘story’, ‘narrative’ or ‘diegesis’ in relation to what one sees and hears in a music theatre performance.

I have selected two case studies, which I will use to illustrate the consequences of narrativisation in the listener’s responses to auditory distress, respectively De Overstroming (2002) by Het Net and LOD (formerly Het Muziek Lod), and De Helling van de Oude Wijven (2002) by Walpurgis. Through these case studies, I argue that the definitions of narrative and narrativity need revision in a context of musicalisation of the theatre stage in order to understand how music and sound can generate a sense of narrativity, rather than be a narrative. The performances help me to discuss some relevant moments that offer an ‘impulse’ for narrativisation in their address of the listener.

With regard to this address, I distinguish the potential of focalization or a ‘point of audition’ (Chion 1994) as a specific perspective in listening that invokes a sense of narrativity. I contend that focalization is decisive in inciting a narrative mode of listening in the listener, more than the presence of a narrator or a ‘narrative voice’. I distinguish the latter from the human voice, which I further conceptualise for its stimulation of narrativisation on the stage through a ‘voice-body’ or vocalic body (Connor 2000). Finally, I demonstrate how narrativisation casts new light on issues of authority and agency in meaning-making, which are significant to the discussion of narrative voice. In relation to these issues, narrativisation will prove to be useful in the discussion of certain dichotomies in the spectator’s modes of interpretation, which I will explain towards the end of the chapter: oral versus literate modes, and concert/recital versus representational modes. The notion of narrativisation then explains how these modes help the listener to read the voice-body in terms of a ‘vocal persona’ (a fictional character) within a

---

110 I choose the spelling ‘focalization’ and ‘focalizer’ with z, besides ‘narrativisation’ with s, as suggested by the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (2005).
'diegesis' (a story world), while keeping her or his attention on the actual musical performance and regarding it as a performance.

1. Narrativisation in Music Theatre: Another Mode of Listening

In *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996), Monika Fludernik develops the notion of ‘narrativisation’ against the post-structuralist tradition in order to broaden the scope of narrative analysis. Earlier, in narrative psychology, narrativisation was introduced to explain how a narrative constitutes a cognitive mode of experiencing the self in relation to the surrounding world. This idea recognises particularly that our lives are intertwined and immersed with narratives (Paul John Eakin 1999; qtd. in Nünning & Nünning 2002: 1-2). In the 1970s, the notion of narrativisation was taken up in the context of poststructuralist’s valorising of narrative indeterminacy and uncertainty, which included the role of the emancipated reader. In this context, narrative processing was initially theorised as hypothetical *gap-filling*.\(^\text{109}\) Fludernik (1996) partly follows the psychological and cognitive understandings of narrativisation, but carefully adapts them for the analysis of literary texts. Since her constructive approach to narrativisation stresses subjective experience and perception, I suggest reconsidering this emphasis as a way to unravel the impasse between perception and interpretation of music in theatre, which we encountered in the previous chapter. Ultimately, I propose to extend Fludernik’s argument and conceptualise narrativisation as a distinct mode of listening that can help the listener to relate to music theatre, even when a straightforward story is not given.

Fludernik’s notion of narrativisation questions the traditional boundaries of what ‘narrative’ and ‘narrativity’ can refer to. There are many different definitions, both ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’, according to the object one wishes to discuss in relation to these notions. For instance, in Stanzel’s established definition, narrativity came to denote the mediation of a *story*: “the degree to which one feels a story is being told or performed” (Abbott 2002: 193). In this definition, the presence of a narrator, an agency that initiates and performs the ‘narrating’ – as different to the author – is crucial. In his book *Discours du récit: essai de method* (1972), Gérard Genette has formulated the ‘premise’ that there can be no narration without a narrator.\(^\text{110}\) This principle is, however,

\(^{109}\) See for instance Meir Sternberg’s *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978).

\(^{110}\) Roland Barthes (1977) has formulated a similar definition of narrative in terms of communication: “In linguistic communication, *j* et *tu* (*I* and *you*) are absolutely presupposed by one another; similarly, there can be no narrative without a narrator and a listener (or reader)” (109). Barthes stresses the importance of an agent (agency) that addresses a listener in the act of narration. Building on Genette’s premise, Barthes’s argument supports Benveniste’s communicational model of the constitution of an ‘I’ in the linguistic relation to a ‘you’, which I
too narrow as a basis for a comprehensive understanding of narrative and narrativity. The limitation especially concerns contexts where there is no explicit ‘story’ or ‘telling’ in words, in verbal content, such as in the case of instrumental music in the theatre.

Structuralist narratology in the Genettean tradition is most often criticised for privileging the text for the development of its conceptual toolbox. This is one of the reasons why many scholars have argued that narratology does not apply well to music, despite specialised linguistic approaches in musicology that have included narratological terminology. According to those who oppose these approaches, narrative and narrativity would have been much too defined for the purpose of analysing literary texts. One argument against this criticism is that acclaimed structuralists such as Roland Barthes have consistently argued for an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of narrative from the advent of the term ‘la narratologie’, coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969. Alternatively, many narrative approaches to music have been put under scrutiny in an attempt to surpass the considerable constraint, which Adorno formulated in a comment to Mahler, that music can only constitute “a narrative which relates to nothing” (Nattiez 1990: 245). However, Adorno’s comment appears to refer to a traditional definition of ‘narrative’ in the narrow sense of a ‘story’ told in words. Indeed, music as a nonverbal medium seems not to relate to anything outside itself. Yet this constraint does not mean that the music is devoid of narrativity and cannot be read in a narrative way.

introduced in chapter two. In this understanding, a narrative always presupposes certain subject positions in the way it addresses the listener or reader.

Narratology was modelled after de Saussure’s structural linguistics, which comprised of semiology as part of a general psychology. In this theoretical framework, Roland Barthes originally searched for a descriptive model for the structural analysis of narrative, which was founded in linguistics and deductive from language. But the model he envisioned was intended to reach further than the analysis of literary texts or linguistic messages only. Barthes therefore focused on signification, not on the coding systems as such, since he did not want to restrict his analyses to the exchange of linguistic communication.

Many approaches towards music’s presupposed narrativity have been both formulated and criticised in musicology, music semiology, opera theory and most recently, in ‘post-classical’ narratology. The term ‘postclassical narratology’ has been coined by David Herman in order to highlight that contemporary narrative studies have moved away from the structuralist ‘Saussurean’ phase: “Postclassical narratology (which should not be conflated with poststructuralist theories of narrative) contains classical narratology as one of its ‘moments’ but is marked by a profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses; the result is a host of new perspectives on the forms and functions of narrative itself. Further, in its postclassical phase, research on narrative does not just expose the limits but also exploits the possibilities of the older, structuralist models. In much the same way, postclassical physics does not simply discard classical, Newtonian models but rather rethinks their conceptual underpinnings and reassesses their scope of applicability” (Herman 1999: 2-3). Postclassical narratology is perhaps more a project within narratology than a real separate field of study. Its claims on interdisciplinarity are, however, not that very different from structuralist narratology, though it paves the way for alternative concepts and approaches, such as the concept and theory of ‘narrativisation’.
Therefore, another definition of narrativity is needed for the analysis of music in theatre. The concept of narrativisation as a mode of reading then accommodates to a broader understanding of narrative and narrativity than that Genette proposed.

Fludernik’s understanding of narrativisation helps us to relate the question of narrativity to the reader’s propensity to recognise or construct a narrative development in terms of fictionality (Fludernik 1996: 42). Fludernik defines narrativity as dependent on what she calls ‘experientiality’; that is, the evocation of ‘real’ experiences, which, by recognition, offer the reader access to a text. She defines narrativisation then as a particular reading strategy with which the reader reads texts as narrative, constituting narrativity in the reading process (Fludernik 1996: 20). Her notion of narrativisation is primarily based on Jonathan Culler’s idea of ‘naturalization’:

In my reading, which is based on Culler’s process of naturalization, narrativization applies one specific macro-frame, namely that of narrativity, to a text. When readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives – motivated by the generic markers that go with the book. They therefore attempt to re-cognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters, or they try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level. This process of narrativization, of making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it, needs to be located in the dynamic reading process where such interpretative recuperations hold sway (Fludernik 1996: 34).

Fludernik’s contribution to the definition of the concept presents us with a shift of focus in the question of narrativity on the reader. According to this definition, narrativisation constitutes a way for the readers to solve the ‘inconsistencies’ in a text, which would otherwise be ‘unreadable’. Narrativity functions then as a (macro) frame to read and ‘recuperate’ a text as a narrative. This makes narrativity a question of agency exerted by the reader in her or his reading process, rather than a question of a narrator’s authority in the text (as in Genette’s premise). However, Fludernik’s understanding needs to be gauged critically in order to determine how narrativisation is called upon to make meaning, before considering it for the analysis of our listening experiences in music theatre.

I am aware that Fludernik’s notion of narrativisation does not completely suspend the idea of a narrator, though it is of another order than the discussion whether a narrator, explicitly or implied, is constitutive of a narrative, or not. I will come back at this issue at the end of this chapter, when I discuss the concept of narrative voice. However, it must be stressed that the focus of my investigation is not narratives as represented on stage, but narrativisation as a specific mode of interpretation.
In Fludernik’s argument, narrativity as a frame is called upon by the text and its so-called ‘generic markers’, i.e. the ‘natural’ constituents or categories in the text that generate this frame. Fludernik refers to Culler’s notion of ‘naturalization’ in order to indicate that the reader might recognise such constituents to establish a sense of ‘natural telling’ in terms of identifiable actions and event structures. In this way, narrativisation would help the reader to naturalise texts into stories by associating them with what she calls ‘natural stories’. These stories, in turn, call upon a certain degree of the reader’s ‘real’ experiences which are evoked by the text (‘experientiality’, in Fludernik’s terminology). However, the categorisation of natural stories is problematic by itself if it would imply certain universality in the way readers would read narrativised texts into inconsistent texts. This would disregard cultural as much as personal differences. Fludernik, on the contrary, stresses the individual experiences of the reader as a horizon. Narrativising means to her, in essence, to recuperate the text by imposing narrativity as a frame according to what one recognises within the constituent events regarding one’s own lived experience.

Fludernik’s argument about narrativisation and lived experience hinges upon a much older debate about the relation between narrative and meaning. In his landmark essay “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” (1966), Roland Barthes stressed, for instance, the connection between narrative and how we make meaning by claiming narrative’s universality in life. Despite this problematic universality, Barthes’s argument can help us to comprehend how narratives respond to an urge for meaning-making in how we relate to the world:

Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it: beyond the narrational level begins the world, other systems (social, economic, ideological) whose terms are no longer simply narratives but elements of a different substance (historical facts, determinations,behaviours, etc.). Just as linguistics stops at the sentence, so narrative analysis stops at discourse – from there it is necessary to shift to another semiotics (115-6).

The consequence of Barthes’s argument is that narrativity answers to a fundamental need for meaning in our relation to the world or to any object for that matter. Barthes, moreover, places our inclinations towards meaning in relation to what can be known from life and from the world. He thereby anchors the propensity to make or read a narrative in discourse. Meaning-making by means of narratives or narration is contained in the cultural discourse that both enables and restrains the way we attribute meaning to our lives and the world we live in.

H. Porter Abbott (2002) extends Barthes’s argument to stress the importance of narratives in our urge to make meaning of our perceptions in general:
Wherever we look in this world, we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding [...]. Accordingly, our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes. And without understanding the narrative, we often feel we don’t understand what we see. We cannot find the meaning. Meaning and narrative understanding are very closely connected (11).

The close connection between narrative and meaning explains how humans have an indispensable urge to grasp and make sense of their experiences. This should not suggest that meaning and narrative are identical. On the contrary, narrativity here is regarded as a specific strategy for coming to terms with experience. As such, this understanding could offer an answer to the impasse between experience and interpretation. It stresses that narrativisation as a mode of interpreting always implies a relation between the perceiver and the world.

As a particular mode of reading, narrativisation can account for a sense of narrativity in our perception of music to the extent that the urge to interpret calls upon the listener’s world of experience. Fludernik’s concept of narrativisation explains how the listener makes meaning in relation to her or his familiarity with certain elements in a text that call upon narrativity as a reference frame. In the context of music theatre, however, the question is to what extent we can distinguish comparable elements as objects of our experience that call upon our familiarity and ‘real’ experiences outside the music. To answer this question, I propose to relate the notion of narrativisation to the arguments of specifically two scholars, Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Werner Wolf, who have broadened its scope specifically for the analysis of music. Among other scholars, I develop their perspectives further in the analysis of my case studies.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1990) claims a relationality of music to other constituents or ‘objects’ that call for a narrative reading, which he argues for at first in most general terms: “An object of any kind takes on meaning for an individual apprehending that object, as soon as that individual places the object in relation to areas of his lived experience – that is, in relation to a collection of other objects that belong to his or her experience of the world” (9). Nattiez emphasises the role of ‘other objects’ as part of the perceiver’s life experience. This would imply that, for the purpose of music theatre, we should look at how the music takes on meaning in correspondence with other elements in the performance. Familiarity and experience, thereby, do not diminish the importance of the object’s immediate context for narrativisation, or in this case the context of the music performance.

Werner Wolf (2002) agrees with Nattiez and Fludernik that experience is an essential condition in the way the listener narrativises music: “In this way, namely, the music opens up a space, which each listener can fill in narratively
The Frequency of Imagination

according to [her or] his realm of experience” (83; my translation, PV).114

However, Wolf emphasises the space that the music creates on its own by calling upon its connection to the world of the listener’s personal experience, rather than by relating it to other objects. He thereby stresses the role of the listener, who turns raw sensations into structures through narrativisation, which depends on her or his earlier experiences.

If we relate both these arguments to Fludernik’s position, we can tentatively conclude that narrativisation of music can be conceptualised as a mode of interpretation that necessitates both the engagement of a listener and inherent aspects in the music or the theatre performance that generate this mode. Hence, I propose to examine narrativisation as a category of perception that suggests a connection with the modes of listening I have discussed so far.

In doing so, I analyse to what extent the perspectives in music theatre fulfil a similar function as, what Fludernik calls, the ‘generic’ markers that attune the listener through familiarity, expectation and recognition into a narrative mode of listening.

The notion of narrativisation helps me further to demonstrate how listening modes, as ways of relating to music theatre, involve processes of signification that make use of idiosyncratic experiences as well as discursive structures. As we have seen, these modes of relating can be implied as subject positions in the performance that are generated and managed through perspectives. The causal listening mode, for instance, helps the listener to trace back the sounds spatially and interpret the information they may contain, according to her or his experiences with proximity, density, movement, texture. However, causal listening in itself does not explain what the sound does to the listener and why it does so. Rather than looking for causes or origins in a certain listening environment, the listener looks for relations guided by the question: What does the sound mean to me? Causal listening relates the sound in an immediate environment to the listener, which in turn affects her or his sense of self. Narrativisation, as a very specific listening mode, could, likewise, explain how we appropriate sound or music by anchoring each in a narrative that provides a meaningful structure to this relation between ourselves and the sound or the music.

Seen this way, narrativisation appears to provide temporary resolution, a sense of ‘closure’ to the listener in coping with the inconsistencies, disruptions or insufficiencies in her or his auditory experiences. As I have already introduced, these gaps in listening materialise in a semiotic ‘remainder’, which

---

114 German original: “Damit nämlich eröffnet die Musik Projektionsflächen, die jeder Hörer nach Maßgabe seiner eigenen Erfahrungswelt narrativ auffüllen kann” (Wolf 2002: 83). The psychological term ‘projection surfaces’ is not common as a concept in English. It suggests a spatial understanding of narrative interpretation in terms of the ‘projection’ of subjective associations, and thereby, of the self. The listener’s ‘world’ of experiences also suggests this spatial aspect of interpreting music as narrative.
causes auditory distress. Narrativisation then brings a structure and temporary closure to the semiotic remainder. Narrative closure conveys a particular feeling of satisfaction to desire, relief to suspense and clarity to confusion (Abbott 2002: 60). However, the narrative structure or coherence that the listener subjectively creates by means of the process of narrativisation is not identical to the closure that it brings to auditory distress. Narrative closure does not necessarily mean to close up any new meanings that the performance can evoke in the listener through burgeoning on a semiotic remainder.

In chapter two, I introduced Kramer’s idea that semiotic listening should not smooth out the excess, nor exhaust the musical remainder in endless conceptualisations. In the current chapter, I contend that narrativisation as a specific semiotic mode of listening fulfils a similar function. The auditory distress caused by music invites the listener to take up a position that provokes a connection with both a cultural discourse and personal, lived experiences. Narrativisation, then, offers a way for the listener to find structure and resolution in order to make the auditory distress meaningful by connecting the music (or any sound, for that matter) to other constituents in the performance and to aspects of her or his realm of experience. Here, I intend to show how the perspective of focalization – an ‘implied listener’ as a particular subject position – plays upon these extra-musical relations and references within a music theatre performance.

In what follows, I will develop my argument about narrativity and narrativisation of music in the theatre further through a case study, *De Overstroming* (2002), directed by Peter Van Kraaij for LOD (formerly Het Muziek Lod) and Het Net.\(^{115}\) The performance aims at bringing music, text and imagery together as three separate parts or versions of what could be called a ‘narrative’. I argue that through the juxtaposition of music and text, an excess of meaning is produced, which is channelled through the perspective of focalization. This perspective is given through a verbal, narrative text, which provokes the listener to apply a narrative reading onto the music pieces by Jan Kuijken. The music then cultivates a semiotic remainder in relation to the text: it creates an excess, which makes the meaning of a musical narrative more ambiguous. Using several aspects from *De Overstroming*, I illustrate how one can analyse the ‘impulses’ in the listener to narrativise the acoustic events in response to auditory distress. This can be achieved through the specific structure of address in the perspectives that a text or the listening situation itself provides. I thereby regard narrativisation as an interpretative strategy that helps the listener to process the auditory intensities and create

\(^{115}\) Besides an earlier version in 2000, the performance of *De Overstroming* that I discuss here premiered on 7 February 2002 in the Bottelarij (Brussels), where I also enjoyed the opportunity of seeing it. The production had a relatively short tour, with performances in Amsterdam and Tilburg in March 2002.
meaning by filling in the gaps and bringing the musical sounds in relation to a context, a lived experience and ultimately, a cultural discourse.

2. *De Overstroming*: An Excess of Narratives in Text and Music

The motto to *De Overstroming* in the programme folder reads: “Do you see the story? Do you see anything?” taken from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As intertextual reference, this epigraph asks for a careful examining ‘eye’ in relation to what one can perceive as narrative in the performance. It preludes the self-reflexivity of the performance towards its address on the listener that aims to activate a highly focused mode of *listening-in-search* of a story of some kind to some degree. It is to be expected that these questions cause a narrative mode of interpreting the music theatre performance, but not without scepticism. The query moreover explicitly addresses a ‘you’, implying a listener or reader as addressee. As a specific response to this address, I pose narrativisation as a compelling mode of listening with which the listener can position her or himself in relation to what she or he sees, or rather, does not see in the performance. In doing so, I propose *De Overstroming* as an illustration of how narrativisation helps the listener to make the auditory distress meaningful.

As for the question *Do you see anything?*, the performance does not offer as much for the eye as to the ear. The setting for the unfolding story (or stories) is an abstract, black-box theatre. Angled mirrors hang down in the background of the dimly lit stage, reflecting squares of bright light onto the floor. Gradually, the squares turn into blurred image projections of natural elements (by Erik Nerinckx). Actress Yvonne Wiewel moves silently between those reflections and shadows, and awaits her cue to begin her monologue. Sounding somewhat agitated, though in a detached way, she recounts as if she is trying to remember the words that are not her own. Throughout the performance, musician and composer Jan Kuijken sits in a dark corner on the right side of the stage, where he plays the cello in front of a minimally lit music stand. He improvises along with pre-composed and pre-recorded musical materials, distributed across eight loudspeakers, which are also visible to the audience. At times, Kuijken’s music overlays or disrupts the actress’s speech, while his visual presence resides in the background as much as possible. This context, visually deprived in part, sets the stage for enhancing the listener’s auditory distress caused by Jan Kuijken’s music. I want to argue that, in such a context, any musical narrative can only materialise in the listener when the performance offers perspectives that stimulate for a narrative way of listening. Kuijken’s live performance on the cello ‘musicalises’ the stage in such a way as to obscure a clear, coherent story or narrative in the listener.
Despite this, the performance employs a text that casts a perspective and plays upon the expectations of the listener to narrativise the acoustic events: *Die Überschwemmung* (1963), a short story by the Austrian author Peter Handke. This text plays upon the question *Do you see the story?* On the surface, the story recounts two brothers standing by the side of a river. One brother is blind and the other tells what he sees in the first person (*I*-narrator). The blind brother listens carefully and considers what he is told, which is the only access to 'reality' he has. Gradually, as the description develops, the images grow out of proportion: a dead gnat appears to be swimming in the water; a dead pig floats by; two children appear to be clutching to a stone and are screaming as the river rises continually. *De Overstroming*, then, illustrates how a narrator can offer distrustful metaphors of perception, and how one narrative account can produce many different, subjective readings. The descriptions of the seeing brother call for a comparison of what is probable in our everyday reality and what deviates from what we (can) accept in relation to the cultural discourse and knowledge of our world. In doing so, *De Overstroming* plays with the reliability of narrating and the possibility of imagining what is being told by means of mental representations of the world. Looking and listening become gradually opposed to each other, as the blind brother does not believe what the seeing brother describes.

The scepticism towards what gradually becomes a narrative in the text is already evident from the beginning:

*A man stands in the river, says I. He stands in the midst of scree and holds his head lowered; his arms hang down by his sides. Apparently he has climbed from the bank on which we sit, into the riverbed, and slowly walked over the stones to the water; because we are so far away from him, he appears to stand directly in front of the waves: with one step he would be up to his knees in water, with another the river would tear him away. He certainly isn’t standing as near as that, however, rather a couple [of] meters farther back; so he ought to be able to hear me. He won’t hear you, my brother [says]. Call him. No, [says] I. Is he looking at something? he [asks]. I don’t know, [says] I. I only see him from behind. The outline of his face is so light in the sun that I can’t tell a thing. Perhaps his eyes are closed. He has walked over the stones and stands there and dozes on the riverbend. You’re lying, my brother [says]. There isn’t any man in the river at all* (Handke, trans. Lance Olsen 1979: 5; my alterations, PV).

As the accumulation of descriptions starts to ‘flood’, the listener (or reader) begins to doubt the truth-value of the narrated events. Barthes (1966) has claimed that every single element has a signifying function in the narrative,

---

116 Peter Handke’s *Überschwemmung* was translated as “The Flood” by Lance Olsen in *Chicago Review* 31:1 (Summer 1979) to which I will refer with some minor changes. A Dutch translation, entitled *De Overstroming* by Gerrit Bussink, was used in the performance; hence the title.
even the unnecessary events (Barthes’s so-called ‘supplementary events’ for the sake of the story). Gradually these unnecessary and rather imaginative descriptions start to ‘flood’. The rising river in the title then becomes a metaphor for the imagination going astray, propelled by a narration of an ‘unreliable’ narrator. In the same vein, the title ‘the flood’ suggests an accumulation that ends in excess. This idea could be extended to the main thesis of my research, namely that sound and music cause auditory distress to the listener through an excess of intensities, urging the listener to respond. This response can as much help to solve the auditory distress as to imbue the listener with scepticism.

Seen this way, I propose to read *De Overstroming* as a metaphor for the excess that underlies not only any listening experience, but also any *act* or *event* of storytelling. This excess materialises in a semiotic remainder, which in turn urges the listener to respond and channel the excess in her or his modes of interpretation. Through *De Overstroming*, I will demonstrate how narrativisation is one specific mode that enables the listener to regain control over the excess in listening and, consequently, the semiotic remainder. I introduced the latter concept in the previous chapter to explain why our responses in listening are also imbued with and propelled by a search for meaning in an endless commutability of signifieds that fill in the gaps of our perceptions. According to Hubert Damisch, the remainder is ambiguous or least to say, paradoxical: “always both gap and excess, lack and substance, it is a positive kernel of non-sense that keeps us coming back to the artwork” (Kramer 2002: 171). Though, as Kramer suggests, this mechanism lies at the heart of making sense of a musical artwork; it also suggests a specific boundary to music in its claims on narrativity. Comparable to the open ending of Handke’s text at the moment when the flooding reaches its highest peak, music’s semiotic remainder necessitates an endless commutability of the signified, as described by Silverman, with “the assumption that the play of meaning has no necessary closure, no transcendental justification” (Silverman 1983: 41). The excess of narratives between text and music leaves the listener or reader with an unresolved feeling of an incomplete ending.

Consequently, the performance of Handke’s text could be read as a demonstration of how a narrative comes into existence through the process of an explorative and imaginative mode of listening, a *listening-in-search*, to the point that it questions itself. It thereby demonstrates that any musical ‘récit’ is always in a state of crisis due to its underlying excess to any meaning or narrativisation that it might evoke. This crisis materialises in a sense of scepticism in the listener surrounding – and yet inherent to – the narrativisation of music. As such, the case study illustrates both the function and the limits of narrativising music.

The scepticism towards narrativising music is set by Handke’s short story: despite the apparent narrative development, the ambiguity of the events
described by the I-narrator question the validity of the story through the eyes of the seeing brother. In the performance, the text provides the framework (like a ‘paratext’ in the Genetian sense) for comparison and application of a narrative reading to Kuijken’s music, depending on the listener’s expectations. The accumulation of narrative events in Handke’s text can create the expectation in the listener to read the music subsequently as an applied narrative with a comparable accumulation of events, that is to say, musical or auditory events. After a semi-dramatic recitation of the short story by the actress, Kuijken’s partly improvised, partly pre-recorded composition – a suite for eight speakers – produces auditory events that can produce a similar effect of a flood as in the story. The music seems to start off from an empty page like Handke’s writing, and gradually establish motives, gestures and phrases in a ‘free play’ of musical ideas. In a perceptual sense, the music could cause an excess of auditory intensities which challenges a semiotic mode of listening, as the narrative of the text does not completely apply to the listening experience in order to resolve the caused auditory distress.

Do you see the story? Do you see anything? These initial questions prefigure the discussion on narrativity of music and sound in theatre. In the following paragraphs, I begin by explaining how narrativisation can help to discuss a music theatre performance such as De Overstroming, which at first sight appears to disrupt and question its own narrative development in its use of verbal texts. I then show how through its perspectives, the performance manages the listener’s attention to such an extent that it cannot evoke anything but a narrative reading of the music. For this purpose, I propose to critically assess the field of narratology as a conceptual toolbox for the analysis of our auditory experiences in music theatre as complementary to the modes of listening. Within this toolbox, I focus on three concepts: narrative impulse, focalization and narrative space. In relation to these concepts, I demonstrate how narrativisation as a mode of listening is incited as an ‘impulse’ in the listener by certain perspectives in the text, the music and the performance. I then explain how this narrative impulse is especially instigated by focalization, which can serve as a particular perspective or ‘point’ in listening that presupposes narrativity in terms of an implied subject position for the listener to take up. Finally, I conceptualise this subject position in spatial terms by showing how focalization can generate a frame that helps the listener to distinguish the physical, presentational space of the stage and the music performance from representational spaces, including narrative space.

The term ‘paratext’ was coined by Gérard Genette in his Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (1987; 1997). The notion, by definition, contains the additional elements or textual materials that are needed to frame and understand the narrative (Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory 2005; 2008: 419). Traditionally in novels, these elements include the titles, epigraphs, prefaces, afterwords, etc. In De Overstroming, Handke’s text could be regarded as a preface to Kuijken’s music, giving rise to comparison and application of the former’s narrative.
2.1. The Narrative Impulse

In the staging of Peter Handke’s short story in *De Overstroming*, the text does not only demonstrate how a narrative comes about. It also creates a framework for the listener to apply the narrative to Kuijken’s music. The frame for narrativisation is already prepared in the opening scene by means of another text in English, preceding Handke’s narrative text: the poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1938; first published 1940) by W.H. Auden.

Auden’s poetic text could be understood as having meta-textual relevance within the narrative context of *De Overstroming*. The poem reveals a narrative reading of Pieter Brueghel’s painting *The Fall of Icarus* (ca.1558). Through the reading of the detail of Icarus falling into the water, the story begins to appear in the painting. In the context of the performance, the poem could create the anticipation to read also the music with a keen and imaginative ear that narrativises them. The story of the falling Icarus in the painting of the old Flemish master then discloses an intertextual map for reading the music performance narratively. Auden’s poem evokes the first impulse in the attentive listener to read a narrative into Kuijken’s music composition, which becomes a hypertext in the accumulation of texts.\(^{118}\)

The opening scene illustrates how a text can address the listener in such a way that it invites her or him to read narrative content into nonverbal expressions, such as in a painting. This suggests that a narrative reading can also be applied to a piece of music. Simultaneous to Yvonne Wiewel’s recitation of the poem, Jan Kuijken plays the cello with an accompanying, acousmatic music piece for loudspeakers with increasing volume. The music, however, disrupts the narrative reading in the poem, engulfing the words. Apart from its connotative function of raising attention similar to a musical ‘overture’, the music functions here literally as a sound wall with escalating levels of auditory distress as it aims to gradually disturb both the reading and the listener’s pursuit of making sense of the poem. The music creates an excess of auditory intensities that overflows the linguistic text and drowns the actress’s voice. One could claim that the listener’s attention to the poem is disrupted by this excess in the simultaneity of text (voice) and music. This

\(^{118}\) Eero Tarasti (2004) discusses a dynamic between two paradigms in time, memory and expectation: ‘In the time dimension, again, two paradigms come into play: the paradigm of memory, which means the accumulation of musical events in the memory of a listener, and the paradigm of expectations, which of course reach their high point at the beginning of the piece’ (294-5). In the overture to *De Overstroming*, the listener is gradually prepared to bring these paradigms in connection with one another by relating the text of the poem and the short story – that trigger certain expectations – to the accumulation of musical events as a memorial trace. Kuijken’s music could then be understood as a hypertext, in the Genettean sense: “[…] a text that builds on or contains traces of an earlier text, the hypotext” (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* 2005; 2008: 229). While searching for meaning in listening to Kuijken’s semi-improvised music, the listener could make associations with Auden’s poem and Handke’s short story in an applied sense.
excess is, moreover, heightened by the emptiness and darkness of the stage, thus creating a situation of partial visual deprivation.

Gradually, the visually deprived performance space is filled with suggestive images. One sequence of images represents a cinematic countdown projected on the surface of the stage, as if marking the beginning of a silent (or ‘mute’) movie. In this way, text and image invite the listener to apply narrative elements to the music as a way to read it, perhaps as a soundtrack to the text, which slowly moves to the foreground. Following the recital of Auden’s poem, the music piece is immediately repeated in its entirety, thereby receiving full attention. The first time the music plays, the listener most likely feels overwhelmed by the simultaneity of music and text, which could evoke a rather dispersed mode of listening. On this second hearing, she or he is able to focus more on the music piece. The listener might connect the auditory input recursively to bits and pieces of Auden’s poem, the title ‘De Overstroming’, the projected images, or the epigraph in the programme brochure. In an applied sense, following an old musical code of baroque music drama, one could suddenly hear the fall of Icarus reflected mimetically in the descending tonal scale from the high notes to the lower tones in the sounding cello score. Nonetheless, one could question whether the music can really instigate narrativisation by itself, as it receives its meaning in relation to other elements, such as imagery and text.

The issue of narrativity with regard to music has always been problematic. There is and has been a great deal of scepticism about methodologies that try to capture music’s narrativity by expanding the definition of narrative that would locate it in the music itself. One of the main objections is that music is not genuinely semantic in the way language is; thus, music can never generate a narrative in a straightforward manner. John Neubauer (1997), for instance, has expressed his scholarly doubt about music’s claims on narrativity precisely because of his insistence on language. His perspective, however, could cast a light on both the possibilities and limitations of narrativity in instrumental music:

Though instrumental music is incapable of narrating, it can enact stories: it can show even if it cannot tell, it can suggest plot, for instance in terms of themes and thematic development. Its most common verbal and rhetorical metaphor, namely voice, suggests that it can also enact metaphoric dialogues between instruments (Neubauer qtd. in Wolf 2002: 80).

Neubauer refers to the concept of a ‘musical voice’ in line with Carolyn Abbate’s Unsung Voices (1996) as an unrealised voice in music, appropriating the human voice without words. Neubauer’s idea of narrating depends rather on a narrow sense of the word, namely as telling in language. He models narrativity of instrumental music on the way literary texts and verbal languages narrate. Consequently, music would never really tell anything
specific. Neubauer’s assertion of language as the basis for narration leads him to conclude that music is not narrative in itself. He does, however, acknowledge music’s ability to suggest or provoke a sense of narrativity in terms of plot, which he locates in the musical development. As such, music can give the suggestion that it enacts or performs a story, though it cannot tell a story of its own.

As *De Overstroming* demonstrates, because music cannot tell as verbal narratives like Handke’s text do, the assumed narratives that the music would perform as such can always be questioned. Kuijken’s music pieces illustrate such self-questioning of narrativity in music. As is common to musical counterpoint, the suite gives an impression of dialogues between voices, between the ‘voice’ of the cello and the recorded ‘voices’ of other instruments. In the context of the recording, the attentive listener could feel an urge to retrace the instrumental sources in a mode of causal listening (like a piano, a violin, a trumpet, a clarinet, etc.). In a narrative mode of listening, yet, she or he reflects on their meaning within the structure of the performance. Due to the acousmatic listening situation, the sound of the instruments also becomes more abstract, producing metaphorical ‘absent’ voices that try to tell something, complete each other’s phrases or musical sentences, or enact dialogues. The performance of the music piece could dissolve in the background in favour of a sense of narrativity, addressing the listener. The music thus unfolds as a performance of narrativity without really telling anything directly, but inviting the listener to narrativise.\(^\text{119}\)

However, by shifting the question of narrativity to the narrativising efforts of the listener, the definition of narrative can be detached from language, while retaining its relation to signification. According to Lawrence Kramer (2002), the fact that music does not communicate as an initially nonsemantic medium in as straightforward a manner as verbal language does not imply that its products cannot engage or evoke meaning (146). Since narrativity gives way to meaning, it does not simply follow from the above criticisms that music cannot engage in narrativity or narrative meaning. Narrativity, on the contrary, encloses a way for the reader to make meaningful relations, coherence and structure. The music pieces in *De Overstroming*, then, do not merely present us with music’s insufficiency to tell a comprehensible story.

\(^{119}\) Cone suggests that even in the ‘wordless’ musical voices we can infer words in relation to an absent human singing voice: “Only our deliberate effort supplies the melody with words. Only our imagination turns the instrumental line into a singing voice that wishes to remain wordless. If we are willing to let the words go, if we can forget the singing voice, we listen in a different way, and what we hear is different” (Cone 1974: 78). I return to the latter aspect later in this chapter, when I deal with oral and literate modes of listening. However, these susions to fill in words in our imagination only apply when words are usually expected. In *De Overstroming* the instrumental voices could reflect the voices of the brothers in Handke’s story, though it is unsure what they are saying, if not irrelevant. As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, verbalisation is not obligatory for having a sense of narrativity when listening to and imagining musical voices.
Rather, the fundamental insufficiency invites the listener to imbue the musical experience with narrative meaning as a response, aimed at resolving the sense of insufficiency. In so doing, music could give the listener the suggestion to look for meanings in relation to other objects of experience, such as texts and images, which also always exceed those meanings because of the semiotic remainder that music constitutes. Music thereby plays upon the listener’s urge to interpret and thereby give a sense of coherence as a way to cope with the insufficiency for which narrativisation can give temporary solace.

This idea of an urge for interpretation helps Nattiez (1990) to formulate the narrative impulse in the listener in terms of an ‘incitement’ that can be invoked by the music:

Human beings are symbolic animals; confronted with a trace they will seek to interpret it, to give it meaning. We ascribe meaning by grasping the traces we find, artworks that ensue from a creative act. This is exactly what happens with music. Music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative, to comment, to analyze (128).

The incitement gives way to a narrative impulse in the listener, which Nattiez conceptualises as a ‘trace’ in the work itself. However, he emphasises the role of the listener who feels addressed to respond. For Nattiez, music’s inclinations towards narrativity therefore constitute an inferred narrativity (Nattiez 1990: 245; Wolf 2002: 94), depending on the listener’s response:

If the listener, in hearing music, experiences the susions of what I would like to call the narrative impulse, this is because he or she hears (on the level of strictly musical discourse) recollections, expectations, and resolutions, but does not know what is expected, what resolved. The listener will be seized by a desire to complete, in words, what music does not say, because music is incapable of saying it (Nattiez 1990: 128).

Despite music’s inability to tell a story in the way a verbal text does, it can bring about an impulse in the listener to narrativise. Thus, one should differentiate between being a narrative and generating a sense of narrativity as a way to respond to an excess and insufficiency in listening. The latter calls for narrativisation as a semiotic mode of listening, a listening-in-search for meaning.

However, Nattiez’s argument above still assumes a dependence on language or words as a basis for narrativisation. In his view, the narrative impulse involves a desire to translate into words which would assist in conceptualising and grasping music’s appeal to narrativity: “Thus I have a wish to complete through words what the music does not say because it is not in its semiological nature to say it to me” (Nattiez 1990: 244-45). Due to music’s semantic insufficiency, the interpretation of it would compel such a
The Frequency of Imagination

verbalisation, which generally impels metaphors in the analysis and 
communication of narrative meanings that the music might invoke. Elsewhere 
Nattiez abandons the necessity of this idea and underscores that such verbal 
translation and fixation of music’s potential meanings in metaphors should not 
be a basis for grasping music’s narrativity. Methodologically, narrative 
analysis may require that we remain specific by translating our perceptions and 
interpretations into words. Yet meaning should not be confused with 
verbalisation, as Nattiez argues: they are two different types of symbolisation 
(Nattiez 1990: 124). A verbal translation that is produced in an analysis does 
not necessarily verify music’s claims on narrativity in our listening 
experiences, and vice versa. In addition, the difficulty of creating a specific 
verbal description holds for every attempt to interpret an auditory experience. 
When we want to communicate our experience, we inevitably turn to 
metaphors. Yet that does not explain the sense of narrativity in the 
interpretation of music as such.

Nattiez’s concept of the narrative impulse is useful to describe the 
listener’s role in narrativisation. At the same time, it locates a sense of 
narrativity as a trace in the specific address of music to the listener (which 
would suggest that certain music is more likely to address narrative 
interpretations than others). The sense of narrativity in music relies on the 
impulse in the listener to respond to an excess of intensities and a lack of 
meaning that music evokes. Seen this way, narrativity in music should be 
understood as an implied position, which the listener can choose to take up. 
The narrative impulse implies a subject position that stimulates the listener to 
interpret the music narratively. Yet, as I explained in the previous chapter, the 
listener does not have to be consciously aware of the implied positions in the 
music or its performance, which make the listener respond in a certain way. 
Therefore, one could question to what degree the music really generates a 
narrative mode of listening in the listener as a response, and to what degree the 
listener independently chooses ‘narrative activity’ (Newcomb 1987) as a way 
to make sense.

De Overstroming offers a demonstration of how narrativity of music can 
be questioned in relation to the listener’s impulse to engage with the music in a 
narrative interpretation. The self-awareness that the performance evokes 
thereby also affects the role of the listener, who feels addressed to listen 
acutely and to look for meanings in relation to the textual narrative of Peter 
Handke’s short story. By placing the story at the centre, the performance 
demonstrates one essential aspect of the listener’s impulse to narrativise the 
events: it is less the narrator (the seeing brother), but rather the focalizer, who 
constitutes the impulse by revealing a point-of-view on what is to be seen and 
believed in the narrative (the blind brother). The text thereby shifts from being 
a narrative to evoking narrativity, which puts any narrativisation under 
scrutiny.
In the following subsections, I engage further with De Overstroming to discuss how the narratological concept of focalization can contribute as a tool to analyse the impulses for narrativisation in the listener in her or his engagement with a music theatre performance. I first propose to extend the traditional narratological definition of focalization for the purpose of the theatre. I then relate this notion to Chion’s ‘point of listening’ or ‘point of audition’ in order to show how focalization could be conceptualised as an implied listening position that invites the listener to interpret a musical performance in a narrative way. Ultimately, I focus on how the spatial aspect of focalization can serve as a specific perspective in the theatre, contributing to a sense of narrative space (including fictional and diegetic spaces).

2.2. The Blind Perspective: Focalization as Point of Listening

In chapter two, I argued how a perspective manages the listener’s attention in terms of an implied, discursive position. A perspective channels the way the listener makes meaningful experiences by allowing her or him to position her or himself to the auditory distress. I also suggested that a perspective can imply an ‘ideal’ point of listening for the listener. Such a perspective suggests an ‘implied listener’ in terms of a subject position to which the listener can relate. In narrative theory, however, a similar position for the reader has been theorised in terms of focalisation. I propose to relate this notion here to explain how a sense of narrativity can be embedded in the music theatre performance in terms of an implied position for the listener to take up. I argue that such an implied position is indispensible for the listener’s impulse to narrativise music.

In narrative theory, focalization traditionally assumes a visual perspective, a point of view, that determines the way the narrative is presented to the reader. Mieke Bal (1985) defines it in terms of ‘vision’:

Focalization is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing. Sometimes that difference is void, e.g. when the reader is presented with a vision as directly as possible. The different agents then cannot be isolated, they coincide (104).

In this definition, focalization reveals the way in which the elements of a story are presented, which in narratology is generally defined as the ‘fabula’.120
According to Bal, focalization is the “vision of the fabula” (Bal 1985: 100). It often introduces a subject or agent, a focalizer, as the point from which the represented elements (objects, events, characters) in a narrative text are viewed (104). The focalizer is embedded in the narrative content of the text. It is an image of the implied reader, an agent through which perspective the reader sees the unfolding of the events.

In the recitation of Handke’s short story in De Overstroming, the spectator becomes an ‘overhearer’ who identifies with the blind brother by engaging with the narrative discourse of the text. The listener (or reader) could be said to be implied in the text through the figure of the blind brother, who, in narratological terms, is the focalizer. Following the above definition, one might first be tempted to believe that in the story, the focalizer is the seeing brother, since it is literally through his eyes that the events unfold. However, the story plays with a discrepancy between what one sees and what one hears through the two brothers. The seeing brother describes to the blind brother what is to be seen. Yet the sceptical perspective of the blind brother triggers doubts in the reader’s and, by implication, the listener’s ear. Through the blind brother’s point of view, the narrative communication slowly turns into disbelief as he distances himself from what is described by the seeing brother as his ‘direct vision’. This creates a shifting focalization between the I-narrator and narratee (that is, the narrator’s audience), which explains the confusion about whom we should trust. This mechanism is generally referred to in narrative theory as ‘unreliable narrator’ and ‘narrative irony’.

The context of the black-box theatre where an actress recites the story adds another layer to this shifting focalization. The actress recites Handke’s narrative text in a distant way, which adds a perspective of estrangement to the recounted events. Her ‘distressed’ recitation as a narrator disrupts an engaged way of storytelling, which highlights not only her narration but also the focalizer of the story. In so doing, the performance shows how perspectives can influence the way we see and hear the events. In this context, the ‘blind brother’ who, deprived of vision, retains a sceptical ear is a useful metaphor for the listener in music theatre. His critical attitude towards the vivid descriptions of his seeing brother also applies to the listener in the audience.

According to Mieke Bal, however, a distinction should be made between, “on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision” (Bal 1985: 100-1). The latter pertains to the authority of the narrative voice, which I discuss later in this chapter.
Like the blind brother, the spectator’s imagination depends on the way the perspectives of the theatre channel what is to be seen and heard, and how she or he interprets it all. However, in this type of music theatre, like most post-dramatic theatre performance, the uncertainty about the regulative mechanisms of the perspectives is enhanced. This scepticism can be extended to the narrativisation of the music.

Through the focalization of the blind brother, *De Overstroming* demonstrates how an implied reader’s position in a text can generate a narrative impulse for the implied listener. Rather than producing a point of view, the performance shows specifically how focalization can generate a point of listening, which stimulates the listener to narrativise the auditory experiences in relation to other elements in the performance. Michel Chion has developed the idea of a point of listening for film sound in terms of a point of audition. This notion pertains to sound in cinema in the first place. However, I want to reconsider it here for the purposes of analysing our experiences of sound and music in the theatre.

Chion (1994) coins the term point of audition specifically as a correlate to point of view. He infers two meanings to his notion, which are not always necessarily related:

1. A spatial sense: from where do I hear, from what point in the space represented on the screen or on the soundtrack?

Chion’s two-fold definition confirms that our relation to sound in film is interdependent with the ways the sounds are presented, bringing a spatial or a subjective perspective to our auditory experiences and listening attention. As such, Chion’s point of audition offers a concept of listening, which stands in a direct relation to the visual image in cinema.122

For the theatre, the application of Chion’s concept needs caution as sound and music stand in a more direct relation to images than in cinema. In cinema, camera positions and microphones generally mediate a point of audition, which necessarily must be obliterated from the observer’s mental representation (Chion 1994: 93) in order to secure the illusion and a homogeneous story world. In theatre, however, a point of listening as perspective is always implied in the way the acoustic events are presented.123

---

122 According to Chion, the subjective sense of point of listening demonstrates the intricate relation to the visual image: “In the second, subjective sense of point of audition, we find the same phenomenon as that which operates for vision. It is the visual representation of a character in close-up that, in simultaneous association with the hearing of sound, identifies this sound as being heard by the character shown” (Chion 1994: 91).

123 That is, when no cinematisation of the theatre stage is intended through embedding the medium of, for instance, film projections.
Showing the processes of mediation in the theatre (such as loudspeakers, a musician on the stage) does not make narrativisation of the auditory experience unattainable, though they might evoke a more conscious perception. This illustrates that a perspective in listening should primarily be located in the music or sound in relational terms with the (implied) listener, for which the representational function is only secondary.

As for a spatial relation, in the first sense, the point from where the listener is listening in the auditorium is most often fixed throughout the whole performance. Spatialisation of sound or music conveys a certain (re)production of space that influences the way the listener perceives it. Yet a spatial sense is always conveyed in the sounds or music, which does not require electroacoustical manipulation at all. As for the subjective relation, in the second sense, the point of audition reveals our position in a story world through a character. Though instrumental music could ‘enact’ a sense of virtual voices in a narrative mode of listening, it is difficult to regard a proper narrative perspective in these voices in terms of focalization. If one can distinguish characters as virtual personae in instrumental music, it would still be very difficult, if possible at all, to state that they listen to what we hear. A different interpretation might be when we are dealing with vocal personae as characters or ‘actors’, as I discuss later in this chapter. Nonetheless, the subjective point of listening establishes an iconic relation between what one sees and what one hears, creating a frame in which to interpret the sounds or the music.

Both the subjective and the spatial sense play a significant role in focalization when it concerns our auditory experiences in the theatre. As narrative theory has suggested, focalization manages how we perceive what is represented in the narrative, which implies a spatial as well as a culturally specific perspective through which we are invited to identify ourselves with. In the theatre, the spatial aspect implies the role of the theatrical frame. The latter also affects the way we perceive the space where the narrativisation takes place, giving us clues about what to focus on in looking and listening. As a result of this framing, as I propose to discuss next, the spectator produces different spaces depending on her or his narrativisations in order to contain the music or the sounds. This production of a ‘narrative space’ could then be understood in relation to an implied subject position contained by focalization.

---

124 Bal argues for a similar function of narrative space as a place where the action takes place; however, she also points out that it might be the ‘acting place’ itself (Bal 1985: 95). Hence, for the purpose of my study, I make a distinction between the actual performance space, the space of the narrating (fictional space) and the space where the narration takes place (diegetic space).
2.3. Framing Narrative Space

In her research on theatrical space as ‘Bedeutungsraum’ (Peter Handke), Gay McAuley (1999) distinguishes the ways in which we perceive space in the theatre in terms of a physical or ‘presentational’ space (of the stage) and the fictional space. McAuley proposes the following traditional schema in theatre theory to explain how presentational space can create a fictional universe through vocal and physical action:

![Diagram](McAuley 1999: 136)

Following this schema, drama commonly immerses the reader in a fictional world, without narrational mediation but through the presentational system of the theatre. Drama assists then in creating fictional spaces, not only through vocal and/or verbal action of the voice but also through physical gestures, including vocal gestures, actions and movements made by the performers. Among the fictional spaces, we can also take into account the story world in the case of diegesis.

For the purpose of the present study, we should include sound and music among the nonverbal gestures that create space. Schafer’s soundscape notion has pointed out that sound is always space, which creates either an acoustic horizon (background, ambience) or gives spatial presence to sounds (stimulating an indexical or causal listening). Using McAuley’s model we can consider to what extent these acoustic spaces can contribute to (the representation of) fictional or narrative spaces. The acoustic space should therefore be split into a physical and a representational space, the latter containing the possibility to produce a narrative space (McAuley 1999: 128). Following McAuley, we could then consider three categories of the spectator’s spatial experience in the theatre:

- The physical space that constitutes a frame and contextual clues;
- The mimetic space, or the space of representation;
- The diegetic or narrative space (which also includes the fictional space).

All three spatial categories can be alternately activated in the spectator’s attention. This schema is rudimentary as it focuses on traditional drama,
though McAuley also refers to many other spatial categories such as the energised space between bodies. Her model does, however, not embrace sounds and music for the representation of space (mimetic or diegetic space), or the physical, acoustic space. Nor does it explain how these different kinds of spaces relate to one another: how they can disrupt each other or be present simultaneously. As sound is by nature ‘placeless’, the listening space is much more volatile than McAuley’s model argues.

I want to argue here that, rather than having been prearranged, these spaces depend on our listening modes as being managed by the perspectives or points of listening. What’s more, I wish to illustrate that focalization, as a specific, subjective perspective, is indispensable for activating a narrative way of listening in music theatre. Both the spatial and subjective points of listening in De Overstroming ‘channel’ the listener’s modes of interpretation, depending on how her or his attention is focused on these different spaces. By functioning as a ‘channel’ or a ‘filter’, focalization then offers an implied listener’s position to connect these spaces, which manages the way the actual listener responds to the auditory distress.

De Overstroming demonstrates how focalization in the text, and in the performance of the text, influences the way the listener interprets the music pieces in relation to both spatial and subjective perspectives. In addition, McAuley’s distinctions help us to differentiate between physical and representational spaces in music. Kuijken’s music includes an element of ‘spatialisation’ by means of its distribution over eight loudspeakers: the partly acousmatised, partly de-acousmatised composition plays on different representations of space. Within this spatialisation, an idea resides of how and from what spatial perspective one listens and perceives the representational space in the recorded music. The sense of space conveyed in the recording can however be disrupted at any time by Jan Kuijken’s live improvisations, when

---

125 Peter Rabinowitz (2004) emphasises the listener’s role in narrativity as a propensity to create fictionality in music: “[L]ike fictional narrative, musical fictionality is not a quality found in the text itself but is, rather, a perspective brought to bear on the music by the listener. That is, in literature there are no formal markers that define fictionality in the way that certain formal markers define a poem as a sonnet; rather fictionality, with its characteristic split between authorial and narrative audience, is a way of reading” (Rabinowitz 2004: 318). According to Rabinowitz, it depends on the listener (or ‘type’ of audience) that fictionality is produced as a mode of interpretation. However, I contend that the listener’s perspective is implied as a subject position through focalization to which the listener is invited to relate oneself.

126 I am greatly indebted to an e-mail conversation with Seymour Chatman (11 August 2007) on the Narrative-L list (at Georgetown University) about the possible connotations of focalization as ‘filter’. He drew my attention to the fact that the term ‘filter’ was earlier used in narratological (and pre-narratological) discussion of what has come to be called focalization. Other terms are ‘post of observation’, ‘centre’ or ‘vessel of consciousness’. According to Chatman, ‘filter’ does not suggest any negative connotations of prejudice as does, for instance, ‘slant’. The latter implies an overtone of bias, which would make it more appropriate to describe unreliable narration.
it pulls back the listener unwillingly into the physical space. Hence, the listener’s point of listening depends heavily on the listening attention and accordingly, the modes of listening.

Chion, however, problematises the spatial aspect of the point of audition, in line with his argument that there is no sound frame in itself that can contain all the sounds:

[…] the specific nature of aural perception prevents us, in most cases, from inferring a point of audition in space based on one or more sounds. This is because of the omnidirectional nature of sound (which, unlike light, travels in many directions) and also of listening (which picks up sounds in the round), as well as of phenomena involving sound reflection (Chion 1994: 90).

Music theatre often even highlights the omnidirectionality of sound and auditory perception, as much as it incorporates the acousmatic nature of sound. The acousmatic composition in De Overstroming highlights this by creating auditory distress. It presents us with the all-pervasive nature of sound that thrives on collisions and intrusions, a constant jumble of sound that, upon first hearing, lacks one spatial perspective. Chion’s conclusion is highly relevant for the theatre too: “So it is not often possible to speak of a point of audition in the sense of a precise position in space, but rather of a place of audition, or even a zone of audition” (Chion 1994: 91). The acousmatised musical instruments in Kuijken’s suite can make the listener aware of their seemingly a-topicality, their ventriloquist nature, which urges her or him to link the sounds to a place or a ‘zone’ of listening.

This mechanism of placing the sounds is, in turn, channelled by the perspectives offered, implying positions for the listener to engage in. Both spatial and subjective perspectives in listening can bring temporary coherence to the restlessness of sound, including musical sounds. As I argued earlier, this is related to one’s listening self. A spatial perspective could be realised in terms of a differentiation between foreground and background. Such a perspective suggests a frame that contains and places the sounds, when the listener positions her or himself by discerning certain musical sounds as more frontal in relation to an acoustic background.

Handke’s short story offers the listener a particular point of listening, in the subjective sense. The focalization of the blind brother in the story can metonymically contribute to a fictional space in the music. The ‘eyes’ of the blind brother, so to speak, could become the focalizer for reading the music narratively. In so doing, one could imagine Jan Kuijken as the narrator of his own musical narrative, taking upon the role of the seeing brother in relation to the musical voices of his improvisations. Yet his presence as a potential narrator is not further motivated or significant for narrativisation to materialise as a response to the music. Rather, through comparison and relation with
Handke’s text, the composition generates a narrative impulse in the listener in order to resolve the musical remainder and excess in listening.

Seen this way, Handke’s narrative text is not just a prologue or a paratext that offers a frame to narrativise the musical events. It offers the listener a perspective through focalization in terms of a ‘search light’ with which she or he can read the music in a narrative way. In this reading, however, it remains an open question what belongs and does not belong to the story. As such, Handke’s text presents us with an undeniable narrative about narrating. It opens the listener’s ears to listen critically and question her or his narrativisations, like the blind brother in the story.127 Through the perspective of the blind brother, the narrativisation of the music constitutes an ‘applied’ narrativity with ‘inferred’ meanings and associations: the text prepares the listener and incites her or him to apply it through a narrative mode of listening.

Kuijken’s suite is, however, purely instrumental, thus imposing restraints on the notion of narrativisation in relation to its musical remainder. Consequently, I propose a second case study in which narrativisation is inherently part of the auditory experience and its modes of listening in relation to vocal music: De Helling van de Oude Wijven (2002) by Walpurgis. Walpurgis, based in Mortsel/Antwerp (Belgium), has been creating small-scale music theatre productions since 1989, with a focus on the singing performer. In De Helling van de Oude Wijven, text plays a slightly different role in the process of narrativisation than in De Overstroming.

In the following case study, I first discuss how a variety of texts obfuscates an apparent narrative or plot. I argue that the listener is inclined to respond to this ambiguity through narrativisation as a proper mode of listening, invited by a minimal exposure to a narrative from a novel, which served as an inspiration to the performance. Textual fragments from the novel only serve as an atmosphere that could frame some of the musical events. The narrative impulse is reinforced by the musicalisation and the multiplicity of songs, in which verbal language has only little or no contribution. I then examine how texts (lyrics) and gestures by the performers (the ‘voice-body’) can contribute to the constitution of a fictional character or ‘vocal persona’, as an equivalent to the concept of ‘narrative voice’. Related to this examination, I distinguish two related pairs of interpretative modes, which we have not come across so far, respectively a concert/recital mode versus a representational mode, and an oral mode versus a literate mode of listening. Through these modes, I contend that vocal music on stage, such as in De Helling van de Oude Wijven, can give rise to a ‘narrative on narrativity’, not only as a side-effect of his analysis but as a necessary awareness in the listener called upon by the music. This awareness foregrounds narrativisation as one of the modalities to process atonal music in terms of musical narratives. Atonal music then demonstrates the mechanisms of a narrative as a ‘metanarrative’; “a story about the principles of narrativity” (Meelberg 2006: 209).

---

127 Meelberg (2006) similarly concludes in his study of atonal music that narrativisation gives rise to a ‘narrative on narrativity’, not only as a side-effect of his analysis but as a necessary awareness in the listener called upon by the music. This awareness foregrounds narrativisation as one of the modalities to process atonal music in terms of musical narratives. Atonal music then demonstrates the mechanisms of a narrative as a ‘metanarrative’; “a story about the principles of narrativity” (Meelberg 2006: 209).
shape to fictional characters as part of a diegesis (the story world) without diminishing the perception of the actual musical performance. In doing so, narrativisation helps me to push the discussion of these seemingly oppositional pairs further.

3. De Helling van de Oude Wijven: Raining Narrative Voices

De Helling van de Oude Wijven ('The Slope of the Old Women') is a music theatre performance, based on a multiplicity of songs and texts. Most of the songs are poems set to music, performed by two female singers: soprano Judith Vindevogel and mezzo-soprano Gerrie de Vries. The whole performance is structured around these vocal works as a dramatised or semi-scenic concert.

The title of the performance might refer to a Dutch saying “het regent oude wijven” (literally, ‘it is raining old women’, meaning it is raining cats and dogs). It also refers to the epigraph to the performance in the programme brochure, “il pleut des voix de femmes” (‘it is raining voices of women’). This sentence is the first line of a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire, which is set to music twice by Rob Zuidam and Kaija Saariaho. Both vocal works are performed in De Helling van de Oude Wijven, along with four compositions by dramaturge and composer Klaas de Vries, based on texts by the Mexican poet Jaime Sabines, and a short composition by Claude Vivier, which is fragmentarily repeated throughout the performance.

The idea of ‘raining voices’ illustrates the main dramaturgical concept: the singing women present us with a ‘shower’ of voices, the voices of old women that disclose some kind of story in a plurality of songs. This idea is realised through the musicalisation of the stage (Lehmann 1999) by means of the songs as well as a soundscape of bell sounds and pre-recorded voices of the women in the background (edited by Jean-Marc Sullon). In contrast to De Overstroming, the shower of voices and songs does not offer one point of listening through a text, nor one straightforward narrative that could be ‘applied’ to interpret the musical performance. On the contrary, the diffusion of voices, languages and songs disrupts a tendency towards any narrative construction in the play. Despite this, I contend that narrativisation as a mode of listening is called upon through an implied subject position in the music

128 De Helling van de Oude Wijven premiered on 17 March 2002 in Düsseldorf (Germany), after which it had its Belgian premiere at the Kunstencentrum Vooruit in Ghent on 26 March 2002, and its Dutch premiere at the Rotterdamsche Schouwburg on 27 April 2002. I attended the performance in its third season in October 2003 at Zuidpool Theater in Antwerp. 129 The compositions by Rob Zuidam and Klaas de Vries were commissioned by the ‘Fonds voor de Scheppende Toonkunst’ and Walpurgis. The latter composer and the singer of this performance, Gerrie de Vries, still continue making small-scale music theatre performances in the Netherlands. The name of their company suggests an interesting connection: Muiziektheater De Helling (subsidised by the Ministerie van OC&W between 2005 and 2008).
The Frequency of Imagination

performance and its staging, which incites the (implied) listener to solve the ambiguity.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of texts in the vocal performance by the two singers disseminates the presence of a single narrative voice or ‘narrator’. This dissemination makes it rather difficult to place the voice, thus urging the listener to make meaningful connections in relation to what she or he hears and sees. An important distinction should be made here between the human voice in the theatre and a narrative voice. Voice in narratology commonly refers to the “question of who it is we ‘hear’ doing the narrating” (Abbott 2002: 64). When used for the analysis of a theatre performance, we have to distinguish the physical voice that we hear from the narratological notion of the narrative voice. Besides the double meaning of the phrase “voix narrative” in French, which like in English also suggests modality in a linguistic sense, the German word Erzählinstanz highlights that narrative voice is an agent in an abstract sense, literally an ‘agency’, an ‘authority’. Narrative voice is then the authority ‘who speaks’, which ultimately makes up the narrative (in Genette’s premise).

Though the idea of music generating narrativity is of a different order than the Genettian one that is preoccupied with the issue of being a narrative, I will expand on the traditional notion of narrative voice. Due to my focus on narrativisation as a mode of interpreting, I move away from the traditional idea of a narrator or narrative voice as the basis for a narrative. Rather, I will address the issue of narrative voice to discuss how a singer can suggest a narrative authority through voice in order to give a sense of a fictional character on stage. I contend that the sense of such an authoritative voice in vocal music generates the narrative impulse for the listener to distinguish virtual characters in fictional and diegetic worlds. I thereby transfer the issue of narrative voice in music to that of fictional character, which I will discuss through Edward T. Cone’s concept of ‘persona’. Nonetheless, we should be cautious not to simply equate narrative voices with physical voices on stage when analysing characters in music theatre performances. The former can also be produced as part of narrativisation by the listener in a context where vocal and musical voices tend to make any narrative development in music ambiguous, such as De Helling van de Oude Wijven.

Using this case study, I demonstrate that the human singing voice can appeal to a vococentric attention that seeks narrativisation without establishing an overt narrative voice that ‘speaks’ on stage. That is, the physical voice does not need to narrate verbally in order to suggest possible narrativisations. However, the singing voice always poses a boundary to narrativisation in its musical remainder, a vocal excess that exceeds signification. I will examine this through one example in the performance: a scene where Gerrie de Vries seemingly talks gibberish in vehement vocal gestures that become gradually musical. I will show how, with the help of focalization, the vocal gestures
produce a ‘voice-body’ (Connor 2000 & 2004) that can stimulate a narrative mode of listening in the listener as a response to the vocal excess and its distress.

Photo Gerrie de Vries (left) and Judith Vindevogel (right) in De Helling van de Oude Wijven © Raymond Mallentjer
3.1. Musicalisation of Text and Voice: The Voice-Body

The voices in *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* musicalise the stage and the theatrical experience to the extent that they urge for interpretation. Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999) discusses musicalisation as an essential dramaturgical principle in 'post-dramatic theatre', as I explained in the general introduction to this study. Lehmann adopts the term *musicalisation* from a lecture by Helene Varopoulou (1998), who uses the notion to describe music as an independent theatrical structure that gives rise to the metaphor of 'theater as music', beyond the evident use of music in theatre or music theatre. Musicalisation is then defined by a wide-ranging application of and sensibility for music and rhythms in the theatre, which are as much influenced by classical, modern as popular music idioms. Lehmann takes this notion further and regards musicalisation as an integral part of a larger project in contemporary theatre.

According to Lehmann, ‘musicalisation’ expands to other elements in the performance, or even to its whole organisation. Following Varopoulou’s suggestions, he recognises in this notion a different way of structuring theatrical communication. It purposefully disconnects the elements and confuses any linear, goal-oriented or ‘teleological’ structure, which would render a traditional definition of narrative on the stage impossible. As such, it can ambiguate the meaning-making processes of the theatre, though due to the musical remainder it produces, musicalisation does not move away from meaning, nor possible narrative meanings.

In his article “From Logos to Landscape” (1997), Lehmann mentions the issue of narration in the sideline of musicalisation:

Theatre was and is searching for and constructing spaces and discourses liberated as far as possible from the restraints of goals (telos), hierarchy and causal logic. This search may terminate in *scenic poems*, meandering *narration*, *fragmentation* and other procedures – the longing for such space, a space beyond telos is there (56).

According to Lehmann, post-dramatic theatre responds to a desire for a space, a universe or a ‘landscape’ that is not controlled by a hierarchical structure. This desire does not abide by the traditional definition of narrative, which presupposes a well-defined structure. He expresses thereby how musicalisation tries to go beyond narration in a traditional sense, or even oppose it. Still, he refers to a ‘meandering narration’: a sense of narration that is oblique or indirect. This notion could prove to be very helpful to consider the connection between music and narrativisation in music theatre that does not follow any logical, causal or dramatic structure, such as *De Helling van de Oude Wijven*. 
Through musicalisation, Lehmann argues that sound can produce an auditory landscape that activates the spectator: “An auditive space is opened, which calls upon the spectator/audience to synthesise the elements presented” (Lehmann 1997: 57). In this way, musicalisation can create an auditory landscape beyond ‘telos’; that is, a space beyond any orientation on a goal, a point to which the dramatic development converges. Correspondingly, the verbal text loses its privileged position in the theatre as the source of meaning and communication. In post-dramatic theatre, the development of the events no longer drives to one focal point or goal (like, for instance, a climax or catharsis). Rather, musicalisation gives rise to fragmentation, ambiguity, and excess that urges the listener to make meaningful connections her or himself subjectively.

Significantly, post-dramatic theatre does not turn away from narration completely, as Lehmann claims above. ‘Meandering narration’ calls for a different sense of narrative from that we have thus far encountered: a narrative that can wander off in many, perhaps contradictory directions according to the attention of the spectator who tries to synthesise the elements. It is an indirect narration, produced by the process of narrativisation in the spectator’s mind. Narrativisation offers a way to structure and connect the experiences. It appeals to the human urge to interpret and make sense of the fragmentary perceptions.

*De Helling van de Oude Wijven* illustrates the implications of musicalisation. In this performance, the songs give the impression of a concert, enriched by poetic texts in various languages. In the programme booklet, dramaturge Klaas de Vries calls it a ‘theatrical and musical poem’. Though the free play with songs and poems would highlight lyrical expression at surface level, the performance includes undeniable tendencies towards narrativisation. Among these tendencies are the references to the renowned novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) by Juan Rulfo. This symbolist and untimely post-modern novel served as a main inspiration for the performance. It creates a dream world of voices, in which the protagonist converses with the voices of ghosts on his return to Comala, the deserted town of his deceased mother, in search of his father Pedro Páramo. At one point in the performance, the...
women whisper fragments of the novel in Dutch. In the programme brochure, one can read the following two excerpts:

Sounds. Voices. Murmurs. Distant singing: My sweetheart gave me a lace-bordered handkerchief to dry my tears... High voices. As if it were women singing. Laughter.

In the middle of a village square. The chiming began with the big bell. Afterwards, the others followed. The sounding of the bells lasted longer than usual. A neighbouring church sets in; the others follow. It became a big mourning chime. A cacophony of bells. The people had to shout to make themselves heard. Some bells are bursting and sound hoarse. Nobody knew where they came from, but at a certain moment circus artists appeared.

(Taken from Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo, programme brochure p.2; my translation based on Margaret Sayers Peden 1994)

Though these references to the novel are rather wavering, taken out of context, they powerfully stimulate a narrative mode of reading the music theatre performance. The programme note could thereby influence the listener’s responses to the fragmentation and the excess caused by the musicalisation in the performance, as audiences have been trained to use the programme as a guide toward the understanding of a performance. The programme then becomes a paratext for the listener suggesting a way of reading in dealing with the auditory distress.132

As a response, the listener could feel an urge to solidify the possible connections in a narrative way, guided by the information she or he receives besides and within the performance. The programme note sets a scene for the action or event to take place in the middle of a village square. The fragment refers, in a first-person narrative voice, to a person (“my girl”) and ambiguously to “the others” and “the people”. In this way, the fragments give a frame for the stage, the characters, the actions and the acoustic events in De Helling van de Oude Wijven. The text, moreover, offers a perspective through an unnamed focalizer, though it is detached from the original context of the novel. The onset of narrativisation through these textual fragments offers the attentive listener a way to deal with the excess of the musicalisation and the multiple voices that exceed verbal content. Similarities between the textual fragments and the performance are suggested, which insist that the listener make the connection with the threads of a narrative: the sound of a ‘rumour’,


132 On this matter, I want to thank Prof. Dr. David Herman for his helpful comments on an earlier paper on this topic, which I presented during the Media in Transition 4 conference The Work of Stories at MIT in Boston, Massachusetts (6-8 May 2005).
The Narrative Response: Narrativisation and Focalization

the bell, the singing voices reverberate with actual acoustic events on stage. The scenery consists of bells hanging from long cables. The sound of bells is also pre-composed within the soundscapes, which literally musicalise the stage and create an auditive space.

Comparable to *De Overstroming*, noise plays an essential role in offering an impulse to narrativisation. The performance starts with silence, which is suddenly disrupted by loud noise when the women briskly empty two buckets filled with pieces of metal onto the floor, as if throwing out the garbage. After this vehement acoustic intervention, follows the first composition, *Passaba Rumbosa*. During this piece, the women gradually develop bodily gestures into uttering percussive syllables. Little by little, these phonetic sounds become words and sentences, as if forcing themselves onto the bodies of the performers. Suddenly, a tone sets off. The singers repeat what another sings until an articulated song comes to existence, though no real language is achieved. The music seems to develop out of vocal noises and gestures, musicalising linguistic materials before becoming text, language and music (a musical score). This development draws the listener’s attention to the musical qualities of language in a vococentric rather than logocentric pursuit. The first real song, a fragment of Claude Vivier’s *Kopernikus*, sets off with the words: “Nous entendons l’appel” (i.e., we hear the appeal, the call), and it ends by repeating the word “écoutez!” (listen!). Hence, the voice addresses the listener as subject in reciprocal terms: it literally calls the listener to listen carefully to its call. The song is repeated, and it travels through the performance as a spectre of a voice with a strong appeal of the ear.

Apart from the high concentration on voice, the attention of the listener is drawn to the music as a gesture, both vocally and bodily. In this context, I want to introduce a new notion: the ‘voice-body’. Steven Connor has coined this term: “For voice is not simply an emission of the body; it is also the imaginary production of a secondary body, a body double: a ‘voice-body’” (Connor 2004: 158; see also Connor 2000: 35-42). Connor distinguishes the voice-body most significantly from the voice in the body, as the former also incorporates the entire gestures that accompany the voice such as facial expression, movements of the shoulders, hands, arms:

> The voice also induces and is taken up into the movements of the body. The face is part of the voice’s apparatus, as are the hands. The shaping of the air effected by the mouth, hands and shoulders marks out the lineaments of the voice-body (which is to be distinguished from the voice in the body). When one clicks one’s fingers for emphasis, claps one’s hands, or slaps one’s thigh, the work of gesture is being taken over into sound, and voice has migrated into the fingers (Connor 2004: 163).

The voice, in its gestures, produces a second body beyond the singer’s body on stage, which speaks to us, addresses us in our imaginations, phantasms of a
The Frequency of Imagination

vocalic body. The opening scene of *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* demonstrates how such a voice-body slowly comes about in the auditive space, as Connor describes above.

I want to suggest here a connection between the concept of the voice-body and narrativisation as a response to musicalisation. The voice-body could pose a discrepancy with narrative voice in narratology. I will demonstrate how the voice-body contributes to an understanding of narrativisation in a context where musicalisation diffuses the line between theatre and musical performance. In this context, narrativisation could offer a solution for the listener to negotiate between the two realms of experience.

According to Connor (2000), the voice gives rise to a second, imaginary body, which is not only an effect of an intentional acousmatisation (or ‘ventriloquism’):

In fact, so strong is the embodying power of the voice, that this process occurs not only in the case of voices that seem separated from their obvious or natural sources, but also in voices, or patterned vocal inflections, or postures, that have a clearly identifiable source, but seem in various ways excessive to that source. This voice then conjures for itself a different kind of body; an imaginary body which may contradict, compete with, replace, or even reshape the actual, visible body of the speaker. […] The leading characteristic of the voice-body is to be a body-in-invention, an impossible, imaginary body in the course of being found and formed. But it is possible to isolate some of the contours, functions, and postures by means of which vocalic bodies come into being (36).

The imaginary body that the voice invokes is based on an excess in relation to its physical, visually identifiable source body, which marks the voice’s inherent placelessness. Connor seems then to suggest a connection between this excess and the listener’s imaginary production – ‘invocation’, so to speak – of the voice-body, which includes certain postures, gestures, movements, ways of expression. In relation to my case study, I want to argue that it is through this voice-body that the listener narrativises what she or he hears and sees. In this respect, I contend that the excess of the voice, being the reason of the creation of the voice-body, is a vital part of the narrative response to auditory distress. The voice-body then becomes the vehicle in the listener’s response to the necessity of coping with the distress that is caused by the voice’s excess in listening, its musical remainder.

The workings of the voice-body is exemplified in *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* by literally showing how music comes into existence through vocal stresses, plosives, postures and gestures. Suddenly a tone sets off in the soprano’s voice, as if capturing the body, ‘precipitating itself as object’ as Connor would formulate it, giving the illusion as if the voice is acting upon it (*ibid*.). Gradually the vocal performers step into the fiction of their vocalic bodies, as a diegesis begins to emerge in a mode of narrativisation. Therefore,
we look for focalizers and perspectives that can help us imagine these bodies as characters.

In the following subsection, I introduce Edward T. Cone’s concept of ‘vocal persona’ to explain how the voice-body of the performer can stimulate the spectator to imagine a character in a story as part of narrativising the music. *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* illustrates how shifts between modes of perception call the listener to reinterpret the voice-bodies, resulting in constant metamorphoses of virtual personae or characters in the fictional and diegetic spaces. This metamorphosis opens the way for many possible, concurrent narrativisations, which illustrates that narrativisation does not need to imply *narration* of a particular story as such.

Narrativisation as a mode of listening helps me further to understand two sets of modes that have thus far not been theorised: oral/literate modes and concert/representational modes. Both sets of modes could explain different ways of listening to the singing voice. Though these modes are not immediately theorised in relation to narrativisation, they share certain considerations for the constitution of narrativity and narrativisation in relation to vocal music and the voice-body. Among these considerations is the interplay between the listener’s attention, the music performance, the words, the gestures by the performer and the staging. Through my case study, I illustrate that narrativisation is relevant for understanding these modes in their mutual contribution to the listener’s interpretation of vocal-musical events and the production of vocal bodies in music theatre. As such, I argue that these constrastive modes can contribute to narrativisation as supporting modes in listening and understanding depending on the listener’s object of attention.

The first set involves whether one chooses to pay attention to the words (literate listening) or to the voice as sound and its vocal gestures (oral listening). With regard to the second set of modes, I argue that the opacity of voice and its excess plays a significant role in the listener’s perception. Depending on the perspectives in the theatre, the listener will either focus on the vocal performance as a performance (concert/recital mode) or as a representation of speech of a character in a fictional world (representational mode). Both do not exclude one another when the listener narrativises the musical performance. Narrativisation of the voice in listening reveals that these modes should not be seen as oppositional to each other, leading to paradox between perception and interpretation. Rather, they reinforce each other in their mutual contribution to narrativisation as a most dominant mode of listening, which does not only pertain to a reading of words. I argue that this shared contribution materialises in the positions they imply towards the voice-body as conveyed through the performance of vocal music, its musical remainder and the voice’s opacity in listening.
3.2. In Search of a Vocal Persona: Oral and Literate Modes

De Helling van de Oude Wijven plays upon the listener’s urge to locate the voice and place it in a coherent structure as a way to resolve the ambiguity in the multiple narrative threads and fragments of meaning. I contend that this ambiguity is shaped in the first place through the listener’s attention, which shifts between the vocal-body, the lyrics and the textual fragments. The diversity of texts obstructs one coherent narrative unfolding. Nevertheless, the vocal events, props and gestures transform the singers into multiple characters, depending on the listener’s narrativisations. The metamorphosis thereby challenges the listener’s interpretative competencies, as these characters emerge not as stable constructs of signifiers and signifieds, but rather change continuously in relation to the way the attention activates different modes of listening. Therefore, I contend that the production of fictional characters depends on the implied subject positions that focalization provides for the listener to engage in.

In order to address the issue of a fictional character in music, Edward T. Cone (1974) has coined the terms vocal persona, in the case of a singing voice, and musical persona, to describe purely instrumental music. Both constitute narrative voices in music. Cone defines a vocal persona as a projection of a vocal performer, an embodiment of a character or a narrator. The term musical persona respectively denotes a vehicle of the composer’s message, in Cone’s definition. With regard to these notions, Cone warns us not to confuse the composer with the persona: “This location also reminds us that the persona is by no means identical with the composer; it is a projection of his musical intelligence, constituting the mind, so to speak, of the composition in question” (57). Cone’s musical persona constitutes what narratology has conceptualised as the ‘implied author’, meaning an image of the author by the reader in the process of reading.133 In this way, he suggests that narrative meanings could be experienced as intended and generated by an implied author through musical voices that project the composer’s voice in the music (that is, a ‘complete’ musical persona). However, I would like to dispute the intentionality of such a projection by the composer in the way music can generate a narrative impulse in the listener. Neither is the projection of the composer’s ‘intelligence’ as implied author by the listener constitutive of a narrative response.

In De Helling van de Oude Wijven, the vocal persona coincides with the musical persona, as Cone would agree, since accompaniment is most of the

133 According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (2005), the implied author is defined as “a ‘voiceless’ and depersonified phenomenon (Diengott 1993: 73), which is neither speaker, voice, subject, nor participant in the narrative communication situation” (240). The ‘implied’ or inferred author is a concept introduced by Wayne C. Booth (1961; 1983) to denote an image of the author as constructed by the reader in the process of reading the narrative.
time lacking (Cone 1974: 57). The pre-recorded and pre-composed soundscapes create an atmosphere for the voices to produce personae in terms of virtual agents and fictional characters of a story that are ambiguous, to say the least. The partly acousmatised listening situation and the smooth passage between the diverse musical pieces also obliterate a musical persona as an image of an author or composer, who would stand in a triadic relation to the musical and vocal personae (17-8). On the contrary, one might even consider many authorial voices behind the music compositions (the composer, the lyricist) and the representations on stage (the director, the scenographer, the actors themselves), none of which are responsible for the narrative impulse in the listener. Instead, the impulse to narrativise is generated by the combination of text fragments, musicalisation and gestures of the performers, which contributes to a sense of characters in the narrative voices that are thus produced to contain the multiplicity. An implied authorial voice is not at all obligatory in music in order to generate a sense of narrativity.

The concept of vocal persona further calls for an examination of how language and text (lyrics) play a role in the listener’s production of fictional characters. In *De Helling van de Oude Wijven*, both whispered fragments of Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* and lyrics of the songs produce a sense of textual excess. If narrativisation of music were to strictly suture a relation to text, one could question whether the sense of a vocal persona implied in the voice-body depends on our attention to verbal content or also to the musical qualities of the voice. In this context, narrativisation of vocal personae can be critically gauged against Derrick de Kerckhove’s (1997) distinction between an *oral* and a *literate* mode of listening:

The basic difference between the two modes is that oral listening tends to be global and comprehensive, while literate listening is specialized and selective. One is attending to concrete situations and to persons, whereas the other is interested in words and verbal meanings. One is context-bound, the other is relatively context-free. The first is cosmo-centric and spatial, the latter is linear, temporal and logocentric (104).

In de Kerckhove’s account, oral and literate listening are defined in terms of contrastive but related pairs. Oral listening pertains to the whole experience, where meanings are all-inclusive and concern context or person-bound

---

134 De Kerckhove’s distinction is inspired by Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* and McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, though the latter might be based on a misunderstanding of McLuhan’s discussion of oral and literate spaces in relation to the far-reaching historical implications of the written and printed word. He foremost bases his distinction on Walter Ong’s research of the comparison between oral and literate minds, suggesting several features in a ‘psychodynamics of orality’: “Each feature may correspond to a characteristic attitude in listening, namely what to listen for, how to listen, who to listen to and how to store or remember what has been heard” (de Kerckhove 1997: 106-7).
The Frequency of Imagination

situations. It is comprehensive, attending to the space between the voice and myself – the ‘interlocutors’ – within an emphatic address of the singer’s performance, saying: ‘listen to me’. In oral listening, the listener does not pay much attention to the actual word, but rather to the sounding and musical qualities of the voice as body, which Barthes (1977) called the ‘grain’ in the voice. One could compare it to the reduced listening mode when focusing on concrete sounds. However, it might as well include ambient or background listening in its global scope.

Literate listening, as the word suggests, calls for literacy in a specific sense, according to de Kerckhove: it involves reading through listening in a way that is specialised, selective, linear, temporal, ‘logocentric’, context-free. One could include ‘narrative’ in this list. Literate listening is realised when we focus our attention on words and verbal meanings. Seen this way, it favours the discursive content of what a singer communicates within the diegesis of the song or play, the poetic or dramatic content. Literate listening would assist in transforming the vocalic body into a proper vocal persona. Disregarding the listener’s pre-knowledge of the lyrics, a literate mode of listening makes the listener pay attention to the verbal content. The interested listener could read the lyrics in the programme booklet of De Helling van de Oude Wijven prior to or after the performance. During the actual performance, the textual content seems only secondary. The musicalisation in the performance invites one to listen orally, with special attention to the vocal music in the first place.

However, de Kerckhove’s distinction between oral and literate listening, based on literacy, is highly problematic. His dichotomy does not include that every listening experience always suggests competency, as I discussed in chapter two. De Kerckhove’s understanding is based on a narrow definition of literacy, in terms of written words that give structure and meaning to our experiences. Narrativisation, on the contrary, demonstrates that language does not have to be realised and communicated in actual words in order to structure our auditory experiences, despite our predilection for language as a basis for understanding narrative and narrativisation.

As I explained earlier in this chapter, narrativisation is a way of making meaningful relations in our experiences. It does not need verbalisation, but it does presuppose certain competences. In de Kerckhove’s dichotomy, narrativisation cannot be subscribed to the structuring and semantic tendencies

---

135 De Kerckhove makes the dubious conclusion that we close our ears in order to be able to ‘read’: “While reading the body is stilled, almost as that of someone asleep. The reader is either in silence, or has made sufficient reservations in his or her mind to turn the ambient noise into silence. That kind of control, by the way, bears witness to the power of literacy over our hearing. When we read, we literally ‘shut our ears’ as if we had ‘earlids.’” (de Kerckhove 1997: 111). Such claims are very similar to the model of listening that n-Chance by David Rokeby conveys, where reading means shutting out or filtering the auditory distress. An overgeneralisation of this idea would suggest that we cannot read while we are (in) listening at all, which would render literate listening impossible.
of literate listening only. Rather, it negotiates between oral and literate modes of understanding. This is made clear in the implication that the literate and oral modes also depend on the listener’s predilection:

As people whose attitudes are ruled by literacy, we tend to listen for the meaning of words, rather than for the substance of an argument or for the intention of the speaker. This may not necessarily be the case for the oral listener (de Kerckhove 1997: 106).

Oral listening would then imply a more inclusive and comprehensive way of making sense through an emphatic engagement that goes beyond the particular meanings of words:

Oral listening searches for images rather than concepts, persons rather than names. Sense is made and organized around vivid images acting in context. The oral discourse is built around narratives and, as Havelock demonstrates in his analysis of early Greek literature, prefers verbs of action over predicates [...] the oral listener will favor dynamic drama over static descriptions. Again, this tendency corroborates the suggestion that we first learn and make sense by body imitation (de Kerckhove 1997: 108-9).

Oral discourse makes use of narratives as mnemonic devices. Narrativisation then has a function in learning about the world through mimesis in language. It includes competences that stem from body imitation rather than from words. Oral listening thereby does not exclude language. Nevertheless, it calls for a different attention to the ‘drama’, the performance and the sound of words, reminding us that listening is always embodied experience in the first place. As a primary way to respond in our bodies, we use and produce images in our minds that are closely connected to how we perceive the world.136

Oral listening then pertains to narrative in order to store, communicate and structure images that stem from lived experiences and oral discourse.

The concept of narrativisation suggests that there is no strict opposition between oral and literate modes of listening. De Kerckhove’s distinction places narrative both in a tradition of oral discourse and literacy. I conclude that the two modes can function in interplay in narrativisation.137

As an example that challenges de Kerckhove’s dichotomy between oral and literate modes of listening, *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* presents us with a scene where the vocal-body of one of the performers could disrupt the listener’s assumed ‘literate’ mode of listening. In this scene, mezzo-soprano Gerrie de Vries takes a seat on the edge of the stage and opens a lunch box.

---

136 In the following chapter, I will develop this idea further by comparing narrativisation to auditory imagination.

137 I am grateful to Sybille Moser who drew my attention to de Kerckhove’s theory, on the occasion of the ASCA Sonic Interventions conference in Amsterdam (29-31 March 2005).
She starts mumbling while putting food in her mouth. Gradually, her inarticulate ‘babbling’ begins increasing in fervour, producing an excess of voice that could be described as *vocal distress*.138 Despite the comic effect, by imitating a vehement conversation without articulating it in words, the vocal performance makes the listener aware that every communicative act with the voice is based on such distress.

Gerrie de Vries’s overacting looks as if she is speaking *old wives’ tales* (referring to the title of the play). From her gestures one can tell that she is an embittered woman and that she is agitated by her story. She gives the impression of narrating something while a character of her own narrative universe. Yet there is no narrative closure. The rattle and burlesque exaggeration in the vocal body becomes rhythmic and blends in with the soundscape of sounding bells, spatialised through the loudspeakers. At the same time, soprano Judith Vindevogel is fervently running *in situ* facing the wall in the background. Her shadow is reflected in the copper surface of the massive wall (set design by Stef Depover). The bell sounds eventually drown the woman’s *sound and fury*. The loudness intensifies auditory distress. The babbling woman then moves to the background and joins her company in haphazardly jumping and running. The simultaneity of the acoustic events and the distressed body gestures leaves room for subjective narrativisations: Are they running on a slope? Where are they running to or are they running away from something?

The vocal distress of the babbling woman implies also a connection to auditory distress. Mladen Dolar (2006) connects both kinds of distress to a surplus in exposure and experience:

> So both hearing and emitting a voice present an excess, a surplus of authority on the one hand and a surplus of exposure on the other. There is a too-much of the voice in the exterior because of the direct transition into the interior, without defenses; and there is a too-much of the voice stemming from the inside – it brings out more, and other things, than one would intend. *One is too exposed to the voice and the voice exposes too much*, one incorporates and one expels too much (81).

---

138 I regard the metaphor of ‘vocal distress’ as a concept that highlights some crucial aspects in the discussion of narrativising the voice. In its most literal sense, vocal distress would symptomatically signal a disorder of the vocal chords, caused by stress or anxiety. In a physical sense, stress and strain on the vocal chords are constitutive for every vocal utterance. Steven Connor (2004) explains this necessary stress in voice: “[T]he seeming naturalness and irrepressibility of the voice’s exuberations should not prevent us noticing that voice is produced through a process that necessarily creates stress, as air is directed under pressure through the larynx and then out through the mouth” (159). In mimetic terms, vocal stress would show an overload of strain. But as the scene in *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* demonstrates, overstimulation of the voice can also pretend to *tell* us something, depending on a narrative response in the listener to the vocal excess.
The performance of vocal distress demonstrates this surplus of exposure and authority of the voice in the listener’s perception. Musicalisation of voice highlights this excess, the semiotic remainder of voice in listening. The voice-body equally indulges in this surplus. The excess compels the listener to respond by means of the listening modes. Narrativisation of the voice and voice-body as vocal persona then offers a solution to the auditory distress: it gives coherence and a place to the sounds.

The scene of the babbling woman demonstrates that even in a context of wordless communication, it is still possible to have a sense that something is being ‘narrated’, here by means of bodily mimesis, in the voice-body. The question is not what is precisely narrated, but how our modes of listening give meaningful shape to our experiences by means of narrativisation. Cone supports this idea by claiming that the voice has a ‘vococentric’ supremacy that does not require logocentric or verbal meaning to create a sense of character: “The fact that only the human voice can adequately embody a protagonist or character is due to this natural supremacy, more than to its ability to verbalise. For, as we have seen, words are not necessary so long as the voice is there” (Cone 1974: 79).

_De Helling van de Oude Wijven_ shows us that focalization as a point of listening is indispensable for us to narrativise the voice and to recognise in it a fictional, vocal persona. Focalizers are embedded in both text and music performance. On the one hand, the fragments of the novel _Pedro Páramo_ offer a frame that places certain sounds in a narrative structure. For example, throughout the performance the bells chime at different instances, hunting the women as a ghostly memory. This echoes with the story of _Pedro Páramo_. However, this story is fragmented in itself, both textually in the programme brochure and auditively in the whispers on stage. On the other hand, the musical performance could contribute its own points of listening. In the vocal distress of the babbling woman, a change in spatial perspective makes our attention shift, nearly cinematically, from an external perspective on the woman into an internal space of her incomprehensible _telling_. This is supported by the bell sounds, which at that point could be recognised as a ‘sound mark’ of her inner world. In an oral mode of listening, the bells receive meaning in a global sense of the performance. The gestures of the voice-body could be read in mimetic, bodily terms of distress. By means of a literate mode of listening, the listener could respond to the auditory distress by filling in words to the woman’s babbling in order for a story to emerge.

_De Helling van de Oude Wijven_ demonstrates how listening to a voice stimulates both oral and literate ways of listening through its surplus of authority and exposure. Both modes necessitate aural competences that enable the listener to respond to the auditory distress caused by the excess. Narrativising vocal, musical and, therefore, auditory events does not imply an exclusive focus on words in a literate mode of listening. Rather, the implied
The Frequency of Imagination

points of listening are responsible for activating either mode in our narrativisations. In the following paragraph, I will discuss how the voice in its relation to the voice-body could also pose a limit to narrativisation, when our attention is drawn rather to the actual performance. This could cause a continuous switching between the modes that make us distinguish the physical from the representational spaces. I will argue that both modes do not exclude narrativisation, but rather enhance it.

3.3. Opacity of a Vocal Remainder:
Concert/Recital and Representational Modes

The performance of vocal distress in De Helling van de Oude Wijven presents us with a voice-body that poses an element of resistance to our interpretations. The voice retains a boundary to our efforts of placing it in relation to what we can understand in a literate mode, and thereby, in relation to ourselves. Steven Connor (2000) traces this boundary in the voice itself: “In all instancings and picturings of the vocalic body, the voice secretes a fantasy of a body in its relations to itself, in what it does to the fabric of the very sound it produces. The voice makes itself solid by its self-relation” (37). In this relation to itself, the voice marks its own, distinct physicality through sound. This creates a limit to the listener’s imagination of a voice-body, an imaginary body that is always bound to the materiality of the voice. I want to discuss how this discrepancy between the physical voice and the imaginary body in voice stimulates listening modes that constantly move between the voice in its self-relation and the listener’s narrativisations through the voice-body.

Peter Kivy (1994) has conceptualised this self-relation in terms of the ‘opacity’ of the medium voice. He reminds us that the voice as medium is never really eliminable, never vaporised into pure content (66). He explains that we only become aware of the medium interposed between us and its content when “it has received the impress of the artist’s hand” (67). He goes on to argue that the medium of voice can obtrude in our musical experience. What we hear is the medium, in which we are totally involved: “we are listening to singing” (67). This awareness is produced by the opacity of the medium to which the presence of an author (‘the artist’s hand’) in the music would draw our attention.

Kivy bases his argument on Cone’s earlier discussed distinction between a (complete) musical persona and a vocal persona (fictional character):

The complete musical persona is telling us about the characters, and their parts should be thought of as if within quotation marks. On the stage the singer does not portray a dramatic character directly but represents a character in a narrative. He is enacting the musical persona’s conception of the character; that is, he is quoting rather than talking (Cone 1974: 13).
Cone argues that characters in opera are constituted in singing as if by quoting in the third person (indirect narrative discourse) in relation to an implied authorial voice in the music, i.e. the ‘complete musical persona’. According to Kivy, however, such a voice behind the characters is not necessary for producing a sense of narrativity. Kivy argues against Cone’s claims in a perceptual sense by focusing on the listener’s modes of listening when attending to a singer on stage:

[W]e are in a mode of attention that is both – and very strongly both – one of attending to a singer giving a ‘performance’ (remember how the action comes to a full stop for the applause!), and attending to a character in a drama making an expressive utterance (Kivy 1994: 68).

Kivy acknowledges the role of the listener and her or his attention. The mode of attention decides if the voice refers to itself (its performance, voice as body) or to the expression of a character (its voice-body, an imaginary body in the listener’s mind). In the latter, Kivy transfers the issue of authorial voice to the characters themselves by comparing singing in the fictional world to speaking in the ‘real’ world: “[W]e hear, I would suggest, a world in which the character is a ‘composer’ of her vocal expression, as, in my world, I am the ‘author’ of mine” (ibid.). Seen this way, a vocal persona generates in the listener’s narrativisation a fictional character who is also the narrator of her or his own expressions.

Kivy’s argument helps me to explain how the songs and gestures by the singers in *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* produce characters in a narrative universe in which they are the authors of their own expressions, while we are aware of the singers performing. According to Kivy, this double attention depends on the modes of interpretation. He distinguishes a recital or concert mode from a representational one. The former implies that we listen to a performance as a concert, a musical performance: singing as singing. The latter includes the production of a narrative, characters and a narrative space through listening: singing as speech. In music theatre, these modes co-occur in the listener.

As a result of this split perception, the space of the diegesis is not homogeneous. In narratology, one traditionally makes a distinction between homodiegetic (voices playing a role in the diegesis) and extradiegetic narration (voices that are situated outside the action). The singing voice on stage, however, always draws attention to itself, its act of singing, and therefore, the physical space of the stage. The listener sometimes regards the singing as that of a singer within the diegesis, heard by other characters (homodiegetically). Yet at another instance, one could also interpret the singing as speaking in quotation marks (extradiegetically). Due to the lack of an unambiguous narrative and focalization, the issue of whether the singing occurs in or outside
the diegesis becomes ambivalent. It depends entirely on the listener’s narrativisations as to how she or he deals with the ambivalence.

For example, when one of the women uses a tuning fork to find the right initial tone for the song, the listener might regard the music performance as a concert. However, the gesture might as well belong to the diegesis, if we are to narrativise the vocal bodies as characters singing a song within the story world. Extradicetic and homodiegetic references are constantly competing with one another, depending on how we narrativise the events.

In De Helling van de Oude Wijven, we are no longer listening to speech represented by music. Nonetheless, we could hear and imagine the characters expressing themselves through the music, even if no words or lyrics are involved. The spontaneity with which the singers perform the songs and establish dynamic vocal bodies can give the impression that they are ‘composing’ their own songs in free improvisation, giving free reign to the ambiguity, musical remainder and surplus of exposure in the voice.

Kivy’s argument gives way to make a correlation between the level of opacity of the musical performance and narrativisation. If auditory distress urges the listener to respond, then narrativisation offers resolution to a certain degree among the listening modes. This does not exclusively depend on the listener’s aural competences or willingness to draw her or his attention to find meaningful relations. Rather, the performance offers listening perspectives and focalizations that manage the listener’s attention.

In this type of music theatre, auditory distress creates the conditions for musical meaning and pushes the listener to listen for alternative interpretations. Narrativisation is then a compelling mode of listening that gives structure and coherence to our experiences. Yet it depends on the implied points of listening that urge us to take position through our attention and its respective modes of listening. I follow the line of argument by Peter Rabinowitz (2004) on this matter, which states that

[…] fictional music can invite the listener to occupy several different listening positions simultaneously. The multiplicity, analogous to certain techniques central to purely verbal narrative (especially fiction) allows the music not merely to ‘represent’ various states but also to manipulate the listener into taking a position with respect to them (307).

Through listening, the listener can take up different positions in relation to the perspectives in a performance. As the interplay between concert/recital and representational modes suggests, some of these positions can collide; for instance, when the listener attends to the music performance as concert, while narrativising the voice-bodies in relation to the representations of characters in a diegetic world. Or the positions can shift our attention, unnoticeably, as between oral and literate modes of listening that mutually contribute to narrativisation of vocal music. These positions help the listener to create
coherence to her or his auditory experiences and disambiguate the excess of the voice in listening and looking to music theatre.

4. Listening in the Space of Narrative Discourse

We can conclude from this chapter that, among the listening modes, narrativisation constitutes a particular mode of interpretation, which the listener can apply to make her or his auditory experiences meaningful and coherent. The listener’s impulse to narrativise the auditory events depends on the implied positions given by focalization, subjective and spatial points of listening that are embedded in the performance, the music or the sounds themselves. In the music theatre I discuss, these perspectives are highlighted because of a general lack of a clear-cut dramatic or narrative development. Rather, the performances offer fragmented meanings through texts, images, projections, lights, etc. I introduced narrativisation as a particular form of semiotic listening in the listener who is searching for and exploring meaningful relations between the elements presented.

In this specific sense, narrativisation exceeds ‘telling’ and ‘narrative’ in a narrow definition. It presents us with a particular way of interpreting and structuring auditory events, giving them salience, coherence, meaning and relative ‘closure’. The case studies I have discussed, however, challenge this closure, questioning the interpreting efforts of the listener.

*De Overstroming* demonstrates how narrativisation can be generated by a text, in this case, a short story by Peter Handke that offers a perspective and frame for the auditory experiences. Narrativisation is then rather the result of an applied narrativity, where narrative meanings are instigated or implied by the text. The textual narrative, moreover, plays with what is ‘true’ within the story world, which questioned the borders of what one can imagine and accept in narrative fiction. When applied to music, narrativisation presents us with similar restrictions as to what we can imagine as a narrative. Narrativity in music gives rise to scepticism, since any narrative produced by the listener is subjective and depends on her or his impulse to narrativise. Handke’s story and other paratextual references could then make the listener aware of this construction as a narrative about narrativity.

In *De Overstroming*, the incitement to produce a narrative primarily resided in the encounter with a short story, enhanced by the juxtaposition of text, image and music. My analysis was also restricted to the narrativity of instrumental music. I therefore discussed a second case study, which activated strong impulses for narrativisation in the listener through a multiplicity of songs and fragmented texts.

*De Helling van de Oude Wijven* shows us how narrativisation could be a self-sufficient mode of listening that helps the listener to interpret the vocal events. I illustrated how the singing voice introduces voice-bodies with its
gestures which, through narrativisation, can be transformed into vocal personae or characters of a diegetic world. This necessitates a distinction between the human, physical voice and the concept of narrative voice. I then showed how, through focalization, a transformation of voices into imaginary bodies can produce multiple vocal personae, depending on the discursive positions the listener takes up in listening. Narrativisation can help the listener to place the voice not always to an identifiable source (causal listening), but in a meaningful relation. Words are not necessary to activate a narrative way of listening. Yet the voice always keeps retention or a certain level of opacity towards being vaporised entirely into a narrative voice.

The final example of ‘vocal distress’ discloses the voice as a space in itself, but never as a clear, identifiable object. The distress underscores that the voice has no defined space in itself. Because of its inherent a-topicality (the ventriloquist effect, according to Dolar 2006), it moves between different spaces: physical, representational and diegetic spaces. The excess of voice underlying the distress is opposed to any final fixing or framing of its source, which creates a space of its own. Doris Kolesch (2003) comments on this vocal space: “The voice is not a definable object; it is not a thing, but rather a tangible, spatially expansive acoustic event” (274, my trans. PV). In music theatre, the voice can produce an energised space, an auditory landscape (in Lehmann’s sense) that is not controlled by a hierarchical structure or a text.

We are familiar with the space a voice can create around us from our experiences of the first sonorous envelope in early infancy. In theatre, the enveloping sound of a voice can create a physical space that addresses and affects the listener, who in turn relates to that space through the listening modes. In chapter two, I suggested that the modes of listening offer ways for the listener to regain control over the listening space in response to the auditory distress. When narrative discourse and focalization are involved, the listener can produce diegetic spaces as a response to regaining control through narrativisation. In relation to the sounding environment of a voice, the listener can feel addressed by a character (a vocal persona). As I have argued, the presence of an implied authorial voice in the music is not constitutive for characters to come to life in the listener’s mind. At the same time, a singer always performs the music as performance, while delivering textual content of which the character becomes the author in her or his diegetic world. The opacity of the voice, or music as both media, does not disturb a narrative way of listening. Rather, narrativisation is driven by a constant switching of positions materialised by the listening modes (oral/literate, concert/representational).

As Kivy (1994) pointed out, a fictional character in song and music is never a holistic being. In De Overstroming, the musical voices that enact

---

178
some sense of dialogue are under constant scrutiny, prompted by the blind brother’s sceptic perspective in the short story. “Do you see the story? Do you see anything?” We might as well ask: Do you see the characters? Do you see the protagonists of the story? The instrumental music in De Overstroming alone does not offer much solace to these questions. De Helling van de Oude Wijven shows us a continuous metamorphosis of voices as character-narrators, constantly moving and challenging the interpretations. We could ask ourselves then: Are these old women living on a slope? Are they really women? Do they really exist? Or are they ghosts? The metamorphosis of characters in our personal narrativisations questions the ontological status of the fictional worlds that these characters would inhabit. Narrative discourse proves, therefore, to be foremost spatial in creating different, sometimes opposing worlds. Discourse presents us with a space of contestation in our meaning-making efforts towards the stage and our own, private narrativisations.

The spatial aspect of narrative discourse materialises in the sonorous space of the voice. De Helling van de Oude Wijven demonstrates that the fictional world can transform continuously according to how the listener perceives the characters through their songs and vocal gestures. Hence, perspective is of crucial importance in the linear and spatial expansion of narrativisation. Just like the modes of listening, narrativisation becomes a vehicle for the listener to inhibit the uncontrollability of sonorous space as an effect of auditory distress. Narrative discourse, as it were, stimulates an interpretative mode of listening-in-search in the listener, exploring the space for meaningful relations that fit the temporary narrative interpretation. However, the metamorphosis of voices and spaces also leaves room for contradiction and friction between them.

In this chapter, I have focused on how narrativisation as a particular mode of listening can be generated by focalization as an implied subject position in a text, an image or a piece of music, which can serve as a solution to auditory distress. Narrativisation applies a rather rigorous structure, based on the way we create narratives in language, though textual input is not mandatory. It is thereby possible that one performance allows for many subjective narratives to occur. While analysing the production of space through narrativisation, I came across incompatible spaces that are not contained completely in the narrative discourse of the particular performance. Narrativisation does not account entirely for all the spaces that emerge as a response to auditory distress through different modes of listening.

Consequently, in the following chapter, I discuss ‘auditory imagination’ as a third way to respond to auditory distress, besides the listening modes and narrativisation. As a departure point, I will focus on the issue of an imaginary space that we could produce in relation to voice, sound or music. In the discussion of oral and literate modes, I already suggested that we create images in our minds as a means to respond to sounds. I want to examine
The Frequency of Imagination

further how we produce images of spaces in relation to the sonorous envelope of voice. It will therefore be necessary to define the role of ‘imagination’ in the context of auditory experiences. I will then question whether auditory imagination is in contrast to narrativisation, or, rather, is mutually dependent upon the human urge to make sense. In addition, I will investigate the role of texts and images, what W.J.T. Mitchell (1986) calls the ‘imagetext’ in one word. I will relate this concept to the imaginary production of spaces in sound and music, which I will discuss as ‘spatialisation’. Finally, I will examine how aural competences help our imagination to find alternative meanings in response to auditory distress.
Photo Alexandru Agache in Blauwbaards Burcht © Peter Missotten
Chapter 4
The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation

In the previous chapter, I explained how narrativisation as a mode of listening offers the listener a temporary solution to auditory distress and to the impasse between perception and interpretation that an excess of intensities might bring about. Through narrativisation, the listener can create meaningful relations between music, texts and images, including the gestures of the performer’s vocalic body. By expanding the definition of narrative, I showed how narrativisation could also be of use for the listener in performances that tend to purposefully disrupt any singular narrative unfolding by not offering a linear development, coherence or closure, but rather an excess of possible meanings. A narrative mode of listening should then be understood as a response to this excess that causes auditory distress.

As we have seen, narrativisation gives rise to diegetic spaces populated by fictional characters (musical and vocal personas), as long as focalization is implied. However, in cases of no evident narrative impulse, or in absence of focalization, we can still produce fictional spaces in our relation to sound or music without narrativisation. The signifying and structural aspects of narrativising music cannot fully explain the multiplicity of spaces that have both material and imaginary validity in our perception of music theatre. Neither is the production of space through narrative content or narrative discourse the sole answer to turn auditory distress into a meaningful experience. Therefore, I propose a third and final mode of relating to sound and music that allows the listener to create synthesis in her or his experiences of music theatre in a less rigorous way than narrativisation: auditory imagination. Spatialisation, that is the perception and production of space in sound and music, materialises and demonstrates the workings of auditory imagination.

In this chapter, I establish a theoretical framework in order to discuss the connections between auditory imagination, haptic experiences of space and the listener as subject in listening. My aim is to demonstrate how the listener’s responses to auditory distress are rooted in the comprehensive workings of the imagination. After a brief introduction on the formation of an imagined unity in the listening subject in relation to the sonorous envelope, I develop three arguments. First, I discuss the concept of ‘auditory imagination’ in relation to the notion of imagination and explain how it contributes to an understanding of the listener’s responses to auditory distress in the theatre. Second, I distinguish the workings of auditory imagination from narrativisation. Although the two share many similar functions, such as their mutual contribution to create unity, coherence and continuity in the listener’s experiences, they differ in terms of ordering auditory perceptions. While
narrativisation could specifically assume a linear development (as in melody) or some sense of temporal structure, auditory imagination allows for a more spatial ordering of auditory experiences. Third, I argue that, in our perception and (re)production of haptic space through spatialisation, auditory imagination can help the listener to achieve the unified experiences required to stabilise the auditory self.

After having established this conceptual framework, I illustrate how the imaginative response works differently in two case studies. I discuss respectively Blauwbaards Burcht (Bluebeard’s Castle, 2006) and Men in Tribulation (2004-2006), both produced by Muziektheater Transparant. I argue that the metaphor of the ‘theatre of the mind’ (Ingram 2005) can be applied to both performances to discuss how the stage not only stirs the imagination, but also offers a self-reflexive outlook to one’s own imaginative responses. I interpret both performances as monodramas, playing in the heads of the protagonists. In both case studies, I explain how the monodrama gives rise to the idea of a theatre in the mind, in the ‘headscape’ that relates us to the worlds of the protagonists, as if the imagination could be compared to a stage in front of our consciousness on which mental images are played out. This theatre of the mind can make the spectator aware of the ways in which she or he produces space and, thereby, spatialises her or his experiences as a response to auditory distress in the theatre.

In what follows, I develop this idea further as a departure point for my main argument: the imaginative response helps the listener to deal with the auditory distress in relation to the construct of the theatre. The theatre of the mind in these music theatre performances notably reveals how the listener

---

140 The trope of the ‘theatre of the mind’ has a longstanding history in which consciousness has often been compared to a stage (similar to Plato’s cave analogy). This understanding of the notion appears, for instance, in Jay Ingram’s popularised book *Theatre of the Mind: Raising the Curtain on Consciousness* (2005). In particular, and in relation to the auditory imagination, there are references to this metaphor in Ferrington (1993), and indirectly in Forrester (2000). Both use this term to discuss how sound can create a theatre for the listener’s imagination. The latter compares the imagination to a play in the listener’s head when listening to a radio drama: ‘The listener, however, occupies a corresponding ‘listening zone’, which Gray (1991) claims is the imagination, the creativity of the mind or, to paraphrase Beck (1998), this is the second play in the audience’s head, where the listener is the “final actor’ and ‘director”’ (Forrester 2000: 45).

In my study, this notion makes a convenient counterpart to Francis Dhomont’s term ‘cinema for the ears’, which he uses for acousmatic music. With regard to the inner space in the mind, one sometimes refers to the term ‘headscape’. R. Murray Schafer (1977) defines this notion in rather pejorative terms, though he includes also the more neutral definition related to the listening experience with headphones: “‘Head-space’ is a popular expression with the young, referring to the geography of the mind, which be reached by no telescope. Drugs and music are the means of invoking entry. In the head-space of earphone listening, the sounds not only circulate around the listener, they literally seem to emanate from points in the cranium itself, as if the archetypes of the unconscious were in conversation” (Schafer 1977: 118-9). Schafer’s description also reflects the idea of a theatre in the mind where the archetypes appear as actors on a private stage of our consciousness.
creates new meaningful unities and coherencies in listening through the imagination as a response to the distress. It is worth mentioning at this point that, in Dutch, no distinction is made between the words for ‘representation’ and ‘imagination’ in homonyms such as ‘verbeelding’ and ‘voorstelling’ (which are differentiated in, for instance, German, as in Darstellung and Vorstellung). Though this chapter investigates the close connection between the two notions, which could suggest at some point that their conceptual boundaries are blurred, caution is needed not to confuse them. The representation of a protagonist’s imagination should by no means be conflated with the workings of the listener’s private imagination, which in its turn does not have to be at all congruent with the representation on the stage.

1. A Theatre of the Imagination: An Imagined Unity in the Listening Subject

Read through the metaphor of the ‘theatre of the mind’, the two performances that I examine in this chapter provide us with a starting point for discussing the imaginative response to auditory distress. Blauwbaards Burcht evokes a theatre of the mind through its libretto and images. The dialogues give us continuous glimpses into Bluebeard’s subconscious, while proceeding toward the inside of his castle: the room with his alleged dead wives. Whereas in Béla Bartók’s opera the imagination is suggested as something that is to be externalised into consciousness141, in Men in Tribulation it is suggested, rather, through sound and technology as a state of Artaud’s troubled mind. Here, the idea of a theatre in the mind invites me to read the performance as a monodrama playing in the headspace of an old Artaud as some kind of delirium tremens, which plagues him from outside into his deepest self. As such, the persona of Artaud becomes a figment of the spectator’s own imagination, while everything surrounding her or him directs to interiorisation.

By alluding to the idea of the imagination as a stage, these two performances create awareness of the theatre space in which fictional and diegetic worlds materialise in the listener’s imagination. I concluded chapter 141 Ingram’s understanding of the theatre of the mind suggests that consciousness is not something played out on a small screen or a stage in front of a rather passively receiving subject looking at the mental images from within a vast audience, i.e. the unconscious. Rather, Ingram argues, we alternate our attention to this small stage populated by agents, objects and ideas, feeding back to the ‘unconscious audience’, which is sending back in its turn messages to the stage in order to screen out what is unnecessary to be raised into consciousness. Ingram suggests that consciousness (the ‘mind’ in his understanding) is not an all-knowing thing, but that much of what is processed and filtered out by our cognition goes unconsciously through routine. This thesis supports my earlier claims that the ‘screening out’ of excessive information is a necessary, automatic response that enables every sense production (see chapter one). The cognitive channeling in the feedback between the stage of our minds and the unconscious ultimately would safeguard the listener as subject from auditory distress in an excess of acoustic information.
three with the observation that the singer’s voice in music and operatic theatre creates such a discursive space that adjoins an opaque physical space of the performance with fictional and narrative spaces within the representation. The voice constitutes an auditory environment that makes the listener recognise the voice-body of the performer as a fictional character (a musical persona), who in turn shares an inner emotional world with the listener within the general diegesis and/or representation. Apart from reading the words in a song, this way of identifying a character with a voice-body is first and foremost established through the voice’s address of the listener’s imaginative competences. In the performances I discuss in this chapter, the aspect of the theatre of the mind raises awareness of this mechanism.

In relation to this theatre that highlights the functioning of auditory imagination, I want to pick up on the idea of voice as a discursive space once more to discuss how the listener makes sense of her or his auditory experiences in relation to an embodied, or ‘haptic’ experience of this space. I thereby question why the listener identifies fictional characters as unified totalities, despite the opacity of the performance. The analysis is composed of two arguments: first, I argue that the listener’s imaginative responses relate to a sense of one’s embodied self as subject of listening. Second, this embodied self is experienced through these imaginative responses as a unity. This unity of the listening subject proves precisely to be at stake in both case studies through the listener’s relation to space. Whereas in *Blauwbaards Burcht* the space is hierarchically designed as a vertical triangle in front of the audience granting the spectator a certain sense of spatial control and perspective, in *Men in Tribulation* the performance space surrounds the audience in a pentagonal shape confusing the listener’s spatial awareness. In both performances, the construction of space aims at fragmentation of the auditory experiences and listening space. The stage of the theatre of the mind then becomes a space of contestation, where the imaginary unity of the listening subject is questioned.

In Mary Ann Doane’s “The Voice in the Cinema” (1980), I find a preliminary answer to why we experience our embodied ‘selves’ as unities in relation to sound and especially to the voice. In this article, I find support to connect the workings of the imagination to the perception and production of space, and a sense of self. Doane’s argument focuses on the acousmatic split between sound and image that is inherent to the cinematic apparatus. Doane argues that, because of this split, the presence of a voice needs to be compensated by sound techniques that recreate its connection with the physical environment it belongs to. This unification is achieved in the fantasmatic space that we imagine through *spatialisation*: “The fantasmatic visual space which the film constructs is supplemented by techniques designed to spatialise the voice, to localise it, give it depth and thus lend to the characters the consistency of the real” (Doane 1980: 36). At this point, Doane refers indirectly to a causal listening mode that would anchor sound – more
specifically, the voice – and its originating bodies in the space of the image: “Just as the voice must be anchored by a given body, the body must be anchored in a given space” (1980: 36). She suggests that sound addresses the spectator’s modes of perception in such a specific way that she or he would disregard the perceptual split and anchor sound in the fantasmatic visual space, as conveyed by the image. She thereby implies a relation between the cinematic apparatus and the spectator who compensates for the split in her or his modes of perception through an imaginative response.

Though the object of Doane’s argument is cinema, I propose to extend her argument to music theatre and its mechanisms in the listener’s imagination. In theatre too, though in a dissimilar experience of sound and image, the listener might feel an unconscious urge to attribute a source to a sound. Because of the acousmatic nature of every sound, in terms of the ‘ventriloquist’ effect (Dolar 2006) as I explained earlier, causal listening then materialises a fundamental urge to make the sound come to rest in an image, a body or a space. Causal listening, however, always marks a fundamental difference between the sound and its source body, since we always construe the latter in our imagination, even when we know that the sound is coming from a directly perceivable source. However, I have already argued that imagining the source is only secondary to the temporary significance we give to the sound by placing it and relating it to ourselves. In this context, I concluded that, in seeking this relation we are taking up a position, instigated by auditory distress, with which we create meaningful auditory experiences to give stability to our auditory selves. As such, our listening bodies are always anchored in a given acoustic space in relational terms as a result of the place and meaning we give to the sounds in our imagination.

Doane develops her claims further about the connections between voice, body and space through the psychoanalytical concept of the sonorous envelope:

The mother’s soothing voice, in a particular cultural context, is a major component of the ‘sonorous envelope’ which surrounds the child and is the first model of auditory pleasure. An image of corporeal unity is derived from the realization that the production of sound by the voice and its audition coincide. The imaginary fusion of the child with the mother is supported by the recognition of common traits characterizing the different voices and, more particularly, of their potential for harmony. According to Rosolato, the voice in music makes appeal to the nostalgia for such an imaginary cohesion, for a ‘veritable incantation’ of bodies (1980: 44-5).

In this model, the sound of the voice contributes to experiences of unity in the listener as subject on the one hand, while constituting separation between bodies on the other. The latter is often referred to as the ‘acoustic mirror’, in
which the listener recognises her or himself as subject of listening, an auditory self.

In chapter one, I introduced Guy Rosolato’s suggestion that the sonorous envelope could remind us of a desire for an embodied unity against the fragmentation in our auditory selves. This idea could be transposed to the voice in both film and music theatre. To make her claims about the voice in cinema, Doane cites Serge Leclaire’s *Démasquer le réel* (1971): “Between a (more or less inaccessible) memory and a very precise (and localisable) immediacy of perception is opened the gap where pleasure is produced” (Doane 1980: 43). The gap here seems to appear between the moment of experience and a memory of the acoustic mirror. The voice then gives rise to a ‘phantasm’ of the body as a memory of the psychoanalytic pleasure in the divergence between present experience and past satisfaction. In Doane’s psychoanalytic approach, imagination inheres in a memory of the first experiences of pleasure in the voice. In the same way, it exists in the desire for regaining an embodied immediacy in our auditory perceptions that would bring us back to this hallucinatory satisfaction, which the voice once offered. The pleasure of hearing and listening is then constituted in an imaginary overcoming of this gap when we are not aware of our ‘selves’ as distinctive, as in the acoustic mirror. As a result, the ‘phantasmatic body’ in the voice marks a relation of the listener to her or his own body in terms of unity, cohesion and, hence, an identity framed in this relation.

Doane’s claims about cinema resemble my earlier concerns about the regulative perspectives and stabilising points of listening in the theatre that offer ways to channel the auditory distress. Similar to the “manufacturing of the ‘hallucination’ of a fully sensory world” through the workings of vision and hearing (Doane 1980: 46), in traditional operatic theatre, visual and aural perspectives had the similar effect of a phantasm supported by the multisensory address of the spectator. These perspectives had to safeguard the illusion of coherence and identity of the self, a unitary subject against the ‘trauma’ of dispersal, dismemberment, difference. I want to argue that the

---

142 In studies of voice and music in opera, Rosolato’s suggestions – usually read through Kaja Silverman’s book *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) – would connect a fetishist desire for the ‘maternal’ sonorous envelope to operatic singing. This argument has found only partial acceptance (see Michel Poizat 1992, David Schwarz 1997, Steven Connor 2000). Many scholars have pointed to the connections between opera and early cinema (see, for instance, Michal Grover-Friedlander 2005). However, the voice in opera calls for a different stratagem in the desire for a unitary subject than the voice in cinema. I use Doane’s argument only as an entry point to look at the listener’s bodily experience of the sonorous envelope in contemporary music theatre to discuss the disintegration of the listening subject, rather than its imagined unity.


144 See chapter two about the regulative workings of perspectives (‘points of listening’) in the ways theatre and sound can manage the listener’s attention.
theatre of the mind, when alluded to on the stage, raises awareness for the homogenising workings of the imagination. It shows that unity is an illusion, which is an effect of our imaginative responses.

Doane’s argument gives us a preliminary idea of the connection between the listener’s imagination and the embodied experience of sound that results in a sense of unity. I want to further investigate this unity through the notions of auditory imagination, embodied listening (more specifically, ‘auditory bliss’ with reference to Barthes’s *jouissance*) and haptic space in the theatre. In order to do so, I explore the connections between body, imagination and subjectivity in the listener’s responses to auditory distress. In my argument, music theatre structures the listener’s imagination by suggesting different listening perspectives. The listener, in turn, relates to these perspectives and deals with the auditory distress through an imaginative response. Instead of aiming at a sense of unity in the listening subject, contemporary music theatre generally decentres a narrative orientation through spatial disintegration. In so doing, this type of music theatre challenges the idea of a ‘total’ space in theatre. Instead of an anaesthetising immersion, the appeal on the imagination offers an aperture for the listener to relate actively to the sonorous space and position her or himself against the dispersion of auditory distress.

In the following subsection, I first consider different characteristics of imagination and auditory imagination that would help me to investigate the imaginative response in relation to discursive listening in the theatre. Second, I specify, in comparison to narrativisation, how auditory imagination contributes to the discussion of meaning-making as a way for the listener to position her or himself in relation to the auditory distress and the channelling mechanisms in the theatre. Finally, I discuss embodied listening and haptic space, and their contribution to the listener’s imaginative responses.

1.1. Imagination and Auditory Imagination

Both imagination and auditory imagination are historically constructed concepts. Thus, the history of thought is full of numerous definitions of the former, and there are wide-ranging suggestions in phenomenology and psychology about the workings of the latter. Moreover, the use of the term ‘imagination’ in popular discourse today has various overtones of ‘fantasy’, which I do not wish to allude to.\(^\text{145}\) Here, I discuss those characteristics of

\(^{145}\)‘Fantasy’ is also a historically dependent but related notion. Imagination in this sense is connected to the faculty to make ‘synaesthetic’ connections between different sense modalities. Consider, for instance, Walt Disney’s legendary animated movie *Fantasia* (1940) and its more recent spin-off *Fantasia 2000*, in which music is visualised in both abstract and figurative forms, suggesting and following a certain narrative. In the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century, there is Baudelaire’s famous discussion of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s musical writing about synaesthetic correspondences which suggests that the imagination connects experiences of the different senses to create a sense of harmony and analogy: “In ‘The Salon of 1846,’ he writes, quoting Ernst Hoffmann
The Frequency of Imagination

imagination that concern the listening experience. I then formulate the definition and functions of auditory imagination on the basis of these characteristics.

In the conclusion to her extensive philosophical study, Mary Warnock (1976) formulates two main characteristics that recur in the history and theory of the imagination:

Imagination is our means of interpreting the world, and it is also our means of forming images in the mind. The images themselves are not separate from our interpretations of the world; they are our way of thinking of the objects in the world. We see the forms in our mind’s eye and we see these very forms in the world. We could not do one of these things if we could not do the other. The two abilities are joined in our ability to understand that the forms have a certain meaning, that they are always significant of other things beyond themselves (194).

According to Warnock, imagination has two defining aspects that are intrinsically related: it includes a way to invoke mental imagery and it suggests a unifying activity. The faculty of creating mental images (in our ‘mind’s eye’) helps us to interpret and attribute meaning, which is defined in terms of our relation to the world. It therefore serves as a discursive means to fill in the blanks in our perceptions in order to create a sense of continuity.

One defining aspect is that the imagination actively produces images. This faculty is generally dependent on memory, which can be subjectively based on experientiality or shared with a community through cultural discourse. In this sense, imagination aims at ‘apprehension’ (Rée 1999: 149). It apprehends

from Hoffmann’s Kreisleriana: ‘It is not only in dreams, or in the mild delirium which precedes sleep, but it is even awakened when I hear music – that perception of an analogy and an intimate connection between colours, sounds and perfumes. It seems to me that all these things were created by one and the same ray of light, and that their combination must result in a wonderful concert of harmony’ (Shaw-Miller 2002: 55).

In the course of this chapter, I do not intend to engage with traditional definitions of imagination that indicate the artist’s authority in terms of creativity or genius, nor the listener’s agency in having an alternative reservoir of knowledge at her or his disposal at will against the objectifying methods of a (musicological) mode of ‘structural listening’, which Adorno himself would oppose. Neither do I refer to imagination as ‘fantasy’, often understood as an illusory power of producing mental images. Rather, my aim is to discuss auditory imagination in relation to the discourse of listening, though not without the understanding that imagination is a very subjective but codified experience, including both affective and unconscious responses that affect signification, and in effect, the listening subject.

It has a longstanding tradition and played an essential role in Immanuel Kant’s Critical Philosophy where the imagination is defined – in line with the empiricists – as an activity that gives order to experience according to certain rules or schemata: “The schema, like a particular image, is something which the imagination makes for itself, and which it then applies to experience in order to render it intelligible to the understanding. It is, it seems, a kind of readiness on the part of the imagination to produce an image where necessary” (Warnock 1976: 31). Without going into detail of the historical ramifications of the ‘schema’ in human thought, it suffices to state here that the mental image is produced in the imagination as a way to grasp
the world by conforming its objects to our knowledge, our ‘world-pictures’. A second aspect, continuity, relates to this apprehension of the world through mental images. Mark Johnson (1987) therefore defines imagination “as a power to form unified images, and to recall in memory past images, so as to constitute a unified and coherent experience” (149). This stresses the unifying faculty of the imagination in bringing synthesis to the manifold, singular and atomistic perceptions. It thereby mediates and bridges the gap between sensation and thought (144). Specifically, it provides us with “unifying structures of our consciousness that constitute the ultimate conditions for our being able to experience any object whatever” (151). Imagination is then understood as our capacity to mould experience by which the images attribute and solidify meanings in an otherwise disintegrated world of experiences. Imagination’s unifying activity is indispensable to make any sensory experience possible.

Based on these two central aspects, namely an apprehending function through mental images and a unifying function, I conclude that imagination contributes to a sense of structure in our perceptions, by bridging bodily experience with discursive comprehension. Seen this way, imagination lies at the heart of any interpretation or signifying process. As a way to fulfil a human inclination to find meaning in perception, imagination also contributes indirectly to keeping sensory overload at bay. Working as a filter, it channels and structures our experiences into significant categories and unities.

Thus, we can regard imagination, alongside the listening modes and narrativisation, as a specific mode of relating to sound and music that appears as a response to the intensities we perceive. When sound or music cause distress, imagination becomes a response that offers synthesis in our perceptions that make the sounds or music recognisable to us in relation to what we already know and can understand. The imaginative response enables us to make connections with, for instance, images and meanings with which we associate the sounds or music in a given context. This gives our auditory experiences a sense of significance. When we consider that these images and meanings are part of a culturally specific set, it follows that the imaginative responses of the listener also operate in relation to this cultural discourse. In this way, the imaginative responses to auditory distress in the theatre are genuinely discursive in the way they contribute to meaningful experiences.

I now propose to deduce from the rather general characteristics of imagination a more specific sense of auditory imagination. This term has a
The Frequency of Imagination

rather recent history in comparison to the philosophical definitions of the human imagination. It was given more substance during the twentieth century with the developments in phenomenology and psychology. In many cases, auditory imagination is defined as the ability to hold a tune in your memory or invoke musical imagery, as if one could have a whole orchestra at one’s disposal ready to play on the private stage of the imagination (Sacks 2007: 31-2). Some scholars point to a sense of double perception between the actual experience of perceived music and the experience of a usually known piece of music playing in our minds as imagined sound. Forrester (2000) suggests:

Although we know the source of the music is external to our bodies, our phenomenal experience is of music playing in our heads, sounds and images intermeshed with thoughts, reflections and associated responses to the music. What is inside and what is outside becomes unclear, an observation which should remind us that to listen is not the same thing as to hear in a passive sense (36).

Here, Forrester draws our attention to the stream of thoughts, imagery and associations in the mind that can co-occur while listening to music. In this way, auditory imagination creates a double perception in our minds while listening to music, guided by our expectations and own musical imagery.

Don Ihde (2003) goes even further in his phenomenological approach to include possible conflicts and resistances between imagined and perceived sounds:

[…] I seek out the peculiarities of the auditory dimensional characteristics. I notice that there are distances and resistances between the imaginative and perceptual modes of experience regarding copresence. There is a ratio of focus to fringe in the dual polyphony of perceived and imagined sound. Perceived sound, as in the case of ‘white sound’, or programmed background music, floats lazily around me, and I find I can easily retire into my ‘thinking self’ and allow the perceptual presence to recede from focal awareness. But a series of variations illustrate that there are also distances and resistances in the polyphony of perceived and imagined sound (61-2).

149 Oliver Sacks (2007) finds support in neurological research with brain-imaging techniques such as the MRI scan: “imagining music can indeed activate the auditory cortex almost as strongly as listening to it” (Sacks 2007: 32). He quotes extensively from neuro-scientific research by Robert Zatorre, Halpern, Alvaro Pascual-Leone, and William Kelley, which he applies to case studies from his practice in psychology.

150 Don Ihde (1976) further describes how auditory imagination can include instances of both distracted and intense listening, allowing for associations or even one’s own musical additions. In his idea, auditory imagination shows how we compose our own listening experiences: “I attend a concert, and while it is playing I begin, in fancy, to ‘embroider’ the perceived piece of music with co-present imaginative tonalities. With some practice it soon becomes possible to create quasi-synthetic dissonances, adumbrations, variations upon the actual themes being played” (Ihde 1976; 2003: 63). Ihde stresses that auditory imagination goes hand in hand with
The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation

According to Ihde, the listener’s attention vacillates between perceived and imagined sounds in terms of expectations and resolutions, especially when one is already familiar with the sound or the piece of music in a certain linear development as in a melody. At this point, he would most likely agree with Sacks’s psychological observations about memory and musical imagery in the auditory imagination; however, this is not his focus. Rather, Ihde problematises the duality in the listening attention when it intervenes thought and, hence, a sense of ‘self’.

Furthermore, Ihde’s phenomenological observations about the auditory imagination can be read as a way to resist auditory distress:

If suddenly the sounds of the environment increase in intensity and volume, particularly if not constant, I begin to find a resistance to the maintenance of ‘inner’ focus to ‘outer’ sound. The perceived sound in its penetrating capacity disturbs my train of thought. […] The intrusive presence of sound may penetrate into even my ‘thinking’ self-presence (Ihde 2003: 62).

Here, Ihde suggests that sound can intervene and penetrate in our sense of self. Music – or any sudden sound for that matter – could disrupt our train of thought as an ‘inner voice’. In chapter one, I argued that when a particular sound or music creates auditory distress, it causes unwanted intensities, which threaten our sense of auditory self. In a similar way, Ihde argues that the imaginative response to the acoustic intervention mutes the inner voice of his thoughts:

When involved in presentifying the ‘embroidery’ of an imaginative musical ‘addition’ to the perceived music, I note that my inner speech ceases. I am ‘in’ the music. I discover here a resistance to simultaneously ‘thinking in a language’ and imaginatively presenting music (65).

In this conflicting experience, Ihde finds evidence of the embodied aspect of our thoughts in inner speech. He regards the inner voice as one type of auditory imagination, which contributes to a sense of thinking self: “Inner

certain aural competences that allow the listener to imagine tones in relation to the perceived ones.

In contrast, Nicholas Cook (1990) discusses the potential of auditory imagination in the musician while performing: he therefore describes it as an imaginative vocalisation, an ‘inner singing’ in the musician’s mind in terms of ‘internalised performance actions’.

Ihde’s aim is to restore the embodied aspect of thought and imagination, which has been overlooked due to a long historical tradition of knowledge as disembodied thought: “In part, this phenomenon as a phenomenon of a special type of auditory imaginative activity may have been overlooked because of the long tradition of interpretation that maintains a ‘metaphysical’ and ‘Cartesian’ stance toward thought. This tradition takes for granted that thought is disembodied. Thus in spite of discussion of ‘mental word’ [sic!], the persistence of a dualism of ‘acoustic tokens’ and disembodied ‘meanings’ continues” (Ihde 1976; 2003: 64).
The Frequency of Imagination

speech is an almost continuous aspect of self-presence. Within the 'contingency' of human language it is focally embodied in thought as an imaginative modality of spoken and heard language (65). The double bind of imagined and perceived sounds could then cause distress by intervening in these embodied thoughts, thus creating unwanted disruptions to the subject and its inner voice.

Ihde highlights the multi-sidedness of the subject in its constitution by means of a plurality of inner voices in the human imagination. In his argument, language receives a primary role, which explains why the perception and imagination of sound can disrupt the logocentric tendencies in the human urge to make sense and think in language. However, Ihde’s understanding does not at first recognise the multiplicity of voices within inner speech. Subjectivity is itself plural, which would challenge Ihde’s claim that the sense of self is disrupted by many voices, including imagined and perceived sounds. Rather, the subject is created by this plurality. In order to include this, Ihde does make a concession. He embraces the possibility of co-presence of imagined and perceived sounds, which would not immediately exclude the inner voice(s) of thought: “But while sound poses a threat of seduction in some of its occurrences, which intrude ‘inwardly’, there are also possibilities of co-present polyphony of auditory experiences of the perceptual and imaginative modalities” (62).

Despite this acknowledgment, Ihde’s argument does not allow much room for a sense of multiplicity in the self that would include auditory experiences for which words are not immediately necessary (a ‘subject of audition’ instead of a subject of speech). We can, however, deduce from his arguments that auditory imagination plays a role in the response to auditory distress as it compensates for the conflicts in our conscious attention and sense of self-presence. In a similar way to the role imagination plays in unifying experiences and suggesting connections between mental images and meanings, auditory imagination could also function to create temporary coherence and stability in listening.

In the theatre, the unifying and homogenising workings of our auditory imagination could work as safeguards to our inner selves, which would enable us to make our auditory experiences signify beyond themselves. However, the theatre productions I discuss in this chapter – under the denominator of ‘theatre of the mind’ – disrupt the experience of unity in the perception of space and, ultimately, in the sense of self. Imagination is then called upon for

153 Ihde’s inclination towards the psychoanalytic subject made up by language (the ‘subject of speech’ in Benveniste’s theory, see chapter one) becomes apparent, when he states: “Inner speech as a form of auditory imagination hides itself. Yet in this hidden, fragile, and difficult to locate phenomenon are deeper existential significances for the understanding of human beings as language” (Ihde 1976; 2003: 64).
the sense of temporary coherence it brings to the listening subject, which functions as a response to auditory distress.

1.2. Imagination versus Narrativisation

The above characteristics of the human imagination, including auditory imagination, call for a comparison to narrativisation. To what extent do imagination and narrativisation differ? And to what extent do they depend on one another? If they were two separate modes of response, would they collaborate with or, rather, contrast each other? And if they were interdependent, would narrativisation be a subcategory of imagination, or just another manifestation of the desire to create meaningful experiences?

In chapter three, I already suggested several resemblances between narrativisation and imagination. Peter Handke’s short story in *De Overstroming* discloses an allegory of narrativisation that offers a critical outlook through the focalization of the blind brother. Gauged through his eyes, the descriptions as told by the seeing brother culminate in an imagination going astray, which poses a boundary to narrativisation. Narrativisation burgeons on the imagination: the reader imagines the narrative events on the basis of familiarity and experientiality through patterns, private associations and mental images. When the credibility of a narrative is questioned, the very basis of what we just imagined disintegrates. Correspondingly, the story offers a self-critical frame for the listener to interpret the musical events, which incite a narrative way of listening. The story then holds not only a mirror to the limits of storytelling and narrativisation as a way of reading; it also calls into question the very role of the listener’s imagination in narrativising the auditory experiences. Extramusical and intertextual references, such as a poem, a story and an epigraph in the programme brochure, are very prominent in *De Overstroming* in giving clear-cut starting points for the imagination to enable narrativisation.

*De Helling van de Oude Wijven* presents us with a further illustration of how a multiplicity of texts creates ambiguity that invites the spectator to synthesise and make connections her or himself by means of narrativisation. It shows us how the imagination plays a role in the creation of fictional characters and diegetic spaces, even when there is no one, straightforward narrative development. Depending on one’s attention, narrativisation could give rise to the production and perception of multiple spaces in sound or music: physical, fictional, diegetic spaces that co-occur but can also create abrasions between them. This demonstrates that narrativisation does not only need to be linear, but can be spatial as well. However, as Doane suggested earlier, we produce imaginary or ‘fantasmatic’ spaces that do not have to be identical to the spaces in a narrative. We produce such spaces because of an urge to relate to sounds, place them and anchor them in a listening
environment as a result of the atopical or acousmatic aspect of sound. Narrativisation offers one way to relate to sounds and anchor them in narrative space. Yet the imaginative production of space is more comprehensive and calls for further examination. Spatialisation suggests a fundamental divergence between imagination and narrativisation as modes of relating to sound, which I want to address further in this chapter.

From these case studies in chapter three, I deduce retrospectively that imagination contributes to narrativisation; yet that the latter is more constrained. I want to argue here that narrativisation and imagination are two very compelling faculties in the human mind that contribute to meaningful experiences, but have a certain unevenness between them. Narrativisation and imagination both contribute as modes of relating oneself to sound and music by giving structure to experience, though with a noteworthy difference. The definition of narrativisation presented us with limitations in our relation to sound and music: although verbalisation was not required, narrativisation suggested a way of structuring that is closely entangled with language. I contend that imagination also structures our auditory experiences, though in a more inclusive way than narrativisation. Imagination can then be regarded as a comprehensive category that enables narrativisation but does not presuppose it. Therefore imagination and narrativisation should be regarded hierarchically as two separate modes, with imagination at the basis of narrativisation. In order to make this claim, I propose to look deeper into the presuppositions surrounding imagination and compare them to narrativisation.

Michael Nyman formulates the importance of the imagination in interpreting modern music as such:

> The listener should be possessed ideally of an open, free-flowing mind, capable of assimilating in its own way a type of music that does not present a set of finalized, calculated, pre-focused, projected musical relationships and meanings. The listener may supply his own meanings if that is what he wants; or he may leave himself open to taking in any eventually, bearing in mind George Brecht’s proviso that any ‘act of imagination or perception is in itself an arrangement, so there is no avoiding anyone making arrangements’ (qtd. in Nyman 1999: 25).

Nyman suggests that the imagination answers to a human need to arrange our perceptions in order to make them meaningful. Listening to music, then, involves the ordering of our musical experiences. This arrangement, in George Brecht’s words, is unavoidable and presupposes an act of our imagination. According to Nyman, this function of arranging does not shut out the possibility of a ‘free-flowing mind’, enabling relatively free and subjective associations. This way of arranging and composing our musical experience ourselves is highlighted when no inherent musical relations or meanings are predetermined, which can therefore also be considered as relevant in the context of the music theatre I discuss.
Mark Johnson (1987) relates the arranging function as a defining characteristic of imagination to the philosophy of Kant, which argues that “all meaningful experience and all understanding involves the activity of imagination which orders our representations (the reproductive function) and constitutes the temporal unity of our consciousness (the productive function)” (157). According to Johnson, both productive and reproductive functions of the imagination contribute to our capacity to organise our mental representations into coherent unities (140). Applied to music, auditory imagination would then offer us a way to reproduce certain structures, patterns and meanings that make the musical experience meaningful to us. Most experimental music brings to our awareness that we actively create such an arrangement ourselves in relation to the music. Nyman ideally calls then for an open mind – similar to the evenly hovering attention (chapter two) – to this type of music that does not give fixed perceptual structures on its own. Yet the reproductive function of the imaginative response is not exclusive to this type of music. Imagination generally offers a way for us to deal with our perceptions by giving them both a temporary coherence and arrangement.

Seen this way, narrativisation is one dominant manifestation of the imagination’s reproductive, organising function. As we saw in chapter three, a narrative is an arrangement of events in a given temporal order; by definition, a linear, chronological or causal development. This implies a rather restrictive arrangement of the events that offers a certain familiarity for the reader. Narrativisation, however, has expanded the definition by including relations in retrospect, and by allowing simultaneous interpretations that could be incompatible. It still presupposes a certain logic or coherence between these relations and interpretations. This reproductive function gives narrativisation a prominent place in our understanding of the world, or any perceived object for that matter, in the way it attributes a temporary arrangement and coherence to

154 The consequence of this reproductive function is that we can only know the world through the symbols we create ourselves in our imagination. In Susanne Langer’s theory of the imagination, we know the world or ‘reality’ by ‘conceiving the structure of it through words, images or other symbols (Langer 1962: 150). Through the conceptual structures of our imagination we assimilate actual experiences as they come. This is what Langer calls ‘imagining reality’. According to this principle, the world as it appears in human experience is framed, conceptually structured and only perceptible through symbols (what Langer calls the ‘vehicles of thought’).

155 According to Eric Clarke (2002), the auditory events in a music performance give the impression to segment themselves in such a way that they address the listener to structure the events through her or his short-term memory: “In listening to performance, we are primarily sensitive to what is happening now in a continuous flow. This flow is not seamless, however: in the performance of most music, particular events segment the stream and periodically provide an opportunity to organise the events of the last few seconds and consign them to memory” (192). The presence of the auditory experience takes our full attention, while only a memory of a ‘few seconds’ is organised retrospectively. The past is then always experienced through the arrangements we make in the presence.
our experiences. In this function, narrativisation sponges on the workings of the imagination. However, it offers a more rigorous structure than imagination, necessitating a certain impulse in the listener to arrange the experiences approximating language. In contrast, imagination can be understood as the all-encompassing faculty of apprehending and assimilating experiences to meaningful structures and categories, which can go beyond the necessity of a narrative or a sense of narrativity.

With the reproductive function in common, both imagination and narrativisation reproduce a cultural discourse in the way they give order to our mental representations. We have adopted certain ways to apply our knowledge of the world – as contained in discourse – through experience, acculturation and practice. Correspondingly, we have acquired and can still develop certain auditory competences that make use of this discourse when we listen and search for meaning in music or sound. When reproducing discourse by giving meaningful structures to our experiences, narrativisation and imagination presuppose these competences that are entrenched by a cultural discourse. However, as a more comprehensive faculty of apprehension, the imagination forms the basis of our modes of perception, which includes the listening modes. Narrativisation as a mode of listening is then subordinate to the workings of the imagination.

As a final point in response to the close connection between imagination and narrativisation, I want to invoke once more how Handke’s story in *De Overstroming* warns the reader or listener of the imagination going astray in comparison to what she or he knows of the world. Mary Warnock (1976) confirms this concern when laying bare the stabilising effects of the imagination that strive for synthesis while disregarding the gaps in our rather fragmentary perceptions (like perpetually blinking, moving, going to sleep, etc.):

> Imagination is not only the helpful assistant […] it has turned out to be the deceiver, who gives us an altogether unwarranted sense of security in the world. It is like a drug, without which we could not bear to inhabit the world (25).

Don Ihde’s notion of auditory imagination, for instance, does not consider the possibility of discourse as taking part in listening to music or sound that does not contain verbal content. Discourse, in his argument, relates rather to the inner voice, which the acoustic intervention disrupts. In this opposition, the acoustic intervention poses a boundary to thought when it takes our full attention, and as such, auditory distress threatens a sense of self in the listener: a thinking self. Auditory imagination can then be understood as restoring the sense of self in relation to discourse by making the experience of the intervention meaningful.

Warnock (1976) argues through Hume’s suspicion of the senses as a basis of knowledge: “The sense themselves, therefore, cannot supply us with any material for our belief in the continued existence of things in the world” (22). However, “the imagination is apt to disregard the gaps in our perception. […] Thus, in Hume’s system, the imagination has the function of compelling us to believe that there are objects in the world which exist continuously” (24).
The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation

Warnock exposes the deceptive tendencies of the imagination in its pursuit to grasp and give stability to our perceptions of the world. The sense of stability that makes us believe in a continued existence of things in the world is based on these synthesising and arranging functions of the imagination.

Hence, the imaginative response offers coherence, unity and order against the destabilising power of auditory distress. In the following subsection, I show how imagination provides a sense of unity in the listener in her or his engagement with music theatre. I claim that this unity is foremost established in the experience and production of space: spatialisation. I thereby imply a critique on the idea that spatialisation is represented in the sound itself, or just an acoustic effect of the distribution of sound. I argue that the sense of being a ‘unitary self’ materialises in the first place through a haptic sense of the sonorous envelope. The production of haptic space through spatialisation then tends to smooth out any possible occurrences of auditory distress. This involves an imaginative response to the enveloping sound that enables the spatial relation with the listener in the theatre.

1.3. An Imaginative Response: Spatialisation and Haptic Space

So far, I have described the functions of the imagination in making sense of our perceptions to argue how it can serve as a particular response to auditory distress. Auditory imagination might then contribute to an understanding of how we make our auditory experiences in the theatre meaningful. As a final theoretical consideration, before moving on to my case studies, I investigate how the imaginative response in listening ultimately contributes to an imagined unity of the listening subject that manifests in the sense of ‘self’. For this purpose, I introduce the concepts of embodied listening and haptic space. I argue that the sense of self as a unity comes from our spatial engagement with and position in relation to sound, the basis of which is the first experience of the sonorous envelope. I conclude that our positions towards sound always involve an imaginative production or representation of the auditory space as a unity, in relation to our own bodies and, ultimately, to the affirmation of our auditory selves.

In chapter one, I introduced the bodily aspect of listening as a basis for my understanding of auditory distress. Since sound is primarily resonance created by pressure waves to which our bodies automatically respond, an auditory intervention does not only affect the ear, but involves the whole body of the listener and the muscular organism. Skin is the largest organ in the body, Aden Evens (2002) describes this connection between our bodies and pressure waves that are perceived as sound: “Sound perceived is a contraction. A perceptive body experiences variations in pressure, and contracts this ‘air wave’ into sound” (Evens 2002: 171). The pressure differences are as much perceived in the body through the skin, the body cavities and the bone structure, than in the inner ear. Christoph De Boeck distinguishes in his postdoctoral
and traces of this automatic bodily response can be seen in, for instance, goose bumps. In phenomenological studies, skin has given rise to many metaphors and concepts of perceptual knowledge. A fairly recent development in these studies is the concept of ‘haptics’ or the ‘haptic sense’, which covers the sense of touch on and within the body. According to Connor (2006), the sense of touch “is being presented as that in which all the other senses merge, and out of which they emerge” (Connor 2006: 14). It is therefore the most primitive or elementary of the senses “since the thing touched must always be in immediate contact with the toucher” (ibid.). This idea reflects Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological adage of the chiasm that touching always involves a sense of being touched at the same time.

Listening, similarly, involves both ‘touching at a distance’, as argued by Schafer (1977: 11), and a sense of being touched by the sound through its contractions of air pressure. The concept of ‘haptics’ could address this embodied sense of touch in listening without reference to direct body contact. The term ‘haptics’, however, does not only pertain to the sense of listening. The etymology of the word can be traced back to the Greek words hap’tikos, which generally means ‘able to touch’, and hap’testhai meaning ‘able to lay hold of’. In A Thousand Plateaus (2004), Deleuze and Guattari borrow the term from Aloïs Riegl. They use the notion ‘haptic’ to refer to tactility in a broader sense, in order to not immediately denote an opposition between two sense organs or systems. Their suggestions of the applicability of the term reach beyond an outward perception with the surface of the fingers, as denoted by the word ‘tactility’.

For their own purposes, Deleuze and Guattari differentiate haptic from optical space; that is, the perspectival space that suggests distant vision (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 543-4). The notion of haptic space assumes that the eye itself may also fulfil the non-optical function of tactility. Haptic space is, however, not limited to one sensory perception. Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of haptic space might also refer to visual and auditory experiences.

report Het klankbeeld in de theatrale ruimte of: geluidsdramaturgie (2004), five different channels through which we sense sound: conduction through the bone structure, stimulation of the germinal cells in the epidermis, nerve endings (receptors) in the synovial membrane of the joints, nerve nodes in the organs and flesh – like the gut feeling as a response to extreme heavy basses – and air molecules in the ear. According to De Boeck, sound is therefore a dimension that extends the sense of touch (the haptic sense). Especially at around 20Hz, sound stops to be heard and is felt instead.

159 The terms ‘haptic’ and ‘haptics’ appeared for the first time in 1931, according to Géza Revesz (1950).

160 The figure of the chiasm in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished book Le visible et l’invisible (1964; trans. 1966) explains that there is no lived distinction between the act of perceiving and the thing perceived: ‘touching’ as to perceive and interpret a thing also intricately involves ‘being touched’ at the same time by the thing perceived.

161 Schafer (1977), for instance, refers to ‘echo-location’ as a way of touching, exploring a space acoustically with our ears.
Following this line of argument, I propose to relate the notion of haptic space to the bodily experiences of sound in particular. For this purpose, I wish to introduce Paul Rodaway’s discussion of haptic space, because it specifically includes hearing and listening.

Rodaway (1994) adapts the notion of haptic space from James Gibson’s (1968) notion of ‘haptic system’ and the latter’s ecological theory of perception which includes:

[...] a functional definition of touch as a system involving the coordination of receptor cells and the muscles of the body (Gibson 1968). Gibson suggests that touch refers to two distinct faculties. It is pressure on the skin, or literally contact between the body and its environment, and it can also refer to kinesthesis, that is the ability of the body to perceive its own motion. Touch is, therefore, about both an awareness of presence and of locomotion. Together these can be described as the haptic sense (from the Greek, ‘to lay hold of’) (Rodaway 1994: 41-2).

Sound, likewise, ‘touches’ the listener both internally in the ears and externally in the whole body through the touch of vibration. As such, sound could be said to create a haptic space, which calls for an attention to both the interiority and the exteriority of the body. This haptic space in listening could, moreover, give an impression of movement in sound, resulting in a sense of spatialisation as it represents spatial relations.

Géza Revesz (1950) has pointed out that haptic space is most commonly attributed to the experience of the (congenitally) totally blind. Rodaway (1994) uses this particular claim to explain that the haptic sense in our fingers and skin is categorically different from ‘touching at the distance’ through our ears, in a proximal sense:

The haptic experience provides a continuous body-contact geography, whilst auditory experience provides a more extended or distant geography, an experience of wider spaces and the relationships between places. Further, the sensuous experience of blind people helps us to more clearly appreciate the way in which hearing is not just dependent on the acuity of the ear itself but that which is heard has been shaped by the environment through which the sound has passed (101).

The blind remind us that embodied listening is the default perception of our auditory experiences. This haptic sense allows us to experience space at a distance as a wider geography, or as a relation between places that cannot be

162 J.J. Gibson’s ecological approach regards the senses as different but interrelated perceptual systems in a reciprocal relation with the body and the environment, namely through both passive and active touch. Gibson published his ideas about perception in 1962 and 1966, which agreed with many theories of the German psychologist Katz and his book *Der Aufbau der Tastwelt* (“The World of Touch”) in 1925.
The Frequency of Imagination

seen directly but can be sensed intuitively. The product of this experience is always an imagined space as a result of our interpretive efforts.

Hence, experiencing space involves a production of it, and therefore a conceptualisation by the observer. However, every production of space also immediately includes a position by the perceiver of that space, as the blind remind us. In the darkness of the blind, space appears as a mental construct in the direct relation between the subject and the environment that shapes the spatial perception and production. Hence, through spatialisation, we relate to our immediate physical surroundings and, by implication, to the familiar ways with which we perceive the world.

The space that is thus created through our auditory experiences is always embodied, as it relates to our haptic sense. Spatialisation illustrates then the connection between embodied listening and the imaginary production of space. Auditory distress also always involves a production of space, as it makes us aware of spatiality. It marks the vulnerability of interior space as a result of its intervening power and an all-around auditory receptivity of our ears (Rodaway 1994: 94). As a way to channel the excess of intensities that cause the auditory distress, we try to produce a coherent sense of space. The imaginative response, in particular, helps us to realise this due to its inclinations of coherency and unity. As a result, auditory imagination produces a sense of unity in the spaces we create and the positions we thereby take in that space, in an attempt to regain stability in our auditory ‘selves’.

As a next step in this chapter, I suggest looking at how the listener in music theatre produces space while listening, through her or his imaginative responses to auditory distress. In order to illustrate the different implications of the listener’s imaginative response in music theatre, I analyse two very different performances: Blauwbaards Burcht (2006) and Men in Tribulation (2004-2006).

Béla Bartók’s Blauwbaards Burcht presents us with a theatre of the imagination that calls upon an imaginative castle as a metonymic space for Bluebeard’s subconscious. I discuss a recent concert staging of this opera which, due to its minimal scenic representations, problematises the listener’s imagination in relation to the images that are projected on a screen. I examine how the theatre offers a hybrid construct for the imagination – mainly through the display of images and texts (the ‘imagetext’ as referred to by W.J.T. Mitchell) – which does not aim at supporting its homogenising function, but rather disintegrates it by exposing the theatrical mechanism and apparatus. In contrast, the sonorous envelope in the orchestral score creates auditory distress, which could short-circuit a narrative unfolding in the listener’s

---

164 Anzieu’s idea of the skin-ego, as one particular example, expresses how we produce a sense of space as safe environment in relation to our experiences of sound and music as a way to protect ourselves against auditory distress.
embodied listening. I connect this with Barthes’s concept of bliss or *jouissance* in order to reflect on how the listener’s auditory imagination continues to strive for a coherent sense of space and, hence, a unified sense of self against its dissolution in auditory distress.

Whereas in *Blauwbaards Burcht* the sense of a unitary subject is only questioned to be restored later through the narrative content and its representation, *Men in Tribulation* specifically aims at fragmenting the experiences of the subject in its representations and lack of a single narrative development. In contrast to the first case study, *Men in Tribulation* foregrounds its extensive use of microphones and audio technology on the stage, such as electroacoustic feedback, in order to maximise a haptic experience of the listening space that surrounds the audience. As a result, this sonorous space oppresses the listener, calling for introspection to her or his competences and imaginative responses in dealing with the auditory distress. Despite this compelling oppression of space, I explain how, in relation to the perspective and representations of the performance, the listener is enthused to imagine a body in the spatialisation of sound that goes beyond the idea of a physical body.

2. *Blauwbaards Burcht*:

   Open the Curtains to a Theatre of the Imagination

   *Let the song speak for itself,*  
   *You are looking, I am looking at you.*  
   *The curtain of our eyes rises:*  
   *Where is the stage: outside or inside,*  
   *Ladies and gentlemen?*  
   […]

   *Music sounds, flames flicker,*  
   *The spectacle is about to begin.*  
   *The curtain of our eyes rises:*  
   *Applaud when it falls,*  
   *Ladies and gentlemen.*  
   *It is an old fortress,*  
   *Of which the rumours go,*  
   *Listen carefully, you all.*

   (Prologue of the bard in *Blauwbaards Burcht* by Béla Balázs, my trans., PV)

The bard’s prologue in the libretto by Béla Balázs to Béla Bartók’s 1911 one-act opera *Bluebeard’s Castle* (Op.11) speaks directly to our imagination.165

165 Sometimes Bartók’s opera is referred to as *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* (*Hertog Blauwbaards Burcht* in Dutch). The original Hungarian title reads: *A Kékszakállo Herceg Vára*. I will use the English translation of the libretto by Christopher Hassall in Boosey & Hawkes Stage Works series 1952. It does not include, however, the Bard’s Prologue. Therefore, I have translated it
The Frequency of Imagination

The plot is based loosely on the popular folk tale by Charles Perrault (1697) and more prominently on Maurice Maeterlinck’s and Paul Dukas’s opera Ariane et Barbe-bleu (1907). Balázs has heavily reworked the material in a rather psychoanalytic or ‘psychosexual’ reading of the story. The imagination, the human subconscious and its treacherous depths, are thematised through Bluebeard’s psychosis, conceivably under the influence of a Freudian understanding of the fragmented subject at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The castle, with its locked doors, can be read as a metonymic space for Bluebeard’s (sub)conscious: a perilous space of past memories from which there is no possible escape for Judith or Bluebeard. In the staging it becomes, however, an imaginary space; a virtual space that only comes to life through the listener’s imagination as it is never really represented scenically. The drama, moreover, unfolds as a monodrama, split between two voices: Bluebeard and his antagonist Judith, his latest bride, who witnesses the tragic unfolding of the events as she unlocks the seven doors.

Intrigued by Judith’s longing to know all the hidden depths of Bluebeard’s past, the listener enters the imaginary castle, which reveals its story as a psychoanalytic allegory of the subconscious. As this story unfolds before Judith’s eyes, the listener witnesses the narrative events. Prompted by the narrative mode in the bard’s prologue, the listener is about to witness how the stage will unfold as a theatre of Bluebeard’s mind and subconscious. In a reciprocal sense, the stage can raise the listener’s awareness of her or his own private theatre in the mind: an undisclosed imagination that is evoked through listening in conjunction with images and text.

The bard’s prologue, as quoted above, is often omitted during the performance. It does, however, play a substantial role in calling upon a narrative mode in the listener. In Wouter Van Looy’s staging of this opera for Muziektheater Transparant, the prologue resounds as a presumably pre-recorded, acousmatic voice in the original, Hungarian language. This disembodied voice activates a narrative mode of listening, as it brings in the voice of a god-like narrator prompting to the moral substance of the story as a warning that the unfolding events may also happen in the ‘real’ world, outside myself from the Dutch version by Ildi Lasányi. In Kroó (1961), the translation reads: “Once upon a time, without or within, an ancient legend, what may it mean gentlemen and ladies? Where lay the scene, without or within gentlemen and ladies? We gaze at one another and relate our tale. Who knows where it has come from? Listen and wonder, gentlemen and ladies, how ancient the castle and time old its chronicle; hear and attend” (270).

See Bruno Bettelheim’s much later published study The Uses of Enchantment (1976). This staging of Blauwbaards Burcht was originally part of a Bartók-happening, organised by the Royal Flemish Philharmonic orchestra (deFilharmonie) at deSingel concert hall in Antwerp, Belgium, on 19 February 2006. I attended the performance on 21 February 2006 in the Stadsschouwburg of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Daniele Calligari conducted the orchestra.
Although illegible for a primarily Dutch-speaking audience, the voice speaks in Hungarian directly to the listener’s imagination through the translations of the text projected simultaneously above the stage as supertitles.  

The bard’s prologue asks the audience to locate the stage: is it outside or inside? Earlier in this chapter, I referred to Forrester’s observation that our phenomenal experience of music playing in our heads makes the division between outside and inside rather vague (Forrester 2000: 36). The bard’s question encourages the listener to carefully listen to the acoustic events. After the fourth stanza of the prologue, the music begins unnoticeably in the lower strings, which is marked by the next stanza: “Music sounds...”. Upon that sound, the play is to begin, drawing on the listener’s imagination. One might choose then to focus on the music and contribute to it through narrativization, or one might simply close her or his eyes and try to imagine the events in her or his own ‘inner theatre’.

The bard also calls for the individual listener’s attention to the stage, particularly to the songs, when the curtain rises before her or his eyes, and the story starts to unfold on the stage. The bard’s voice prompts then the listener’s attention exterior to her or his imagination. This disembodied voice presents foremost the core of how opera creates meaning through a conventional split between the fictional character in the narrative, which the singer represents through singing and acting on stage (the gestures of the vocal body), and the texts of the libretto above the stage (the supertitles). This split influences the spectator’s modes of interpretation: while a causal listening mode can draw attention to the off-stage voice of the bard as originating from a recording and a loudspeaker, the translations in the projection aim to draw the listener into the drama and narrative world. Yet in this text, the narrator’s voice disrupts the immersion and makes the theatre’s construct conspicuous as a ‘spectacle’ for the eye. This then contrasts with the rather bare concert stage that is empty of any overt dramatic representation.

As a psychoanalytical monodrama, Blauwbaards Burcht could be said to stage an allegorical ‘theatre of the mind’ that attempts to bring Bluebeard’s subconscious to consciousness. This analogy of a theatre in the imagination, however, affects the listener’s spatial experience of the theatre stage. Peter

---

168 I thank musicologist and philosopher Albert van der Schoot for drawing my attention to the untranslatable opening line of the bard’s prologue in the Hungarian language, which was meant to immerse the spectator into the fictional world of the opera upon hearing the first words. The words would belong to the world of the ancient sagas, which Bartók’s contemporaries would have immediately recognised.

169 I will refer to the translations of the libretto, projected above the stage, in terms of ‘supertitles’ instead of ‘surtitles™’. The latter is a registered trademark of the Canadian Opera Company and its first recorded usage presumably dates January 1983 for their staging of Richard Strauss’s opera Elektra.
Boenisch (2006) suggests in this context a connection between the space of the theatre as a construct and the mental space in the imagination:

Drawing on media studies, we have envisaged theatre as architectural arrangement (thus, a site) of cognitive strategies, a spatial extension of men and mental space. [...] Precisely because it is the extension (or, ‘remediation’) of the mind, it must differ vitally from any other such extension, as for example the extension of the foot in the wheel, or the eye in the camera. As opposed to these human organs, the mind is no biological given, but itself essentially an implemented quality fabricated by its socio-cultural environment: discourse fundamentally channels, shapes and manipulates cognition and perception (113).  

Boenisch regards the theatre as an extension of the mental space, remediating the imagination on stage. Seen this way, theatre mediates and remediates this mental space, even in small unguarded moments, in the most illusionistic or realistic representations of a fictional world. It makes the observer aware of her or his perception, and of its fragmentary and fleeting nature. It also brings into play the socio-cultural discourse in which this perception is inscribed.

Inspired by Boenisch, I propose in the following discussion of Blauwbaards Burcht to regard the ramifications of these (re)mediations of a mental space for the listener’s imaginative responses to auditory distress. I aim at an understanding of auditory imagination that includes the bodily aspects of listening and the production of space as integral parts of these discursive responses. In order to address this bodily aspect, I will first discuss the listener’s experience and production of space in relation to moments of ‘bliss’ (Barthes’s jouissance), as effected by the orchestra. Second, using the concept of ‘imagetext’, I discuss the influence of text and image in the spectator’s attempts to read the stage in conjunction with the music and her or his imaginative responses in listening. I thereby review the idea of a unity of space, and regard spatialisation in connection with these responses in the auditory imagination.

2.1. Unfolding Space: Short-circuits of Auditory Bliss

As the directions in Balázs’s libretto present, Bartók’s opera is originally conceived to be staged in a darkened hall surrounded by seven doors around the perimeter. However, it is often performed as a concert or a recital, limiting the representational gestures on the stage to a minimum. In the concert staging of Wouter Van Looy, the members of the orchestra take a prominent place, together with the conductor at the centre of the stage, all dressed neutrally for concerting. This staging is said to be ‘semi-scenic’, as the stage contains a

---

170 Boenisch bases his argument on media theory following Marshall McLuhan’s acclaimed aphorism that defines a medium as the extension of man and his cognitive nervous system, which he connects with Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) notion of ‘remediation’.
The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation

scenographic design, though kept to a minimum, and the singers are dressed rather casually, not in usual concert attire. As such, the frame of the concert staging reinforces the spectator’s attention to the spatial construct of the scenography.

The spatial design in Van Looy’s staging is triangular. The two singers are positioned opposite each other in the left and right corners of the stage, in front of the orchestra. Two separate supertitle boxes hang as text balloons above them. The split projections of the supertitles above the respective singers play an imperative role in narrativising the vocal-musical events. At the top of the spatial triangle hangs an LCD screen displaying video projections by Kurt d’Haeseleer (De Filmfabriek) while slowly circling on a horizontal axis. This revolving screen frames the listener’s visual imagination in her or his efforts to narrativise the acoustic events. This spectacle is enhanced by Peter Missotten’s light design (also De Filmfabriek), that highlights the singers in visibility and keeps the orchestra in the background, while creating atmospheres through distinct colours for every scene. The interplay of both technologies supports a primarily visually instigated narrativity.

Bartók’s music suggests a sonorous envelope that creates an auditory sense of space in relation to the visual space of text, imagery and bodies on stage. The orchestra’s presence on stage plays an important role in both marking the embodied aspect of listening and the construction of space. The sonorous envelope – or rather the representation of it through the orchestral music – gives the listener a sense of space that could cut through the perception of the visual and hierarchical construct of the concert stage. I want to argue here that the listener produces space in her or his imaginative response to the auditory distress produced by this disruption. In the final scene, I find an illustration of how the sonorous envelope influences the listener’s production of space when the orchestral music comes to the fore in a prolonged climax. I argue that when the space of the castle closes down upon Judith in the diegetic world of the opera, the listener’s imaginary production of this space reinstalls a coherent and unified sense of space.

The unfolding of Bluebeard’s castle as an imaginary space in the digesis of the opera culminates to the point when Bluebeard’s bride Judith urges him to open the seventh and last door. The whole narrative unfolding also thrives on this suspense that comes to an end with this final disclosure. At the opening of the door Judith sees the alleged dead wives, just as she (and the audience) was expecting. She then cries out singing: “I have guessed your secret, Bluebeard! I know what you have been hiding for me behind the seventh door. […] Oh, the rumours, they were all true.” Yet to her greatest surprise, she immediately finds out that the wives are not dead: “They live, look, they live! […] Beauties, divine beauties, next to them I sink into nothingness”. Bluebeard explains then how he selected his wives and how
they symbolically represent respectively sunrise, noon and evening. Bluebeard offers Judith a crown with diamonds so that she can complete his collection and reign over the night. She rejects it, though she has passed the point of no return. At this point, the orchestra slowly works itself up from an acoustic background to the fore in a suspended musical climax and ever increasing level of sound. The orchestra consequently drowns out Bluebeard’s voice and bathes the listener in an envelope of resonance.

As the orchestra takes over from the singers, Judith seems to unite with Bluebeard’s deepest desire in his subconscious, while the last door in his castle locks her in for eternity. Her collapse as a vocal persona and fictional character is underscored by the dramatic sound in a representational gesture. The orchestra was already clouded visibly in half-darkness for this scene. However, at this point the Hungarian mezzo-soprano who performs Judith (Andrea Melath) steps away from the spotlight and dissolves into the thresholds of invisibility. This ‘blinding’ of the spectator’s eye, so to speak, stimulates for an imaginative response in the listener to the affective surplus in listening to the orchestral score. Bluebeard then concludes by singing *sotto voce*, ‘below’ the score: “Henceforth all shall be darkness, darkness, darkness”. The libretto reads further: “The stage is slowly plunged into total darkness, blotting Bluebeard from sight”. In Van Looy’s staging, the Romanian base-baritone who portrays Bluebeard (Alexandru Agache) remains in a bundle of white light until all the stage lights dim and the last resonances die out.

The sonorous gesture of the orchestra barging in within this visually deprived environment prompts the production of an imaginary space in relation to a haptic sense of sound. As a divergence to the foregoing theory on embodied listening and the haptic sense, I propose here to read this all-engulfing gesture of the orchestra and the collapse of Judith through Roland Barthes’s notion of *jouissance* (bliss). This concept originally relates to a subject theory of reading a text and the pleasure of losing one’s self in reading. Here, I propose to reformulate this notion as ‘auditory bliss’, in relation to discursive listening, to the extent that it contributes to an understanding of how the listener can lose her or his sense of self. I suggest that, as a response, the listener imaginatively produces space to regain a sense of being a unified self.

In *S/Z: An Essay* (1970), Barthes acknowledges the embodied and disruptive power of music by associating it with orgasm. Barthes develops the notion of ‘bliss’ (pre-Oedipal *jouissance*) later in his seminal essay *Le Plaisir du texte* (1990). This notion constitutes a similar sensation of sensuality and orgasm by the excess of text that would impose a state of loss on the reader. The ‘text of bliss’ brings the subject to a crisis, and at the same time, it

---

“discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions” (Barthes 1990: 14). I propose to apply this concept of bliss to the sounding score of music. The purpose of this is to understand the disruptive effect of bliss on the listener’s interpretive efforts, in relation to her or his assumptions in the discourse of listening. Although Barthes concentrated on the effects of bliss on the subject in reading texts, I propose to transpose this concept to music theatre. It allows me to regard music as a texture and a text of bliss that creates an excess in listening, as Barthes himself suggests in his many publications on listening.

Barthes’s description of bliss in terms of its unsettling nature resembles Ihde’s earlier observation that music can effect disruption to our sense of ‘self’ in our thoughts: “In its sometimes orgiastic auditory presence the body-auditory motion enticed in the midst of music may lead to a temporary sense of the ‘dissolution’ of self-presence. Music takes me ‘out of myself’ in such occurrences” (Ihde 2003: 62). Both Barthes’s and Ihde’s ideas of the subject’s dissolution through music are, however, historically and culturally constructed, depending on what one assumes to be a representation of loss. Rather than causing such complete dissolution, auditory bliss calls for a listening attention for one’s own fragile body. Yet in both Barthes and Ihde, the disturbance highlights a contrast: the sense of aural bliss operates in opposition to our reading abilities and conscious self-presence. When describing the pleasure of the text, Barthes splits the subject into two: “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (Barthes 1990: 17). He thereby appears to confirm a traditional Cartesian body/mind boundary, emphasising the mind’s prolific unease with the body that produces pleasure in reading a text.

Bliss, according to Barthes, is the pleasure in reading that comes with instances of loss and collapse of the subject, alternating with a sense of stability and consistency of the self. However historically and discursively constructed this ‘loss’ may be, Barthes’s notion is consistent with what I have indicated in the previous chapters as the listening subject’s crisis due to an insufficiency of listening, which, instigated by auditory distress, would stimulate the listener’s discursive responses. Barthes, however, indicates that the loss of subject in reading and therefore, as an effect in the production of meaning, can also be experienced as pleasurable. This leads to a productive contradiction: “a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (21).

The collapse of the ‘self’ in auditory bliss is not antithetical to meaning-making, as Aydemir (2003) suggests, but it can be productive within a ‘narrative’ reading or narrativisation to go beyond signification temporarily:

Again, Barthes opens the possibility of bliss outside or beyond narrative temporality. Or, this bliss takes place within the narrative, yet manages to sidetrack it. Instead of the suspense of narrative, Barthes privileges the
suspension of narrative. This affective force arrests narrative progression with a sudden stoppage, congealing or freezing its steady course (168).

In the final scene of Blauwbaards Burcht, we encounter a similar mechanism. The orchestral gesture can only bring about sensations of aural bliss when it manages to ‘sidetrack’ the narrative. Indeed, the increasing sonorities not only drown out the singing voices, but they also arrest the listener affectively in an oceanic experience, which in a flash of pleasure disrupts and suspends the narrative unfolding.

This gesture of affective suspension (instead of narrative suspense), however, remains within the representational realm of Judith’s collapse as a character and persona. When one realises the effect of the excessive musical gesture, its affective and performative force is recuperated by the consequent narrativisation. Lawrence Kramer (2002) contends in a similar, though paradoxical way that the same musical excess can be autonomous in itself as a musical remainder outside signification, while giving way to new meanings: “The music may exceed the meaning that informs it, and the excess may either stand by itself or add some new meaning to the scene or both” (148). In my opinion, the finale of Blauwbaards Burcht hinges upon this moment where the excess in auditory bliss suggests a temporary place outside meaning but welcomes another.

Barthes locates the fleeting moment of bliss both within the narrative and beyond it. Bliss digresses from a narrative reading, as the final scene in Blauwbaards Burcht illustrates: the music balances between its narrative impulse and its incessant musical remainder. The visual deprivation enhances a feeling in the listener that she or he does not quite understand what is really happening. As a response, the listener is urged to produce an imaginary space in relation to one’s own bodily experience – a ‘Bluebeard’s castle’ in one’s own imagination – which fails to be represented on the concert stage or in the narrative. Precisely this moment, when the castle discloses its last room in an imaginary space, Judith collapses and disappears in the diegesis. This leads to a point of unrepresentability in the opera, short-circuited by auditory bliss, though the fall of Judith is part of the narrative unfolding. As such, the musical gesture of the orchestra demonstrates that, although aural bliss can unexpectedly strike our senses affectively, there can still be a recuperating narrativisation involved regressively in the listener’s imaginative responses.

As Barthes’s notion of bliss implies, discursive/narrative and embodied/affective modes of listening are not antithetical but rather intersect and sometimes intervene with one another. Bliss would momentarily suspend the split in the subject, though it is part of that same discursive structure underlying the urge to read, narrativise and make meaning through our imagination. Bliss affectively bridges sensual gratification through embodied listening and conceptualisation in the listener’s imagination. This contradiction is embraced in the experience of the sonorous envelope caused...
and represented by the orchestra. As the excessive orchestral gesture demonstrates, the envelope of sound at first affects the body of the listener, making the listener take leave of her or his senses. Yet the listener responds to this ‘body’ of resonances as listening subject by transforming the affects into an imaginary space, related to one’s own body. This space is, in turn, recuperated through narrativisation, which auditory bliss at first suspended.

In what follows, I continue on this ‘loop’ in signification and look more closely at its consequences on the production of space in the relations between the construct of the theatre, including its perspectives for looking and listening, and the listener’s imagination. I examine specifically the imagination’s ability to create unity and coherence in these relations. I argue that the concert staging of *Blauwbaards Burcht* breaks up the space in favour of decomposing the idea of a homogenising imagination, and by implication, a ‘total’ space that would secure coherency in the relations between image, text and music.

### 2.2. Reading the Imagetext: Disintegration of Space

The narrative in *Blauwbaards Burcht* is invoked primarily by the text of the libretto in the supertitles and the visual imagery in the revolving screen. The role of image and text in stimulating the listener’s impulses to narrativise the musical events is what Lawrence Kramer (2002) addresses with the term ‘imagetext’, from W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986). This compound term designates composite and synthetic works that combine image and text with inherent relations between the two. Kramer discusses this concept in relation to the musical remainder that, as I discussed in chapters two and three, also constitutes a gap in meaning. The concept of the imagetext helps him to explain a disparity with music in its relation to meaning, making them interdependent of each other:

Because it stands outside the imagetext, music is semantically absorptive, or, to change the metaphor, a semantic chameleon. Under certain common conditions, it becomes replete with meanings ascribed to it on the basis of the imagetext, while also holding over a remainder that exceeds those meanings (Kramer 2002: 149).

Though Kramer’s primary concern is semantics, the imagetext can also explain how music is imbued with narrativity as a way to infuse or ‘absorb’ the music with meaning in relation to texts and images. According to Kramer, the imagetext therefore enjoys a semantic priority and authority that music is denied (151). Yet at the same time, he stresses the boundary to signification in

---

172 In this sense, the compound ‘image-text’ (with the hyphen) would mark the relations between visual and verbal content. Mitchell’s notion of imagetext, however, does not only refer to the interplay between words and images, but also claims validity of their complementary function in reading, creating a unit for decoding.
the semiotic remainder of music that always presents us with an excess, which I illustrated here through the notion of aural bliss. With regard to this boundary, Kramer reminds us: “No single text, image, or situation can exhaust the music’s potential for meaning or wholly ‘saturate’ its formal qualities” (180).

Kramer’s notion of the imagetext helps me to discuss the workings of auditory imagination and narrativisation as stimulated by the relations between the projected images and the supertitles. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the musical remainder always presents us with a degree of opacity of the medium in our ways of reading, while invoking the listener’s urge to make coherence in her or his perceptions. In the present case study, we see that in exposing the stage as a construct, the opacity could create disruptions to the auditory and visual experiences.

Supertitles generally aim at bridging the representations on the stage with the narrative of the text, thereby calling upon narrative and imaginative responses. In the staging of *Blauwbaards Burcht*, however, the divide of the supertitles into two boxes above the performers could highlight the spatial construct. The video projections above the texts, moreover, create a mirroring effect of mediatisation, which at times intervenes in the listener’s narrativisations of the events on stage when following the supertitles. This might create a split perception in the perceiver as a double, implied subject position; respectively, a subject of vision and a subject of audition, spatially differently located depending on where the attention moves to. In observing the opacity of music and its staging, this split could draw attention to the subjective ramifications of both visual and auditory imagination.

When we regard the imagetext in its property to stimulate awareness of the imagination, it is worth looking at focalization as not only part of the story but also the imagetext. Judith appears as the focalizer of the narrative, who brings light to the dark rooms in Bluebeard’s castle. She thereby literally steers the listener’s eyes, when Bluebeard, for instance, repeatedly asks her in the torture chamber: “What do you see? What do you see?” She then describes what she perceives by glimpsing or literally illuminating the truth, as gradually more light brings the secrets deep down in Bluebeard’s castle to the fore. The focalization is, however, not only offered by Judith’s point of view, but also shaped through the projected images. The double perspective in the imagery can therefore be interpreted as focalizers that steer the spectator’s eyes, directing a mirror to her or his mind’s eye. Imagination then unfolds as a psychoanalytic puzzle, bringing more and more hidden corners to daylight. The images on the screen could metonymically suggest our own mental images, as seen through Judith’s eyes.

Although none of the rooms in Bluebeard’s castle are represented on stage, each room’s particular atmosphere is suggested through colours of light and corresponding abstract images in the projection. The images are highly
suggestive; for instance, the opening and closing of doors shown at the entrance of a new room. The images metonymically create a space that calls upon the castle. The spectator could complete the picture in her or his imagination. Upon revealing images of Bluebeard’s castle through poetic descriptions, Judith sings: “Look there, lovely radiance!,” while she is still blind to what is awaiting her in the last room. As Judith comes closer to the last door and the truth, the stage turns gradually redder. The red colour in the stage lights could be read as a rather obvious symbol for the blood that sticks to the walls, as Judith sings ‘in horror’ (according to the libretto): “Look, your castle walls are blood-stained! Look, the walls are bleeding... Bleeding... bleeding...” Subsequently, in the armoury room, Judith perceives another beam of light: “Here’s the second light stream, gleaming river. Look at it! Look at it! Give me the keys to all your doorways”. Similar to most horror stories, Judith’s focalization drives the listener’s suspense of wanting to know more, though one already knows what to expect.

The character of Judith not only focalizes by describing what she sees; she also personifies the light that Bluebeard most desires to her own detriment. Her eyes personify, so to speak, a point of listening that feeds the listener’s imagination and urge to find out more. The imagetext in this staging only suggestively manages the perspectives of the audience, while feeding the individual listener’s imagination through symbolic and metonymic relations between images, lights and narrativisations by the libretto.

Behind the last door, after the silver lake of tears, appears the room with Bluebeard’s supposedly dead wives. The screen shows here the image of a woman’s face, blurred by thorns, and highly stylised as if in some pale green marble (perhaps referring to the moonlight over which Judith will reign). The woman in the image slowly opens and closes her eyes, looking away from us. She is alive; however, the mute image immortalises her, giving her a phantom presence. When the lights slowly dim and darkness falls upon Judith, the image on the revolving screen displays the woman slowly turning, revealing the fragile low-cut back of her dress to the viewer. The image dissolves gradually in an infinite tunnel of water ripples, a common archetype of the subconscious. The screen then revolves back into its initial horizontal position, closing before the spectator like an eye.

The visual representation in the imagery and light design undoubtedly support the narrative content. However, they also bring to ‘light’ the specific economy of meaning-seeking in the listener. The play with light in both the text and the staging lays bare Bluebeard’s secrets in his subconscious. In so doing, the light also reveals the economy of looking and listening. The visual

---

173 Theatre critic Stephan Moens makes a connection with the iconography of the Pre-Raphaelites in his review in De Morgen (21 Feb.2006). He explains how the projected video imagery by Kurt D’Haezeleer opens up space for (over-)interpretation but also pushes the spectator in most suggestive ways.
imagery in the video projections supports narrativisation of the auditory experiences. Yet it also creates a counterpoint to the auditory events by not representing the narrative in a straightforward manner, allowing the listener more free play to imagine the events and descriptions.

Text, light and image offer cues for the listener to narrativise the auditory events, instigating an urge to look for meaningful relations, while suggesting mental images of the spaces in a metonymic way. The images on the revolving screen give way to a **mirrored way** of looking, unfolding within the confines of the screen’s frame: they represent a window to a mental space, to the images that reflect in one’s own mind. This idea of the unfolding of an imaginary space is mirrored on the theatre stage. The video and light design create a metonymic space that is suggestive of Bluebeard’s state of mind. In a representational mode, the ever-changing, distorted images on the screen might represent memories that seep through Bluebeard’s veins, memories of his deepest desires and mental tortures. The images are suggestive, yet ambiguous enough to give impulses for imaginative associations, correspondences and narrativisations governed by the text. In this way, the listener’s imaginative responses to the auditory events are channelled through the perspectives of the performance in most compelling ways.

Through the representations of a sonorous envelope in the music and the representation of mental images in the video, the hybrid construct of the staging calls upon an awareness of both an embodied listening and imaginative responses. This awareness is justified by the text of the libretto. One might discern a privilege to the gaze when considering Bluebeard’s repeated question: “What do you see? What do you see?” The concert stage, however, does not grant the listener to view much of what is suggested in the narrative, outside its blatant media construct and theatre apparatus. I have demonstrated here that this arrangement of the theatre stage affects the spatial experience of the listener. In line with my former arguments on embodied listening, the disruptive gesture of the orchestra, breaking through the narrative and representations on stage, foremost affects the listener’s spatial perception of the stage and the production of fictional space.

The retelling of Bluebeard’s story on the concert stage shows a general awareness of the disintegration of the unified subject in the modern era, indicative of the Freudian split between consciousness, preconsciousness and subconsciousness. The reading of this split in the libretto is literally represented by the two perspectives of the protagonists, through which the hidden depths of the castle gradually come to light. Upon Judith’s quest for the truth, the castle – as a silent third protagonist – reveals the many layers of Bluebeard’s subconscious. This disclosure does not only speak of modernity’s disenchainting the past, including its legends and fairy tales, by means of a psychoanalytic reading. It constitutes a reading that seeks pleasure in deconstructing the subject as an image of a unified whole, produced by our
own imagination. Yet, ironically, the opera strives for a reunification of the subject in the end with Judith’s lapse into the darkness of the castle, which is suggested on the stage by dimming the lights.

In Van Looy’s concert staging, the disintegration of space through its imagetext forms a significant contrast to the original content of the one-act-opera. This contrast could draw the listener’s attention to the workings of her or his homogenising imagination in relation to the stage. The construct of the concert stage tends then to expose the homogenising function of the imagination through its combination of a visible orchestra and video technology on the stage. Both the continuous display of the media and the opacity of the music could make the listener aware of her or his own failures in keeping within the imagination in track of the narrative. The placement of the orchestra at the centre of this construct is very telling of a (post-)modern culture that embraces the disenchantment – which becomes perhaps a new re-enchantment – of the disruption and disintegration of the visual space. In this way, Bluebeard’s ‘stage of the imagination’ questions the very heart of what can be represented visually and (re)-mediated of the listener’s inner stage.

Where is the stage: outside or inside, ladies and gentlemen? The ‘outside’ concert stage disrupts the ‘inside’, which draws awareness of the listener’s own imaginary projections of a space as a response to the disruptions. After creating Bluebeard as an imaginary body and his castle as an imaginary space, the spectator is left with a rather disquieting narrative closure that closes Bluebeard and his castle down upon themselves.

In the following paragraphs, I discuss Men in Tribulation, another contemporary music theatre performance which addresses the listener’s imagination through representations of the sonorous envelope that are constituted by electroacoustic design and amplification. The performance can be read as a monodrama inspired by the historical figure and persona of Antonin Artaud. Here, the sonorous envelope of music is produced by feedback loops that force upon the listener a sense of oppressive space. The space is marked by deliberately inflicted auditory distress. Unlike Blauwbaards Burcht, this performance aims at spatial dispersal through its sound perspectives and distressing soundscapes as a strategy to fragmentise the subject and decompose a sense of unity. I wish to argue that auditory imagination draws the listener to one’s interior self in an attempt to restore unity through the imaginary projection of a body, as created through sound and the auditory experience itself.

3. Men in Tribulation: A Blindman’s Opera

My second case study, Men in Tribulation (2004-2006) by Muziektheater Transparant, is a music theatre performance with music by Eric Sleijchim (performed by saxophonists from his Bl!ndman Quartet) and text by Jan
Fabre. The performance is inspired by the persona of Artaud through his biography and some of his writings, especially his Mexican travel writing *Les Tarahumaras* (1955). It is an attempt to invoke some of these ideas through sound, music, text and performance. The performance could be described as a theatre installation that at first looks like an indoor rock concert, but then unfolds as a perplexing ritual. It also presents us with a monodrama, as if the whole representational space (re)mediates a mental space inside Artaud’s head, another ‘theatre of the mind’.

Fabre’s text, “A Tribe that’s Me” (2004), unfolds as a voyage through Artaud’s troubled mind, a long interior monologue split into a polylogue of voices. In this text, the old Artaud travels back to the Tarahumaran tribe in search of mental rest, to distance himself from the hectic ‘civilised’ world and the sanatorium where he was treated with electroshocks. These threads of signification crosscut with another narrative temporality, of which the audience is informed upon entering the performance space through a programme brochure: the represented events are to be read as Artaud’s last hour before death. The performance then unfolds an agonising delirium tremens in which all the voices and sounds besiege Artaud’s mind as bodies that leave physical traces. This case study helps me to show how the imaginative response can create a sense of an imaginary body in sound through its sonorous envelope, without any clear reference to a linear narrative or dramatic development.

Eric Slechim deliberately calls his music theatre performance a *non-linear opera* for countertenor, performer, actress, saxophone trio and electronic

---

174 *Men in Tribulation* premiered on 15 May 2004 at the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts in Brussels; seen on 19 June 2004 in Theater Bellevue during the Holland Festival in Amsterdam, and on 27 Sept. 2005 in De Singel. The production also toured through Germany and Australia. The exclamation mark in ‘Bl!ndman’ refers to the conceptual work of Marcel Duchamp and Maximalist!, which Eric Slechim also co-founded in 1984 together with Thierry De Mey, Peter Vermeersch and Walter Hus. The name ‘Bl!ndman’ refers to a journal, entitled “The Blind Man”, that Duchamp published in New York in 1917 and that was based on a Dadaist idea of a blind guide who guides tourists through exhibitions. The Bl!ndman Quartet was founded by Eric Slechim in 1988 to explore innovative, extended performing techniques for the saxophone. ‘Blindman’s music’ is also a fitting metaphor for music that has foremost a spatial cue or calls upon mental imagery (like acousmatic or ambient music). My earlier references to the blindman’s perspective of Handke’s short story applied to music in chapter three, and to the blindman’s sensuous experience in my argument about embodied listening in this chapter are not entirely unintentional, though at this point, coincidental.

175 Artaud suffered poor health from early childhood. During his stays at a sanatorium at young age, he became addicted to laudanum and other opiates, and later in his adulthood also to heroin, which gave him temporal relieve of his pains. In the last years of his life, he received electroshock treatment by Dr. Gaston Ferdière in the psychiatric hospital in Rodez (Vichy) to clear his mind from his presumed symptoms of a mental illness, which included delusions and unusual tics. In *Men in Tribulation*, the electro-shocks are mimicked through aggressive sounds and vocal gestures. The performance suggests that Artaud’s lifelong addiction to these many types of painkillers stem from an enduring desire for purification.
manipulation. The word ‘opera’ refers to its original sense of ‘works’ or ‘oeuvre’ (plural of opus in Latin), as the production is rather a work-in-progress. Opera then refers to its original sense of combined action of different artistic disciplines, merging into a synthesis that is more than its separate constituents, or that cannot be placed under one denominator. The term is also symptomatic of an ongoing redefinition of opera and the operatic tradition, of which the general attitude towards Gesamtkunstwerk is pivotal in the underlying criticism of contemporary music theatre. I show here how this performance disintegrates the model of the Gesamtkunstwerk, and thereby advocates a different relation to the workings of the auditory imagination as a response to (deliberately caused) auditory distress.

One essential aspect of this project is its approach to the space of and in listening. Artaud’s ideas offer an entry point in this performance to deconstruct the Gesamtkunstwerk into a new sense of total space through direct, haptic, auditory experience. The above epigraph resonates with the earlier references from Artaud’s essay No More Masterpieces in the introduction to my investigation. The quote refers to Artaud’s revolutionary idea to surround the listener with the spectacle, as inspired by the Balinese theatre. This idea was groundbreaking in the way that it disrupted the traditional spatial arrangement of Western, dramatic theatre and box set stage. Men in Tribulation reproduces this spatial concept literally by designing the performance space as a theatre installation. This reversal of the traditional spatial arrangement aims not to immerse the listener in a supposed straight line with the spectator’s imagination, but rather create spatial dispersal and disorientation by means of multiple listening perspectives. I wish to argue here that this disruption of a total theatre creates a new total space for synthesis in the listener’s imagination.

3.1. Disrupting Synthesis: A New Total Theatre of Dreams

Men in Tribulation exemplifies a different notion of space through its arrangement and haptic experience of sound. For its spatial arrangement, it adopts one of Artaud’s claims about the Theatre of Cruelty (‘le Théâtre de la cruauté’): “The spectator is in the middle while the spectacle surrounds him” (Artaud, OC IV: 98; qtd. in Hollier 2004: 166). At another instance, Artaud writes that the spectator is “placed in the middle of the action, the spectator is shrouded and so to speak grooved by it” (Artaud, OC IV: 115; qtd. in Hollier 2004: 166).

176 Men in Tribulation forms the first part of a trilogy about ‘tragic destinies’. The second part of Sleichim’s triptych, entitled Intra-Muros (2007), revolves around Pasolini and his cult film Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (1975). It was co-produced by Muziektheater Transparant, Bl!ndman, Toneelgroep Amsterdam and Concertgebouw Brugge (Bruges).

177 In this sense, opera regained recent interest, whereas the term ‘music theatre’ is perhaps overused in its territorial claims against 19th century opera (see introduction).
2004: 190). *Men in Tribulation* gives shape to these ideas in its spatial construct, which not has only implications for the theatrical experience, but also for the distribution of sound.

In this music theatre performance, the spectacle surrounds the listener in a pentagon-shaped installation space (created by the B-Architects/Sven Grooten). In each corner, a saxophone player or performer stands on high platforms. On entering the installation space, the spectator might feel as if she or he is intervening in a ritual – perhaps a Ciguri ritual or Peyotl ceremony as Artaud describes in his travels to the Tarahumaran Indians – that is taking place, or has just finished, around the tower in the centre of the installation space. The musicians are standing in the audience space, painting their skins with white paint. Vocal performer Phil Minton (playing the old Artaud) is seated on a chair at the tower in the middle, under which a light technician and a sound technician are monitoring the representation using laptops and mixing desks. The actual ‘play’ begins when the saxophonists cross the audience space to climb up to their respective platforms in the corners of the performance space.

The context of the theatre installation gives the theatregoers the impulse to walk freely and take up a place in the space. No doubt, Artaud’s numerous directions and manifestos for his Theatre of Cruelty called for such an ‘ambient’ sense of theatre, the purpose of which is to stimulate multisensory experiences in the audience by making the spectacle surround them. This idea also reflects the original meaning of ambience, derived from the Latin word *ambire*, i.e. to go around, to circumvent. Although the installation creates a sense of freedom for the individual listeners to reposition themselves toward or away from the auditory events, their movements are still limited by the compulsive representations of the spectacle that surrounds them.

According to Herbert Blau (1983), the space of the spectacle sets out ‘specular’ boundaries, which spatially restrict the audience’s movements. The ambient use of space in the installation context highlights the impact of such specular boundaries that every performance contains. Blau explains further: “The boundary of performance is a *specular* boundary, marked by speculation, the *idea* of a boundary” (Blau 1990: 256). ‘Specular’ refers to ‘spectating’, the economy of looking and being looked at. Space in *Men in Tribulation* is fixated by the visual spectacle, the ‘specular’ space in Blau’s understanding, that still abides with a hierarchisation between audience and performers who are literally placed above. The listener thereby creates a sense of space by her

---

178 The feeling of trespassing a space is comparable to Rokeby’s interactive installation *n-Cha(n)t*, marking one’s self-presence through sound (see chapter one).
179 Artaud’s ideas have therefore inspired many historical theatre groups to experiment with an environmental experience of space such as the *Living Theatre* and the *Performance Theatre* of Richard Schechner, among others, in the 1960s and thereafter.
180 Blau refers in this context to a Yaqui ritual in which the performer looks through one of the holes of a drum and uses it “as a fixating instrument of the cruel performing eye” (1990: 256).
or his own intervention in positioning her or himself in the act of listening. Yet the listener’s sense of self-presence is reduced, as the performance space is continuously saturated with amplified sound. Loudspeakers are placed both in and around the audience, domineering auditory space. This spatial arrangement influences how the haptic experience of enveloping sounds through the loudspeakers stimulates the listener’s auditory imagination.

Artaud himself found inspiration in the Balinese theatre, which is also reflected in the spatial arrangement of *Men in Tribulation*. He was fascinated by this type of theatre for its potential of a new theatrical language in which actual words and verbal meanings are no longer of major significance, as Leo Bersani (2004) explains:

> In the angular poses of the Balinese actors, in the strange rhythms of their guttural sounds, in their grimaces and calculated muscular spasms, in the mysterious fusions of their voices with the sounds of musical instruments, in the ‘dance’ of the geometrical robes which transform the Balinese players into ‘animated hieroglyphics’, Artaud discovers ‘the meaning of a new physical language with its basis in signs and no longer in words’ (97).

As Bersani points out, the musicalisation of the stage forms the basis of the new physical language of the Theatre of Cruelty. In effect, the Balinese dance theatre draws on a physical awareness of space. Equally, in *Men in Tribulation* a physical experience is aspired towards through both musicalisation of space and spatialisation of sound. Its spatial and acoustic design, including the positioning of the performers, reflects Artaud’s fascination for the Balinese theatre, though there is no direct reference to Balinese music in Sleichim’s compositions. The spatialisation serves only as an aesthetic principle for the experience of haptic space through music and its representation, which addresses the individual listener’s imagination.

By referring to Artaud’s passion for the Balinese theatre, the performance gives literal shape to one essential idea of the Theatre of Cruelty; that is, to create a physical experience by disrupting the traditional construct of the theatre stage with its specular boundaries. For Artaud, this idea is imperative for a new type of communication and awareness in the theatre: “Once the stage is emanated, the spectacle can spread to the entire theatre and, taking off the ground, will surround the spectator in the most physical ways, leaving him immersed in a constant pool of lights, images, movements, and sounds” (Artaud, *OC IV*: 150). In collaboration with the B-Architects, Eric Sleichim composes the space with sounds, lights and movements by the musicians, which aim at surrounding and immersing the spectators in a most physical, spatial experience.

The preset positioning of the instruments, performers and musicians on the platforms, moreover, define invisible boundaries of distance between the performance space and listening space. They imply spatial positions that affect both the production of the sound and the listening experience. On the
one hand, the musicians shape the sounds by positioning their instruments in
the feedback loop between microphone and loudspeaker. On the other hand,
the audience is situated between the fixed positions of the installation space
and the spectacle, which installs a ‘matrix of habitual action’ in Merleau-
Ponty’s terms. The listeners are not fully aware of the place they inhabit;
however, upon entering, they immediately take up a position according to a
routine-like behaviour within the community of listeners that is respectively
formed. The arrangement of the space, thereby, reproduces unconscious
patterns of movement and listening positions for the listeners to manage their
attention and fixate their hearing perspectives in accordance with the thus
created listening space.

The electroacoustic spatialisation of sound further calls for an embodied
listening, which is also reflected in the behaviour of the listener: she or he
manifests her or himself as a ‘sentient’. Although this term appears in the
works of Rodaway (1994), it originates from the theories deduced by Merleau-
Ponty and Gibson: it expresses an embodied mode of listening with the
‘sensuous geography’ of one’s whole body. In this bodily engagement, the
sentient defines her or his ‘aural’ borders subjectively by inhabiting,
positioning and relating to her or his immediate listening space during the act
of listening.

Jacques Derrida (1967) has suggested that Artaud’s theatre is a ‘total’
theatre in the truest sense, addressing the totality of sense and the senses
(Derrida 1967: 307). Likewise, in Men in Tribulation, the surrounding
spectacle and the new concept of spatiality are to ‘immerse’ the audience, not
through a framed visual or representational space such as in traditional models
of theatre space, but by mediating space physically, immediately affecting the
body. The surrounding auditory space in Men in Tribulation correspondingly
affects the audience vulnerably in terms of continuous aural interventions,
causing both physical and cognitive discomfort. In opposition to Schafer’s
idea of a harmonious ‘soniferous garden’, Men in Tribulation embodies a
‘theatre of sound’ (Toop 2001: 252), an aural theatre that serves as a construct
and vehicle for auditory distress.

Artaud’s vision of his Theatre of Cruelty as a ‘theatre of dreams’ helps me
further to illustrate how Men in Tribulation can be read as a theatrical
demonstration of this idea.181 Artaud formulated this notion in order to express

---

181 David Toop explains Artaud’s vision of a theatre of dreams especially in terms of its
innovative propositions in the use of sound and music on stage: “Artaud proposed an inner
theatre of dreams, fantasies and obsessions, activated by masks, lighting like a ‘flight of fire
arrows’, ritual costumes, violent physical images of horrible crimes and famous personalities.
‘It must be aimed at the system by exact means’, he wrote in another manifesto, No More
Masterpieces, ‘the same means as the sympathetic music used by some tribes which we admire
on records but are incapable of originating ourselves.’ He also envisaged new musical
instruments, used as objects on stage and producing ‘an unbearably piercing sound.’” (Toop
that his theatre is “not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams” (Artaud 1958: 94) in order “to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language halfway between gesture and thought” (Artaud 1958: 89). This notion of the theatre of dreams resonates with Lehmann’s statements about post-dramatic theatre as a way to resist a logocentric space. Aural space, as a result of musicalisation, could then become a dramaturgical strategy in the theatre to restore a more direct address, a directly perceived language which is more spatial than textual. In turn, this strategy defies a teleological structure of meaning-making in the performance, while allowing for a more active response from the spectator.

As literally a theatre of Artaud’s mind, Men in Tribulation represents a stage of dreams in vein of Artaud’s visions. In so doing, this stage also opens up an aural space to which the spectator-listener could actively respond by positioning her or himself between the represented events and the mental images, imaginations that are called upon through deliberate exposures to auditory distress. It is thereby in no way Freudian ‘psycho-analytic’ theatre, like the representational stage in Blauwbaards Burcht, nor is it a psychological theatre such as in traditional drama. It is, rather, a theatre of cruel dreams that are manifested in auditory distress.

Derrida (1967) has explicated this idea of a ‘theatre of dreams’. He elucidates that, through this idea, Artaud aims at a theatre that is different from the psychoanalytical theatre:

He would have rejected a psychoanalytic theater with as much rigor as he condemned psychological theater. And for the same reasons: his rejection of any secret interiority, of the reader, of directive interpretations of of psychodramaturgy (CW 2: 39; qtd. in Derrida 1967: 306).

Therefore the ‘theatre of dreams’ is not a stage of the unconscious, representing an inner mental stage of the reader, but virtually the opposite. It is a stage of intensified consciousness: “Cruelty is consciousness, is exposed lucidity” (Derrida 1967: 306). Susan Sontag (2004) refers to Derrida’s understanding of the theatre of dreams in the following explanation:

For not only does consciousness resemble a theatre but, as Artaud constructs it, theatre resembles consciousness, and therefore lends itself to being turned into a theatre-laboratory in which to conduct research in changing consciousness (89).

1995; 2001: 259). As such, the historical ideas surrounding the ‘theatre of dreams’ suggest a direct connection with Artaud’s sound experiments.

182 See introduction and chapter three on Lehmann’s idea of resistance against logocentric space in post-dramatic theatre.
This appears also to be the central investigation in the staging of a theatre in Artaud’s tormented mind, playing out as it were a changing consciousness of our post-modern times. It presents us not with a subjective stage of the individual unconscious (the imaginations of the listener), but with cruel dreams that are mastered through the representation and shared by a community of listeners. These controlled acts of cruel dreams are represented by the aural interventions, which appear to inflict pain and spasms on the old Artaud in a gesture of over-acting by Phil Minton. As such, the auditory distress that the audience shares, aims at an awareness of the construction and reproduction of pain through both visual and auditory means.

Sontag’s understanding of Artaud could shed some light on the imaginative response of the listener to the sensory ‘violence’ in *Men in Tribulation*.183 As a monodrama, the performance marks Artaud’s mental stage of thoughts. Fabre’s text voices the thoughts of the old Artaud, which implies an unsteady construction of a vocal persona on stage: “I shall not give up / layer by layer / peeling the skins of my soul / till all that remains / is a spherical ossification of one single thought”. This sentence is repeated like a refrain at the beginning of every new so-called ‘metamorphosis’ of Artaud. As an invocation, it implicitly transpires Artaud’s determination to liberate and exorcise the self in a ritualistic form of theatre that would also purify the audience through a language that surpasses its linguistic content. By repetition, these mystifying words speak directly to the listener’s imagination, calling for introspection: a desire for ‘one single thought’ that is liberated from the body (‘the skins’) of the inner self (‘of my soul’).

The catharsis, which Sontag alludes to in Artaud’s thinking, is primarily located in *Men in Tribulation* in the haptic experience of sound. The soundscapes create a haptic space that drenches and saturates the listening activity, calling upon the listener to take position. Dennis Hollier (2004) calls this the ‘ultimate cathartic sound effect’ in Artaud’s work: “it occurs when the spectator feels surrounded to the point of surrendering” (165-6). The enveloping and spatially diffused soundscapes in *Men in Tribulation* could be said to cause such a cathartic effect on the listener. What Hollier’s notion of the cathartic effect explains is the potentially overwhelming and physical

---

183 Apart from the implied connection with the word ‘tribe’, the idea of ‘tribulation’ relates to Artaud’s sufferings of great physical and psychological pain. The ‘men in tribulation’, as personalised in the musicians of the Blindman Quartet, are then the figments of Artaud’s troubled mind. The phrase could also be connected to Artaud’s almost biblical visions about sound in *Le Théâtre et son Double*, for instance, when he claims: “Mais le vrai théâtre parce qu’il bouge et parce qu’il se sert d’instruments vivants, continue à agiter des ombres où n’a cessé de trébucher la vie” (Artaud 1956; 1966: 16). Translation: “But the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way” (trans. Mary Caroline Richards 1958). The French word ‘trébucher’ (to stumble) can bring to mind similar connotations as ‘tribulation’ (affliction, souffrance) in Artaud’s biographical context of suffering life, ‘théâtre’s double’.

222
effects of sound on the listener. This has implications foremost on the experience and production of space. In *Men in Tribulation*, both aural intervention and saturation define the auditory space, making the listener aware of the intrinsic uncontrollable power of the sounds. The sense of uncontrollability is not as such caused by the irregularity of vibrations, but by its power to penetrate bodies and minds.

Through spatialisation of the feedback loops, *Men in Tribulation* creates a ‘vibrational space’, but only for aesthetic purposes. The aural interventions create a highly individualised experience of the listener, drawn in towards her or himself. In this way, rather than drowning the listeners to reach disembodied states of immersion and collective experience, the oppressive effect of this space marks the fragility of the body. The intrusion of sound reinforced by the blast of subwoofers calls for involuntary responses in an embodied way of listening. The aural interventions compel the listener to position her or himself in the listening space. Although the listener is never completely aware of her or his spatial position, the interventions call upon immediate responses to the surrounding space in which the listener experiences flashes of awareness for her or his own fragile body.

3.2. Reproducing an Imaginary Body through Feedback

The soundscapes in *Men in Tribulation* present us with a sense of oppressive space constituted by sound. In the following paragraphs, I show how such a spatial sense of sound can give rise to the perception and production of an imaginary body in sound.184 I argue that such a body in sound comes about through the listener’s imaginative responses to control the sonorous space that, besides auditory distress, creates a haptic sense of density in sound.

The imaginary body that the listener creates is foremost constituted spatially in relation to the acousmatising process of the electroacoustic feedback. The programme brochure gives way to a strong impulse in the listener to interpret the acousmatisation in terms of the general representation of Artaud’s anguished state of mind, inflicting distorted bodily gestures. The imagination of bodies in sound offers the listener a way to attribute sense to

184 I am aware that my discussion of an imaginary body in sound has affinity with the idea of a ‘body without organs’ as a cultural understanding of bodily experience and the desire to go beyond it. Although Artaud actually coined the phrase ‘corps sans organes’ in his *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (XIII, 104; XIII, 287), today the concept is associated more with Deleuze’s philosophical work (for instance, Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 2004: 165-85). Edward Sheer (2004) paraphrases Artaud and describes the body without organs as “a self-made body without the hierarchical emplacement of organs, a body made not in the image of god and which will liberate man, who can then be retaught to ‘dance inside out […] and that inside out will be his true side out’” (*OC* XII: 79; qtd. in Sheer 2004: 6). As Artaud did not make any suggestions about the application of the body without organs to the experience of the spectator, I have chosen not to go into a discussion of the concept here that would exceed the scope of my argument.
The Frequency of Imagination

the opacity of sound vibrations, when other modes of listening, including narrativisation, are insufficient.

Remarkably, when the performance was reprogrammed in DeSingel (Antwerp) in 2005, earplugs were distributed to the audience prior to the performance. Consequently, the spectators were prepared in advance for the possible intensity of sound and the damage it could cause to the ears. Thus, the effect of an unrestrained sound performance was disarmed to some extent. If not for physical wellbeing of our bodies, the idea of having earplugs disarms the ‘danger’ psychologically. In view of Artaud’s ideas, which form the intellectual background to Men in Tribulation, the noise control ironically closes the ears to his suggestions to restore the danger to the theatre. It keeps the ‘tribulation’ at a safe distance. Moreover, the ear plugs introduce a sense of noise restraint, which has generally social and cultural implications related to our modern acoustic horizons, public spaces and the constant threat of acoustic intervention. The performance could then call upon a connection with today’s listening habits and the necessity to block out loud sound. Yet this voluntary, aural (self-)abatement politicises to an even greater extent the experience of space. It makes the listener aware of her or his complicity, giving her or him the urge to control the auditory space. Handing out earplugs prior to a performance is rather cogent of the presumed ‘threat’ of auditory distress that the listener is awaiting.

The auditory space in Men in Tribulation dictates the ears in a most compelling gesture of over-exposure. The domination of the space by the electroacoustic noisescapes, composed of amplified, loud and repetitive sounds, affects the listener’s response through physical, psychological and discursive mechanisms. During the performance, this can mainly be observed through the aesthetic use of electroacoustic feedback; that is, a loop of sound that is heard when sound distributed through the loudspeakers travels back in the microphone into the audio system. Feedback, according to Arjen Mulder & Joke Brouwer (2004), assumes a particular power structure of control: “Feedback corresponds to the cybernetic model of control, where […] one party is always the controlling one and the other the controlled” (15). As such, the feedback system corresponds more to a responsive environment than to an interactive one (or networked model of control). In Men in Tribulation, the feedback loops create sound walls between the performers and the audience. Consequently, any real interaction between them is made impossible, due to the experience of oppression of haptic space. I want to argue, however, that despite this invisible wall, the imagination offers the listener a way to respond and interact.

In his article, “Theatre Space as Virtual Place”, Jonathan Burston (1998) argues that audio technology in the ‘megamusical’ has become an increasing currency in practice to immerse the listener through the sound system, giving her or him the sensation of being in the system. Burston refers to a statement
from Broadway sound designer Tony Meola (1995): “A curtain has gone in; an invisible curtain. And it’s taken us one step away from the performer. Because all of a sudden, we’re in the system. We’re in the sound system” (qtd. in Burston 1998: 212). In Men in Tribulation, the application of Artaud’s dream of surrounding the spectator using loudspeaker feedback demonstrates a comparable consequence of producing invisible curtains between performers and audience. The effect of this is to impose a power relationship between them by inundating the senses.

This specific power structure that feedback forces upon the listener creates a sense of a total or perhaps even totalitarian surrounding in which the persistent, repetitive aural interventions become spatially authoritarian. Moreover, the total space imposed by the electroacoustic feedback establishes a type of listening behaviour that is typical of low-fi environments, in which one could give in to the physical sensation of sound (such as in a dance club). Schafer points out the socio-political implications of such a space on our modes of listening:

Low frequency sounds seek blend and diffusion rather than clarity and focus. The listener is not an audience which concentrates but is at the centre of the sound, massaged by it, flooded by it. Such listening conditions are those of a classless society, a society seeking unification and integrity (Schafer 1977: 118; qtd. in van Leeuwen 1999: 29).

Schafer’s generally negative attitude towards the political implications of a lo-fi environment may also account for a common reaction by the audience to Men in Tribulation: each individual listener could choose to detach her or himself from the ‘unifying’ aural landscape and become idle listeners by blocking the wall of sound cognitively. In this case, the listener could use her or his auditory imagination to take up a position against the immersive qualities of the feedback loops, and channel them discursively by means of subjective associations.

Though the monotony of the feedback system has ritualistic connotations, this technologically produced noisescapes is in shrill contrast with what one would expect from the cultures of the Tarahumaran Indians (or the Balinese dance theatre, for that matter), of which the listener is informed through Fabre’s text or the programme brochure. Conversely, in the context of the ‘other’ cultures referred to, the listener might choose to perceive the

---

185 The general stance in ecological soundscape theory is that monotonous, repetitive and amplified sound should be avoided and restricted to certain standards in order to keep the wellbeing of our auditory sense and ourselves. In this approach to modern aurality, the noise pollution of public space has a direct influence on the listening subject inhabiting the space. Especially lo-fi soundscapes are regarded as exerting power on the subject. For soundscape analysts, this is typical for an urban-industrial society which results in a ‘deteriorated’ environmental sensitivity.
soundscape as an *earcon* (in Chion’s sense); that is, an emotional landscape that mirrors Artaud’s state of mind. The noisescapes in *Men in Tribulation* could then mimic a jungle that resounds as an auditory background or scenery to Artaud’s inner voices. Some of the intervening sounds represent iconic sounds of animal wildlife, as indicated in Fabre’s text. At other times, the noisescapes reproduce the effect of a rock concert, exhilarating the audience with spectacular sounds. Depending on private or cultural memory, the audience might even recall the image of the legendary Jimmy Hendrix when the musicians try to modify the sound in the feedback loop by moving their saxophones as resonating tubes in front of the loudspeakers.

These iconic and associative meanings given to the aural interventions in one’s private imaginations, however, do not mediate a sense of control over the sound. Rather, the noisescapes retain an overwhelming effect and saturates the ears in a gesture of over-exposure, psychologically obliterating any other intervention of sound. This gesture of masking sound vibrations creates a territorialisied space that oppresses the listener, and her or his sense of auditory self as whole. The homogenising function of the imagination is broken, as the aural interventions continuously threaten the inner voice of thought, and the sense of self-presence. Reciprocally, instead of disrupting the hierarchical visual space of the representation as a stage of Artaud’s tormented mind, this masking effect installs a new hierarchical space that overpowers the listener and her or his listening space. As a result, listening is put into a state of crisis by being insufficient to totally withstand the excess and delineate the many obscured aural events and multiple perspectives.\footnote{186 According to van Leeuwen (1999), immersion would cancel out aural perspective in our geographic sense of space: “The opposite of perspective is immersion, wrap-around sound. Low frequency sounds (like a bass) are especially important here. They carry further (think of the foghorn) and fill spaces more completely. They are also harder to tie to a particular spot and seem to come from everywhere at once” (van Leeuwen 1999: 28). Although the sound envelope in *Men in Tribulation* aims at a rather diffuse and multidirectional experience of sound in the body, the aural interventions could still stimulate the listener’s search for perspective and positioning in the auditory space.}

In this context, I propose to refer to the oppressive sensation of space as ‘autistic’, since it draws the listener into her or his own inner world. Similarly, the saturated auditory space brings about a state of ‘autism’ to the listeners’ bodies.\footnote{187 I have suggested the term ‘audio autism’ elsewhere in an essay on *Men in Tribulation* (Verstraete 2004).} This becomes apparent when one observes that this spatial saturation causes immobility; it fixes the listener to her or his place in the performance space. As listening bodies, it could be said that the listeners’ mute immobility cries out for some moment of relief in the continuous feedback loop of sounds, not coming to rest in the listening space. However, as a response, the ears could become masochistic in blocking the sounds from their last resort of ‘peace’, the imagination. By the same token, the
immobilising and ‘autistic’ effect of amplified sound silences the voices of the performance, including the voices in Artaud’s mind. In this respect, Douglas Kahn (2001) suggests: “The loudness that silenced speech could also be used to stifle the body. With enough amplification any performance space could be turned into a resonant chamber, much like a body of a very large instrument in which humans are played” (233).

The haptic space that is thus created in sound becomes an instrument, a tool that exerts a sense of uncontrollability of sound onto the listener. At the same time it is itself being heavily controlled by the electroacoustic feedback system. The listener is, however, not entirely ‘immersed’ by the ‘resonant chamber’ produced by the enveloping and spatialised loops of sound. Instead, the over-exposure creates an involuntary awareness of one’s own body, one’s hearing thresholds and one’s own level of competence to deal with loud sound or noise. In this way, it can be understood that the immobility of the listener is rather a reaction that helps her or him to manage the excessive auditory events and multiple, diffused perspectives. As a result, the listening attention is focused on the body to such a degree that the mind has difficulty concentrating. In a similar way to what Ihde claimed earlier, the haptic experience cuts through the listener’s train of thought and ability to process the auditory distress in mental images. The proprioceptive awareness of one’s self-presence in thoughts becomes a self-preservation in a survival mode of listening, when the listener senses her or himself sensing.

Despite the struggle of discursive thought against the aural interventions of the feedback loop, the performance still offers a perspective and focalization through the texts in order to ‘endure’ the sensory and aural distress. The domination of space and its listening inhabitants becomes part of the overall representation of Artaud’s persona and his theatre of ‘cruel dreams’. In representational gestures, Phil Minton’s mimetic spasms seem to suggest a struggle against the immobility of his body inflected by the feedback loops. In this way, the process of acousmatisation, as produced by the electroacoustic feedback, could stimulate the listener’s imagination and therefore, a sense of inwardness, of introverted movement. This, in turn, might represent a mirror to Artaud’s state of mind that is besieged continuously by loops of sound as inner, imaginary voices.

Chion calls this virtual space of multidirectional sound that controls the listeners in the auditorium, ‘the acoustic aquarium’ in cinema (especially increased by the technology of Dolby Surround sound).

Artaud was supposedly disappointed with the development of the talkies because of the acousmatic bond between sound and image. He ultimately left the theatre and his experiments with film for radio, where he could explore his vision of cruelty and decapitate the restricting word (the ‘logos’), the speech of God, of an author, in his radio piece Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu (‘To have done with the Judgment of God’, 1947/8), in which he created a physical space in sound. Sleichim’s compositions in Men in Tribulation also share references to this legendary radio piece, which was banned from broadcasting by Wladimir Porché, director...
The Frequency of Imagination

Significantly in this context, Burston identifies the process of acousmatisation with a *disembodiment* that results from disconnecting the sound from its source through audio technology. This disembodiment involves a process of ‘peeling off’ the sound from its original body, comparable to the refrain in Fabre’s text. The sound is peeled off, ‘layer by layer’, from its source body, until it gives birth to one single thought, as it were: a new imaginary body. As a result of the acousmatisation, the sound gives the impression of having a life of its own, moving uncontrollably through space as an invisible, immaterial *body* that produces a direct, physical sensation on the listener.

This ‘sonorous body’ is a totalisation of the acousmatising effect of audio technology. Yet it calls for a projection of an imaginary body as a response by the listener. As a result, the spatialisation of sound through feedback gives an impression of movement of this imaginary body. Although invisible to the eye, it is perceived as mass or volume by our bodies as a haptic experience. This imaginary body also differs essentially from the body of the voice or the musical instrument it once belonged to. In this way, the loops of sounds that besiege the old Artaud are effectively different and produce a body of their own. The source bodies meet, one might say, their virtual doubles through the circuits of feedback, alienating them and dispersing them in a fragmentary sense of space, and thus, of self.¹⁰⁰

In this context, Burston draws attention to a statement by theatre critic Vincent Canby (1995 in the *New York Times*): “In theater, as in life, it used to be that what you heard was what you saw. Sound was the shadow of the person or object from which it came. No more. The shadow has been amputated. Sound has a life of its own now” (Canby 1995: 1; qtd. in Burston 1998: 213). Canby’s observation could be seen in relation to Mladen Dolar’s understanding of the ‘ventriloquist’ nature of sound, which claims that sound always had a life of its own. Whereas theatre in the past always offered perspectives to maintain sound as a shadow of the spectacle, the use of audio technology in theatre today suddenly makes us aware of the inherent a-topicality of sound and the role of the theatre – through its perspectives – in the mediation and perception of sound.

¹⁰¹ The mechanism here shows how acousmatisation in cinema substantially differs from its use in the theatre. Whereas cinema is grounded on an illusion of immediacy through acousmatic
The experience of such a ‘phantasmatic’ body in sound, however, reveals the workings of the auditory imagination in the listener. Once again, the imagination reveals its homogenising function in our fragmentary perceptions of space. The aural interventions in *Men in Tribulation*, and the auditory distress they cause, could be read to embody the tribulations of our own bodies in listening. The imagination then functions as an automatic response to the involuntary, haptic sensations of sound, and produces our sense of space in order to safeguard and stabilise our auditory selves against the otherwise insufficient workings of our vulnerable ears. The imaginary *bodies without organs* in our mind’s ear, which appear to be Artaud’s final ordeal, finally come to rest when the performance ends with the high, shrill tone of tinnitus in our ear drums.

4. The Listening Space: Positioning Oneself in Sound

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how auditory imagination offers ways to the listener to respond to auditory distress in music theatre, alongside the modes of listening (chapter two) and narrativisation (chapter three). I have therefore redefined auditory imagination in relation to the main characteristics of the imagination: coherency, unification, production of mental imagery, and arrangement of our perceptions. Before embarking on the conclusions of the role of auditory distress in these music theatre performances within the wider perspective of today’s aural culture, I once more return to how the listener positions her or himself actively in relation to her or his auditory experiences and competences. I argue that the listener’s production of space through the imaginative response is quintessential in the way she or he poses her or his auditory self in relation to these meaningful experiences.

Though *Blauwhaards Burcht* and *Men in Tribulation* are two very different performances, and cultural products of very different historical times, they both offer an outlook on how music theatre stimulates the imagination through its spatial arrangements and media constructs. Despite the specificity of both performances, they are representative of certain performance strategies and forms of music theatre which offer a self-reflexive outlook on mediation, acousmatic sound in theatre loses its immediacy in favour of spatial interaction, a sense of self-referentiality towards technology and a more inwardly drawn pleasure of embodied experience. The sense of body thus produced also differs. In theatre, the imaginary body in sound is based on alienation and fragmentation, whereas Doane (1980) states the opposite in cinema: “The attributes of this fantasmatic body are first and foremost unity (through the emphasis on a coherence of the senses) and presence-to-itself. The addition of sound to the cinema introduces the possibility of re-presenting a fuller (and organically unified) body, and of confirming the status of speech as an individual property right” (Doane 1980: 34). In *Men in Tribulation*, the loop of voices and sounds of the saxophones does not aim at ‘re-presenting’ a unified body in relation to the original bodies (or sources), restoring a sense of immediacy. Rather, the effect of the fantasmatic body or bodies of sound on the listener is spatial dispersal, fragmentation, alienation, drawing the listener’s attention to one’s own body and sense of self.
The Frequency of Imagination

the workings in the listener’s imagination. Blauwbaards Burcht is representative of contemporary forms of staging opera on the concert stage (concert theatre) that include video technology. In contrast, Men in Tribulation belongs to the practice of new musical compositions that are created in relation to an integrated scenography (here, an installation space) and a nondramatic text, which opens possibilities for musicalisation and rhythm.

Both performances appear to disband the visually biased construct that predisposes synthesis as a main model for music theatre. The former still creates a sense of coherent space through a highly hierarchical construct in the visual space of its imagetext, which the orchestral music disrupts in its representation of aural bliss. The latter, meanwhile, aims specifically at spatial dispersal through the diffusion of listening perspectives and feedback loops that surround and impose a sense of immobility on the listener. In both case studies, the auditory imagination emerges as a response to the haptic sense of a sonorous space and its envelope.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the theatre of the mind showed how both performances create a sense of self-awareness about the bodies and spaces as we imagine them on our inner stage. The bodies of fictional characters that we give shape to in our imagination are ‘phantasmatic’ projections of our own bodies. Blauwbaards Burcht demonstrates how, through traces in texts and images, we produce the character of Bluebeard as a fictional body, which finds its eventual shape through the enquiry and tragic dissolution of Judith as a fictional character. Using Men in Tribulation as an example, I showed how we can project imaginary bodies as if created through sound in relation to our haptic experiences. In addition, I traced tendencies of cohesion and disintegration of space in both performances, which make us aware of the fragile bodies that we are. As a result of this fragility, I discussed the homogenising workings of the imagination and the critique of its ‘deceiving’ nature in creating a sense of control. Imagination is then responsible for our sense of stability, coherence and contingency in our perceptions, which secures a stable sense of self. I showed how this stability is produced foremost spatially through spatialisation.

Auditory distress destabilises the sense of unity and coherency in the self, while at the same time it can evoke pleasure and aural bliss. To highlight this, I once again referred to the sonorous envelope and its first model of aural pleasure, the acoustic mirror. Using Doane’s arguments on cinema, I introduced how the sonorous envelope implies the projection of an imaginary body, a protective skin (or ‘skin-ego’), that secures our sense of a continuous and coherent auditory I. This imaginary body simultaneously produces a sense of space, an imaginary space that connects sounds to their respective bodies and environments. I argued that auditory imagination is responsible for the
projection of these bodies and spaces, which is repeated in later experiences of sound and music.

Contemporary music theatre could, however, expose the workings of our imagination to its own homogenising and synthesising functions. The homogenising responses of the imagination to auditory distress, which secure continuity in our otherwise fragmented perceptions, are foremost grounded by our relation to our own bodies in the ways we perceive and know ourselves. In this way, embodied listening always confirms a sense of auditory self. Today’s music theatre, such as *Men in Tribulation*, can then comment on the everyday demeanour of immersion in our fragmentised experiences of mediated – and mediatised – auditory environments, which, in their own respect, have changed the ways the listener deals with auditory distress. Our present-day experiences of a ‘total’ haptic space in the theatre – whether experienced through the sensual sounds of an orchestra or manipulated as noise through electroacoustic feedback – urges the listener to position, and thereby recognise her or himself, as a modern ‘auditory self’.

In music theatre’s tendencies towards fragmentation and immersion, the listener can recognise the self as multiple – as a body that is not yet structured. The split between perceived and imagined sounds, intermeshed with and sometimes in conflict with thoughts, marks this multiplicity of the self. The structuring function of the imagination then offers the listener a means to find unity and safeguard stability in her or himself. The auditory imagination subjectivises the experience and relates it to her or his listening self through correlates of body and space. By exposing the construction of the bodies and spaces on stage, the listener can experience moments of self-awareness of how her or his imaginative projections of these bodies and spaces ultimately structure the self.

The position that the listener takes is always related to her or his experience and production of space. Throughout my study, I have argued that auditory distress and the listener’s response play a major role in this. In chapter two, I concluded that the cognitive mechanism of our listening modes externalises attention as an imaginary tentacle to control the direct auditory environment. As such, the modes of listening always imply and confirm a spatial relation of the listener to the sounds, as well as the immediate significance they have to the specific situation. In chapter three, I discussed the spatial dimension, as a theme in theatre theory that has been widely discussed, in relation to narrativisation. I showed how through our narrative responses we create narrative spaces in relation to the physical and representational spaces of the theatre, despite their opacity. I also discussed how the voice might create a spatial experience of discourse in its address of our reading strategies.

In this chapter, I examined the spatial construct of the theatre stage and its disruptions to the listener’s auditory imagination. I hereby conclude that a
significant aspect of spatiality in relation to our auditory experiences requires more careful investigation: ‘spatialisation’ is not only an effect within the sound; it comes about through our imaginative responses to sound. The traditional view in contemporary sound design and the semiotics of space is that spatialisation could be controlled and manipulated through, for instance, audio technology. However, this view does not take into account the fundamental uncontrollability of auditory distress in the listener’s ear. Therefore, I propose to regard spatialisation rather as an imaginative response that the listener produces in relation to the implied spatial positions within the sound and her or his position in the listening space.

From the imaginative responses I discussed in this chapter, I deduce that spatialisation includes how the listener makes sense of her or his auditory experiences through space. Spatialisation then implies precisely the position of one’s *listening self* in relation to one’s *listening body*, in the perception of the *listening space*. This means of producing space involves an imaginative act that creates coherence. It thereby secures the sense of self against the disruptive power of auditory distress. Music theatre therefore reveals to us the inevitability of a new temporary synthesis in our imaginations.
Chapter 5
Epilogue: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

The Frequency of the Imagination investigates the practice of listening and the listener in contemporary music theatre performances. I initially started this investigation from the thesis that auditory distress is caused by any sound or music, urging for a response in the listener. The distress is namely a result of the intervening, disturbing and/or excessive qualities of the auditory intensities in the listener’s senses and cognition, since sound is always surrounding or ‘enveloping’ the perceiver, penetrating the continuously susceptible ears. As a general response to auditory distress in our everyday environments, the listener can block, filter and channel the unnecessary or undesired intensities through cognitive mechanisms.

As one of the implications of channelling the distress in the focused listening situation of the theatre, I showed how the listener creates meaningful auditory experiences by placing the sounds in relation to her or himself. This placement involves the listener adopting a certain position through which she or he relates to the sounds. This positioning, in turn, always implies a relation to an acoustic community within which the listener perceives and relates to her or his auditory experiences. This mode of relating to sounds or music is motivated by the underlying question: What does the sound mean to me, and how do I relate to it? Channelling the auditory distress therefore always incorporates a mode of relating and positioning one’s ‘auditory’ self in the act of listening to the auditory experiences.

I subsequently discussed three responses as coping mechanisms to auditory distress: a wide-ranging set of listening modes (chapter two), and more purposely, narrativisation (chapter three) and auditory imagination (chapter four). These responses helped me to explain how the listener spatially relates and positions her or himself to sound or music in order to deal with the auditory distress. I therefore proposed the modes of listening as tools to analyse the listener’s responses. These listening modes suggest certain aural competences that not only depend subjectively on the listener’s private development in listening, but also on the specific cultural discourse in which the act of listening takes place.

The discussion of a first set of listening modes clarified how the listener attributes direct causes and meanings in relation to her or his attention that make the sounds come to rest in the listening space. I then argued that the theatre always implies regulative mechanisms that manage the way the listener uses attention as embedded in a certain aural culture. By discussing the ways the theatre manages the listener’s attention, like, for instance, the ‘schizophonic’ or split perspectives in La Didone, I showed how the listener’s responses in shifting attention help her or him to position her or himself spatially in order to gain control of the distress caused by sound. My analysis
The Frequency of Imagination

of La Didone, however, ended in an impasse of the listener between her or his perceptions of an evenly hovering attention and her or his interpretations guided by semiotic listening, regardless of the cognitive and cultural competence of the listener. As a result of excessive shifting between listening modes, a suitable frame in listening is lacking that would guide the listener’s attention and rule out contradictory interpretations. In this way, there is always a semiotic remainder that pushes the listener further in her or his pursuit to make the auditory experiences meaningful.

To solve the insufficiency and concomitant deadlock in listening, I introduced two specific modes of relating to sound and music in the listener that imply certain discursive positions in meaning-making: narrativisation and auditory imagination. I redefined narrativisation as a specific semiotic mode of listening, which enables the listener to structure the auditory events according to given patterns of expectation and experience. I showed how narrativisation can often be guided by a verbal text or programme note, which helps the listener to relate the music or sounds to fictional and diegetic spaces. In the discussion of De Overstroming and De Helling van de Oude Wijven, it became apparent that this second response to auditory distress is sometimes too restrictive to solve the remainder of meaning that music or sound generally produces through its excess of intensities. As a third response, I defined auditory imagination as part and parcel of the listener’s imaginative capacities to produce associations (mental images) and relations according to less restrictive patterns that aim to create a sense of coherency and continuity in the auditory perceptions. Using the case studies of Blauwbaards Burcht and Men in Tribulation I showed how in these imaginative responses to auditory distress the listener can produce an imaginary space in relation to her or his own body and position in the listening space. By means of these three discussed responses to auditory distress, the listener ultimately positions her or his ‘auditory’ self, thereby producing a sense of space.

As a result of this positioning, I concluded that the notion of ‘spatialisation’ in contemporary music theatre includes more than the representations of space implied in the sound(scape). Spatialisation, rather, reflects the listener’s position as materialised by her or his responses to the auditory distress. The perspectives and frames that music theatre offers to the audience also have a significant role to play in the listener’s sense of spatialisation that is produced in these responses. In chapter two I explained that both theatre and music (or the soundscape) always offer certain perspectives that ‘manage’ the way we perceive. Conventional forms of dramatic theatre, music theatre or opera generally retain a coherence between the spectator’s expectations and the given perspectives on the represented events, which usually channels the attention away from any possible levels of auditory distress that could disrupt the drama. This coherency generally
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

supports dramatic action, characterisation, and the production of a fictional world (a field, an atmosphere).

In contrast to the dramatic tradition, experimental or ‘new’ music theatre often does not aim at such a coherency. Rather, it makes the individual listener aware of the auditory distress by disrupting conventional patterns of looking and listening. As a result, the awareness for the auditory distress activates and marks the position of the listener who produces meaningful relations in her or his experiences of music theatre. As I argued in chapters three and four, this awareness does not need to disrupt the imaginary production of fictional characters and spaces. Rather, it calls for a self-reflective attitude in the listener towards the active role and position that she or he takes in order to deal with the distress in relation to the perspectives or ‘points’ in listening. The awareness thereby highlights that the creation of characters and spaces is not just visually translated on the stage, but depends on the listener’s responses.

In the present epilogue, I want to relate the awareness of the listener who positions her or himself to the wider concerns of music theatre in relation to its past, present and future. In the previous chapters, I argued that the discussion of the listener’s responses to auditory distress contributes to an understanding of how these new forms of music theatre work in relation to their cultural contexts, and specifically to aural culture. An exhaustive understanding of music’s theatre role as aesthetic practice in today’s culture(s) of listening and society needs much more theoretical underpinning of a socio-historically informed approach than the one I have presented so far. I therefore do not wish to make any serious claims of historical evolution and relationality of music theatre and its traditions, which would succeed the conceptual aims of this study as stated in the introduction. Nevertheless, a historical understanding is needed if we want to conceptualise the significance of auditory distress in music theatre’s recent developments as embedded in the culture in which it operates and receives meaning.

To limit my scope in these concluding paragraphs, I will focus on the relation of space-sound-subject in the idea of spatialisation as an extension of my conceptual approach in chapter four. Within this relation, I observe three major implications or functions that the music theatre productions I discussed in my case studies seem to symptomise:

1. The listener’s auditory experiences in music theatre burgeon on dissociation, a fundamental split between sound and its embodiment of a source or an image (acousmatisation). This idea of a split also extends to other levels of the performance, as, for instance, in the conscious display of theatrical mechanisms that channel or manage the listener’s attention.
The Frequency of Imagination

2. A further implication of this dissociation is that music theatre deliberately fragments the listener’s experiences, thereby putting the idea of synthesis at stake and causing rather distracted ways of listening.

3. As a result of these two disruptive processes, the listener becomes aware of the power or authority of sound through auditory distress and the agency or position she or he needs to exert. In response to the disruptions, the listener appears to seek new coherencies, relations and structures that unify the experiences again.

Before I elaborate on these three issues in relation to my case studies, I will present how they came to my attention through a historical discussion that focuses precisely on the sound-space-subject relation through the ideas of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’.

To be more precise, I will introduce two influential agents as moments in opera and theatre history that stand out and that have steered the analysis in theatre scholarship, even when they are not invoked directly: Richard Wagner and Antonin Artaud. Both have a major influence in the conceptualisation of space in the theatre, be it indirectly, through the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk. Although Artaud does not make any aesthetic claims about music theatre directly, I recognise a dialogue in his work with the historical ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a spatial construct and aesthetic project. He reacts against the political and ideological implications of the total artwork as a critique against Occidental culture. In this critique, he proposes a new notion of space that aims at sensitising the modern self. Music theatre today seems also to respond to these operatic and theatrical traditions through the production of space. Therefore, I juxtapose Wagner and Artaud’s ideas about ‘total artwork’ in order to discuss the changing concept of space in music theatre.

Within this very limited historical debate of the relation between sound-space-subject, I briefly discuss the Wagnerian model of the Gesamtkunstwerk as it appeared as a prominent staging practice in opera, followed by the visions of ‘vibrational space’ by Antonin Artaud as an indirect reaction to Wagner in a theatre tradition. I then propose to relate

---

192 I thereby choose not to reproduce the more traditional debate of Richard Wagner versus Bertolt Brecht, who are frequently placed against each other as opposites in the debate of German opera and its fate in the 1920s.

193 I am aware of the possible methodological problems this discussion might bring about. To say the least, discussing two historical conceptualisations of ‘total artwork’ in very different socio-cultural contexts is not appropriate for a historically informed analysis. I therefore do not intend to make any serious claims of historicity with invoking this debate. Nevertheless, the present speculations intend to give a new perspective on the historical study of music theatre that has been so much influenced by the conceptualisations of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’ in present-day music theatre and its scholarship.
contemporary music theatre to these discussions, ideas and practices of space by way of the three issues stated above.

In relation to this historical dialogue that I instigate, I want to discuss the specific role and implications of ‘auditory distress’ in music theatre as mechanisms that make the listener aware of her or his position in contemporary aural culture. In so doing, the spaces thus created through the listener’s position to auditory distress open up the theatre as a site of contestation: music theatre questions what it means to create meaningful auditory experiences in relation to the cultural discourse and culture(s) of listening today. Seen from this angle, history teaches us about how music theatre as a medium and artistic practice should be understood in relation to historically dependent modes of sense perception. The following historical debate therefore aims to explore these modes in relation to the ideas about the listening space, the aesthetic experience and the perceiving subject.

Before I position this exploration in relation to my case studies, I will first stage a series of confrontations between Susan Buck-Morris, Theodor Adorno and Adolphe Appia, who have all commented on the aesthetic implications of the Gesamtkunstwerk in the Wagnerian tradition. Subsequently, I will pose Artaud’s invigorating ideas about vibrational space against this discussion.

1. Auditory Space in the Wagnerian Tradition of Gesamtkunstwerk

Historically, the concept of space in music theatre found its most influential model in the Gesamtkunstwerk (‘total artwork’), to which Richard Wagner contributed with his legendary essay Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (1849; first published in English in 1899). As the structure of ‘intermedial’ or hybrid art forms, the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk lived through its staging practice of opera and traditional music theatre. Although according to Sheppard (2001), music theatre today has, for aesthetic reasons, been claimed or has claimed itself to be antagonistic to the operatic tradition, which is identified with Wagner’s music drama’s, to which it is much indebted. I will chart here the main problems of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a model for ‘total’ space in music theatre’s staging practice from an aesthetic point of view.

Susan Buck-Morris (1992) gives a historical perspective on the aesthetic implications and innovations of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. She points

Sheppard situates music theatre’s complicated relationship to the tradition of Wagner as a problem of what is to be understood as ‘modernist’: “Modernists looked upon nineteenth-century opera, ballet, and theater as empty entertainment. In contrast, they hoped to create works that would have direct spiritual or political impact in performance. Music theater was often intended as a transformative device that required a receptive audience willing to engage in the performance, rather than a passive audience expecting to be entertained. Of course, Wagner’s music dramas had been composed in a similar ‘modernist’ spirit and with similar intentions, but modernists found many excuses for rejecting his example, and many outlets for alleviating their Wagnerian anxieties” (Sheppard 2001: 6).
out that its technological novelties – such as the darkening of the listening space – were used to cover up the heterogeneous experiences of the modern everyday outside the auditorium. According to her, the unity of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was superimposed against the disunity of the senses under the conditions of modernity and its aural culture. Technology then assisted the channelling of the sensory overload, the fragmentation and the sensory impoverishment of our modern existence (Buck-Morrs 1992: 26). As a way to channel out the acoustic disruptions of modern life, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* offered an experience, structured by a unifying intelligence – the ‘grand’ synthesis – that would steer the listener’s attention away from the fragmentation. This way of structuring experience through an idea of total artwork also has spatial implications. In this respect, the arena shape of the auditorium in Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth was revolutionary, as was the relocation of the orchestra in a pit below the stage. These spatial innovations have deeply influenced the staging practice of opera and music drama up until today. However, as Buck-Morrs explains, this tradition relies on given assumptions on aesthetic experience in relation to listening modalities that have been attributed to the auditory subject in modern life.

When compared to my thesis about auditory distress, the synthesis that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* aims at in the spectators’ imaginations could be threatened through music’s intervening power and disruption in the listener. The visual representations that support the dramatic content on stage have therefore the function to secure a sense of coherency in the listener’s imagination and prevent these auditory interventions from raising attention to the opacity, remainder and excess of intensities in meaning-making processes. Not only do perspectives and the distance they claim play a very important role in this, as I explained earlier, but the musical structure itself was also designed to support the immersion of the listener into the imaginative realms of the drama.

In relation to this immersion, Theodor Adorno (2005) refers to the phantasmagorical products of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would make its construct of synthesis into an ‘intoxicating brew’ to the senses. He highlights how this synthesis is based on the listener’s figments of the imagination: “Wagner’s operas tend towards magic delusion, to what

---

195 The word “intoxicating” actually comes from Nietzsche’s critique against Wagner in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872): “It is with German music, and specifically with Wagner, that this Dionysian spirit is let loose. But, Nietzsche continues, there are dangers in the direct absorption of such an intoxicating spirit: if, he asks, it was possible to hear the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* without the aid of word or scenery, as purely a ‘vast symphonic period,’ would he who thus hears the ‘heart-chamber of the world-will’ not ‘collapse all at once?’” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 43). Ironically, the word ‘intoxication’ was used by Wagner himself in his revolt against the opera tradition of Rossini, which he expressed in his *Oper und Drama* as “the intoxication of an opera-night’s narcotic fumes” (Wagner 1943; trans. William Ashton Ellis 1995: 46). Adorno’s use of the word ‘intoxicating brew’ subsequently meant to criticise the phantasmatic effects of the Wagnerian music drama.
Schopenhauer calls ‘The outside of the worthless commodity’, in short towards phantasmagoria. This is the basis of the primacy of harmonic and instrumental sound in his music” (Adorno 2005: 74-5). As a modern prefiguration of acousmatisation, Wagner’s concealment of the orchestra serves the aesthetics of his phantasmagoria. Adorno therefore designates the orchestra as Wagner’s ultimate medium of the phantasmagoria: “The emancipation of colour achieved by the orchestra intensifies the element of illusion by transferring the emphasis from the essence, the musical event in itself, to the appearance, the sound” (87). According to Adorno, the synthesis that the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk strives for by concealing the modes of musical production and mediation is supposed to secure a complete satisfaction, a feeling of coherency that makes the spectator’s imagination take flight.

In line with Buck-Morss’s analysis, one could say that the ‘danger’ of auditory distress was incarcerated within the orchestra pit and rendered inoperative by the theatrical frame which was intended to make the spectator plunge into the dramatic experience and forget about the outside world. The phantasmagorical medium of the concealed orchestra needed to compensate for the distance between the visual space of the stage and the ideal listening point of the spectator in the auditorium, which was marked by the gap of the orchestra pit between them. With the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, Wagner realised his groundbreaking ideas of framing the spectator’s gaze in a total visibility of the stage, and in positioning her or him to have the ideal auditory experience. The model was set for future music theatre works on how to make the individual listeners forget their presence in the auditorium and totally immerse them in the drama on stage. The theatre was turned into a comforting environment that framed the acoustic events while invalidating the possible effects of auditory distress. Yet behind this comfort hides a conception of total space, controlled by an artist-composer. By implication, he also exerts his

---

196 Adorno (1952; 2005) conceptualises the phantasmagoria in Wagner’s music drama as a ‘dreamscape’, a fairytale, an enchanted garden, an illusion that deceives the senses. The phantasmagoria is an illusion in camouflage to be recognised in bourgeois society in need of its own survival (84). By concealing the process of poetic production and therefore ‘human labour’, the phantasmagoria would ideally create a perfect artifice that alienates itself completely from ‘nature’ and turns all aesthetic appearance into commodity artefacts (86). In this way, it would obscure its origins in order to emphasise its use value in terms of authentic and objective reality, giving the bourgeois spectator the illusion that it exists as an objective manifestation of itself (79-80).

197 Adorno (1952) refers to Chamberlain who describes the Wagnerian theatre in ways most similar to our modern cinemas: “[…] in the darkened room with a sunken orchestra and show pictures moving past in the background” (qtd. in Adorno 1952; 2005: 96). Likewise, Friedrich Kittler (1993) draws to the similarity with cinema in that it immerses the spectator by stimulating the nerves: “For in the revolutionary darkness of the Festspielhaus – to which all the darknesses of our cinemas date back – the medium of music-drama began to play with and upon the public’s nerves” (216).
power and control on an audience as a collective that would share an equal and democratic privilege of enjoying ideal listening circumstances.

This concept of a total space has major implications on the listener and the role she or he plays as listening subject. Scenographer Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), known for his abstract designs and revolutionary use of stage light in his stagings of Wagner, testifies about these implications on the listener. He comments on the comfort of the listener in this particular tradition of staging Wagner:

Up until now, all we have asked of the audience has been to be still and pay attention. In order to encourage it in this direction, we have offered it a comfortable seat and have plunged it into a semi-darkness that favors the state of complete passivity which, it appears, is the audience’s portion. That comes down to saying that, in the theatre as elsewhere, we seek to set ourselves off as much as possible from the work of art. We have become eternal spectators (Appia 1912; qtd. in Bablet & Bablet 1982: 55).

Appia was one of the pioneers who, both in theory and in practice, advocated to activate the spectator in engaging her or him more with the work of art, and therefore, the drama expressed in the music. His comment on the Wagnerian tradition shows, however, a fundamental problem: the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} renders ‘eternal spectators’ who perceive passively and indulge their comfortable distance to the artwork.

When Appia invokes the idea of auditory distress in his book \textit{Die Musik und die Inszenierung} (1899), he categorises it to the ‘inferior’ use of applied music as a sound effect in melodrama, which he strongly distinguishes from serious opera:

At an inferior level it only serves to play mysteriously on the nerves of the audience, either to make this [effect] of the stimulation more accessible through the drama, or to highlight a conflict or a hidden dramatic anticipation towards the spectator, which threatens to deteriorate the scenic action (108; my trans. PV).\footnote{The original quote reads: “Auf einer untergeordneten Stufe dient es nur dazu, auf die Nerven des Publikums dunkel einzuspielen, sei es, um dieses der Erregung durch das Drama zugänglicher zu machen, sei es, um einen Konflikt oder eine versteckte dramatische Absicht dem Zuschauer gegenüber zu betonen, welche die scenische Handlung zu sehr abzustumpfen droht” (Appia 1899: 108).}

Here, Appia criticises melodrama for its degeneration of music as a function that conveys dramatic gestures by stimulating the audience’s nerves. His conceptualisations of music and staging are, however, symptomatic of a tradition of music(al) and operatic theatre that subcategorises music as supporting the drama and action on stage. Though on the brink of modern approaches to staging, Appia discusses music from a tradition that puts it in
function of the dramatic gesture. He thereby confirms that the ideas of synthesis and coherency between music and drama still apply in both theatre and opera, though they are not desirable any longer as they have made the spectator passive and distant to the work of art.

Appia confirms the idea that the Gesamtkunstwerk ‘anaesthetises’ the spectator, as Buck-Morrs (1992) deduces from Adorno’s critique. The model of the Gesamtkunstwerk strives for synthesis and unity in the aesthetic experiences, which support most of the functions of the imagination as discussed in chapter four. However, in the twentieth century, this model is no longer sufficient. This model of total space had far-reaching, ideological implications on the ideas of society and the intervention of the artwork. With the collapse of the master-narratives and the authority of the artist-genius at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is no wonder that Artaud responds to the ideas of total theatre in ways that are much indebted to but also diverge strongly from the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. I contend that his ideas have contributed to another conception of space in relation to sound and the perceiving subject in the theatre. I therefore propose to place Artaud’s ideas about space against the theoretical debate of the total artwork, as raised here by Buck-Morrs and Adorno.

2. Artaud’s Conception of a New ‘Total’ Theatre: Vibrational Space

There is a lot of sound and fury in Artaud’s pamphletic texts on how theatre and its sound design should be. These normative statements belong to a theatre tradition that still holds on to a function of art as intervention in culture and society. Artaud’s theatre project stems from a general dissatisfaction with Occidental culture and society. His concept of ‘cruelty’ in his illustrious Théâtre de la cruauté was aimed at a theatre that would break with all culture, which is a much larger cultural project than only a reformation of theatre. Artaud was a major influence for many theatre avant-garde movements that have eventually lead to the establishment of post-dramatic theatre and its formulation in theory today. My purpose with posing Artaud against the Wagnerian tradition of Gesamtkunstwerk is to highlight how Artaud’s ideas on sound and ‘vibrational’ space in many ways recycle the idea of a ‘total space’, but with different aesthetic considerations and implications of its impact on the spectator. This comparison aims to contribute to an understanding of the idea of a total space, which underlies so much music theatre’s reactions today to the traditions of both opera and theatre.

---

199 I am aware that the discussion of Artaud’s ideas in a context of music theatre today is highly speculative and that Artaud’s legacy should not be detached from the cultural discourse of his time. When Artaud implicitly refers to an idea of auditory distress discomforting the spectator, for instance, this cannot simply be understood as identical to what I have studied in relation to contemporary music theatre.
In *Theatre and Its Double* (originally *Le théâtre et son Double* 1938), Artaud explains that sound is foremost used in his theatre to create a 'vibrational' space: “[...] sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent” (1958: 81). Through the idea and experience of vibration, he aims to address the spectator in a manner that is similar to snake charming. He goes on to compare the listener to a snake: like the snake in touch with the earth, the listener is in touch with musical vibrations, into a subtle massage; or as Artaud states: “I propose to treat the spectators like the snake charmer’s subjects and conduct them *by means of their organisms* to an apprehension of the subllest notions” (81). In such propositions, sound is primarily used for its embodied experience, producing a haptic space, much as I discussed in chapter four. Space has a significant function in Artaud’s vision to enclose the audience and enable an immediate experience of a total surrounding that goes beyond speech (logos) and theatre (representation).

However, Artaud sees a function in sound to immerse the spectator in rather a similar way to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He also seems to adopt uncritically Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘intoxicating brew’ in his essay “On the Balinese Theater” in *The Theatre and Its Double*:

> These howls […], all within the immense area of widely diffused sounds disgorged from many sources, combine to overwhelm the mind […]. Everything in this theater is immersed in a profound intoxication which restores to us the very elements of ecstasy […](1958: 64-5).

Artaud’s use of the word ‘intoxication’ does not carry the same negative connotations as Adorno’s critique to Wagner. The critique that immersion would generally ‘anaestheticise’ the spectator, as Buck-Morrs (1992) points out, is opposed by Artaud’s sound system that means, rather, to activate the spectator through immersion and ‘ecstasy’, rapture, bliss. He thereby appears both to reproduce and pervert the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as both a spatial and acoustic construct with multiple, ‘democratic’ listening points in the auditorium. He replaces this model with a sound system of multiple sources and listening perspectives surrounding the spectator.

The impact of Artaud’s ‘surrounding’ theatre was to excite the spectator’s nerves in a direct, physical way. In his first manifesto, *Le théâtre Alfred Jarry* (1926), he writes that his spectator should feel caught as in a police raid on a brothel (Hollier 2004: 165). Artaud wants his spectator to feel unsafe and uncomfortable. The theatre should cause an inescapable awareness that would mark the subject’s presence in the event and space of the performance. In the

---

200 See, for instance, Kahn (2001: 356-7) on the notion of vibrational space in Artaud’s *Le théâtre et son Double* (1938).
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

epigraph to my study, I referred to another description in this manifesto of the effects Artaud aims at with his new ‘total’ theatre:

The spectator who comes to us knows that he has just exposed himself to a true operation, where not only his mind but also his senses and his flesh are at stake. He will henceforth go to the theater as he goes to the surgeon or the dentist (Artaud 1948, 1974: 22; trans. & qtd. in Weiss 1994: 296).

Such descriptions clearly describe in what state of mind Artaud wants his spectator to be when leaving the performance. Though he never refers to auditory distress in clear terms, I read in these references a particular function of sound that leaves the spectator with physical distress. The spectator’s mind, senses and ‘flesh’ are at stake. Auditory distress can equally work on the audience’s nerves, ‘attack’ their senses and create gut feelings to their bodies or goose bumps to their skins. Sound can also intervene in their consciousness and thoughts, thereby affecting them in their deepest inner selves.

Artaud’s writings, moreover, transpire a general dissatisfaction about Western culture, which motivates the physical distress in his theatre. Sound and music are vehicles for him to break with Western theatre. He proposes to adopt tribal practices of trance that would materialise the vibrational space and immersion of the spectator:

I propose then a theatre in which physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theatre as by a whirlwind of higher forces. A theatre which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection. A theatre that induces trance, as the dances of Dervishes induce trance, and that addresses itself to the organism by precise instruments, by the same means as those of certain tribal music cures which we admire on records but are incapable of originating among ourselves (Artaud 1958: 82-3).

In comparison to Adorno’s critique of immersion in the Gesamtkunstwerk, Artaud’s vision of his new total theatre forms a counterpoint to the Wagnerian tradition and the culture it is embedded in. Whereas with Wagner the drama supports a synthesis in the senses and the mind by concealing the modes of production (the orchestra in the pit below the stage) and retaining thereby a safe distance, Artaud chooses not to create distance through drama but rather to immerse his spectators directly. Inspired by tribal music, his theatre aims at affecting the spectator most physically, making her or him surrender as in a trance. Through sound and music, the theatre can claim a certain authority over the spectator in an experience that draws near spiritual experiences of tribal music.
The Frequency of Imagination

The purpose of the spectator’s surrender in this new concept of total space also perverts the Wagnerian tradition through its political and ideological implications. Artaud’s cultural project namely aims to politicise the theatre through the sensory experiences of dread and immersion that serve to shake the individual by “sudden and unforeseen electricity” (Cahiers de Rodez IX: 43). Artaud explains this idea in a significant letter in August 1933 to Natalie Clifford Barney:

The theater is an exorcism, a summoning of energy. It is a means of channeling the passions, of making them serve something, but it must be understood not as an art or a distraction but rather as a solemn act, and this paroxysm, this solemnity, this danger must be restored to it. In order to do that it must abandon individual psychology, enter into mass passions, into the conditions of the collective spirit, grasp the collective wavelengths, in short, change the subject (Artaud, Cahiers de Rodez V: 153; qtd. in Weiss 1992: 279).

Artaud envisions his theatre as a critical strategy that aims at re-activating the spectator, not only as an individual but also as a cultural agent in relation to others. The political resonances of stirring ‘mass passions’ and advocating ‘collective spirit’ are strikingly comparable to some of Wagner’s ideas on the connection between audience and the ‘human race’, which have lead to the criticisms of (ab)use of his operas for National Socialism and Nazi propaganda in the 1940s. However, the above citation helps me to weigh Artaud’s suggestions of a new ‘total’ space and theatre against this tradition and critique after Wagner.

Both Wagner’s and Artaud’s cultural projects aim at a politicisation of the individual through sensory means, though in opposite ways. Artaud’s suggestion to channel the passions and energies against distraction are not of an equal order as Wagner’s aspiration to channel the spectator through synthesis and integration of all the senses (‘synaesthesia’). Both Adorno and Buck-Morr have criticised the all-encompassing, comforting fusion in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk that is based on the concealment of the fragmentation in the individual’s experience. Artaud, on the contrary, aims at an implicit awareness of the individual entering into mass passions through an immersion that causes dread and discomfort. In this way, Artaud’s theatre is rather a medium or tool that calls for a critical understanding of the power and authority that it conveys. This exemplifies a rupture with the tradition of the

Some scholars have wrongly concluded that Artaud’s theatre would be moralist but not political. Susan Sontag (1973; 2004) speaks of a ‘spiritual’ and cultural revolution (92-3): “Artaud’s plans for subverting and revitalising culture, his longing for a new type of human personality, illustrate the limits of all thinking about revolution which is anti-political” (Sontag 1973; 2004: 93). On the contrary, I want to suggest here that Artaud’s language and cultural criticism cannot be detached from the political situation of his times. The revolution he envisions, however, enters foremost the individual through the senses in his theatre.
Gesamtkunstwerk while referring to it as a new ‘total’ theatre. However, it is of a significant other order with different political ramifications in the way it addresses the individual.

Artaud’s metaphor of ‘grasping the collective wavelengths’ should then be understood as a call for an acute introspection of the individual, aiming at transformation. In this same idealistic vein, Artaud writes in a letter that he wants to create “a work which causes the entire nervous system to feel illuminated as if by a miner’s cap, with vibrations and consonances that invite one to corporeally emerge in order to follow, in the sky, this new, unusual and radiant Epiphany” (Cahiers de Rodez XIII: 131; qtd. in Weiss 1994: 273). The religious terms in capital letters could be borrowed from Wagner. However, Artaud’s theatre does not serve the same ideology. As I already discussed through Hollier’s concept of the ‘ultimate cathartic sound effect’ in chapter four, sound and music in the theatre should create vibrations that affect the spectators physically and bring them to an overwhelming, undeniable consciousness.

Changing the subject through channelling collective energies, stirring the masses, and entering into a collective spirit are modernist ideas that today sound too tantalising or politically incorrect, especially in the post-Soviet period after 1989. The collective address in Artaud’s conception of a total space should, however, be understood in a modernist tradition that still aims at restoring a coherent experience by surrounding and immersing the spectator. My final case-study of Men in Tribulation in chapter four resembled many of Artaud’s ideas presented here in an attempt to open up the notion of ‘opera’. However, it became clear that the physical impact of surrounding the listener with sound had a different purpose and effect than Artaud would have meant in his time. In what follows, I therefore look at how music theatre positions itself towards the traditions of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’ in relation to its present-day audiences. In this final discussion, I will look again at the case studies and arguments I have examined in this study in order to conclude how the workings of auditory distress in music theatre have a significant function in present-day culture and aurality. Within this wider, cultural framework, the

---

202 The metaphor of the ‘collective wavelength’ has similarities with the tradition of an early-modern comparison of the listener’s soul to a piano that can be tuned, like in Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1911): “The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key” (Kandinsky 1911, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 70). Likewise, nineteenth-century notions of synaesthesia paralleled Wagner’s ideas of a Gesamtkunstwerk as artwork of the future that would tune to all the senses through correspondences between them. Synaesthetic correspondences were sometimes described in terms of a corresponding vibration. Douglas Kahn introduces in this respect his ‘figure of vibration’ as pronounced in the historical ideas of synaesthesia: “derived from several sources, including neo-Pythagorean ideas wherein physical laws of vibrating strings reverberated to harmonically map the Universe, occult ideas of cosmic coordination of essences, and scientific ideas that sound and light were distinguished by calibrated degrees of the speed of vibration” (Kahn 2001: 14-5).
case studies signal something significant about music theatre, not as isolated experiments in relation to its own history as aesthetic artefacts, but in relation to the listener and the cultural practice of listening.

3. Music Theatre’s Responses to Total Theatre Today

Every music theatre production – whether it is based on new musical material or a staging of existing work – always moves in-between tradition and its presence as cultural practice. Many of the modes of production and representation of music theatre are rooted in tradition (such as the musical genres, media, musical instruments or the orchestra it incorporates). Music theatre has also developed through its embrace of new technologies, performance styles and contemporary modes of perception that have given way to new aesthetic pleasures and meanings in the listener. In this way, I want to regard how, through its relation with tradition, such as with total theatre, music theatre directly relates to and acts upon aural culture today.

As I argued in chapter one, so much of what constitutes aurality – as a different perceptual category alongside visuality – is an effect of other kinds of forces and power relations that are not restricted to hearing and listening only. Aurality should not be mistaken with audibility or aural competence. Rather, it expresses how listening always takes place within a certain culture and discourse. As I have shown in this study, the listener tunes into memory, experientiality, and ‘preformed’ meanings in order to make sense of the auditory experiences. Awareness of aurality therefore takes account of how these meaningful experiences in music theatre exceed the subjectivity of the individual as they are always influenced and formed by the cultural discourse in which the listener defines what is meaningful. Aurality then accumulates the cultural norms, values, conventions, functions, meanings and so on of sound and aural perception, as contained by discourse. In this sense, I conceptualised how the listener’s responses as ways to channel auditory distress into meaningful categories are always discursive, and therefore culturally and historically defined.

I want to place these discursive responses to auditory distress in contemporary music theatre against the historical debate of space in total theatre. As I explained earlier, (new) music theatre as multimedia theatre positioned itself initially to the Wagnerian opera tradition and Gesamtkunstwerk in terms of both continuity and resistance. Similarly, I found in Artaud’s writings a dissident voice that both contests and reproduces the traditional models of total theatre and total space. By way of conclusion to my conceptual approach to the practice of music theatre, I deduce at least three fundamental aspects or functions that relate to these historical ideas: dissociation, fragmentation and authority/agency. I contend here that in its response to the traditions and current cultural issues, contemporary music
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

theatre incorporates these features in order to make the listener aware of her or his own position within present-day aural culture. I will now discuss each of these facets in relation to my case studies, with which I hope to disclose the workings and the role of music theatre in present cultural practices of listening.

3.1. Dissociation: Splits in Auditory Perception and the Listening Subject

One thing I have consistently attempted to demonstrate throughout this study is that music theatre calls on the listener to actively relate to the auditory experiences and that it thereby (re-)produces post-modern subjectivity in the responses it stimulates in the listener. In the address of these responses, auditory distress plays a major role in disrupting a sense of a stable and coherent auditory ‘self’ in the listener.

As I have shown in chapter 1 through David Rokeby’s installation n-Cha(n)t, auditory distress manifests itself as an excess of intensities that intervenes in the listener. In the controlled situation of the theatre, this excess could be intensified by sensory – mostly visual – deprivation of an ‘empty’ stage. The intervention of sound contributes to an intrinsic vulnerability and insufficiency of the listening apparatus in a continuous attempt to process or channel the excess through various modes of hearing and listening. As a result, the insufficiency produces a semiotic remainder that pushes listening to continue searching for meaning. Listening attention manifests itself then as primarily a defence mechanism in the listener to channel, block and control the excess. In so doing, the listener responds through her or his listening attention in relation to the intervening sounds and the caused auditory distress in order to be able to relate to them in meaningful, discursive ways.

Contrary to Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, which aimed at keeping the auditory distress of modern life at bay, music theatre today takes an alternative position by calling upon listening modes that have been established in our everyday environments and auditory encounters. In this observation, I explained how especially semiotic modes of listening are entrenched by the present-day aural culture. The attitudes of the listener as a ‘modern auditory subject’ are based on a fundamental split: a dissociation that is inherent to auditory perception, which became only more apparent with the rise of audio technology (technical reproduction and distribution of sound). Dissociation generally means a breaking into pieces, a separation, a disunity. This may imply neuro-psychological effects on the human subject, when the splitting affects her or his mental processes. In the context of my investigation, dissociation appears to be central to the auditory experiences in music theatre and my notion of auditory distress, which equally affect the listener and her or his cognitive abilities to respond by means of the listening modes.

To explain how dissociation has a bearing on our responses to sound from very early age, I pointed to the psychoanalytical model of the acoustic mirror,
which materialises our first contact with the outside world through the ‘sonorous envelope’. I explained how the envelope of sound produces both comfort and distress by constituting our ‘selves’ in terms of both identity and separation. Prior even to the Lacanian mirror stage in visual terms, this acoustic mirror makes the subject perceive itself as fundamentally different, while identifying itself with the object that produces the split: the mother’s voice as both a protection from and a dissociation of the surrounding world. In this way, the dissociative functioning of the sonorous envelope produces auditory distress as much as it offers a means to resolve it.

Guy Rosolato paved the way for the connection between this first experience of the sonorous envelope and our haptic experiences of music as a representation of a desire for this envelope in theatre today: a desire to impose coherency, continuity and identity against the dissociations of our modern world. I then introduced Josse De Pauw’s music theatre performance Ruhe to show how the sonorous envelope of a male choir can be used as an effective tool to sooth the listener’s senses under a blanket of sound. This representation of the sonorous envelope in its turn produced a new auditory distress in relation to the context of National Socialism or downright Fascism. As I explained in chapter four, the haptic space that results from our experiences of this sonorous envelope in the theatre comes about by an imaginative response as we seek coherence, contiguity and continuity in our auditory perceptions. Yet in relation to the monologues in Ruhe, this desire for coherence – as also strived for in the harmony of Franz Schubert’s songs – can stir dangerous political feelings such as fascism. In this way, this longing to undo the split in our perception is turned back at us as a mirror in which we hear ourselves listening and interpreting as subjects in relation to the perception of ‘others’. The sonorous envelope thereby puts us in touch with an acoustic community, as though singing in a choir or listening with others in an audience.

The sonorous envelope does not only account for an existential split between the subject and the surrounding modern world. It also shows how every sound always constitutes a split of its own object, body or cause. Using the concepts of acousmatisation (Michel Chion) and the ‘ventriloquist’ effect of sound (Steven Connor), I explained how sounds always seek to come to rest in our efforts to interpret them. Acousmatisation is an effect of technology that has found prominence in present-day aurality since as long as it has been possible to record and reproduce it (the phonographic apparatus). In cinema, acousmatisation is inherent to the film apparatus due to a mechanical limitation that always inserts a split between sound and image. Cinema, however, has brought about many strategies that make the listener forget about this split in order for her or him to immerse her or himself in the story.

250

203 See my discussion on Didier Anzieu’s protective ‘audio-phonic’ skin in relation to the ‘skin-ego’ in chapter one.
Acousmatisation, as Chion describes, at times even takes part in the diegesis (such as in horror effects) or acquires a place outside the diegesis as an off-screen voice or (extra-diegetic) music. Chion thereby demonstrates the authoritative power of sound through his concept of the *acousmêtre*, the master behind the curtain of visibility who is in control of the sound production and meaning.

However, as Mladen Dollar (2006) points out, the acousmatic process that splits sound from its body resides in every sound experience, prior to the entry of recording technology in modern aurality. Pierre Schaeffer (1966), R. Murray Schafer (1977) and Christian Metz (1980) have made us aware of the problematic definition of the ‘aural object’, which never completely equals its source body, even we know the latter with great certainty. As a consequence of this fundamental disparity in auditory experience, causal listening is one of the most fundamental modes of listening as a survival strategy of the listener. It defines the listening subject in relation to its surroundings, as Steven Connor (2005) describes: the modern listener is constantly ‘on the qui vive’. Though, rather than looking for real causes or origins in the physical space or, if not immediately visible, in our imagination (as a way of ‘aural gazing’), I conclude that we always attribute a place to the most significant sounds in our attention. We do this in relation to our sense of ‘self’ by positioning ourselves, and mostly, by giving the sounds meaning as a result of this positioning. In so doing, we seek to regain control over the uncontrollability of sound and the auditory space. Space can thereby be produced by the listening act as a result of our responses to the fundamental acousmatic nature of sound, which gives the sounds a place in relation to ourselves.

The acousmatic split occurs in music theatre on many levels and in different ways, contributing to a sense of dissociation as a productive principle. As Ruhe demonstrated in chapter one, this split can make the listener aware of one’s own position towards the auditory distress and its ‘vibrational’ space, much similar to Artaud’s sense. The sonorous envelope gives the listener a physical and spatial sense of coherency with which she or he can overcome the split. In relation to the texts of the SS-*ers*, however, this homogenic experience of a unified space is at stake. Auditory distress contributes to this unsettling of the homogenising strategies in the theatre and activates the listener in relation to these strategies. I have conceptualised this relation through the perspectives that theatre always inherently has to offer. Other than in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this music theatre does not aim to confirm a synthesis in the representation to secure a straight communication of dramatic content. Rather, it activates the listener and intensifies the listening act in a context that marks the split by not providing easy solutions or conventional perspectives to deal with the auditory distress.

Dissociation defies, moreover, an all-encompassing intelligence (a ‘genius’) or perspective on the world, as was the case in both Wagner’s and
Artaud’s conceptions of total theatre. Walter Benjamin (1935) refers to this process as inherent to the (modern) age of mechanical reproduction, which he sees reflected in the media of photography and film. Dissociation in these media withers away ‘aura’ or auratic power of the art object, distancing it from the fabric of tradition as an inevitable outcome of mechanical reproduction (Crimp 1980: 94). It has slowly affected all conditions of production in all areas of culture. Theatre has been always so much indebted to its unrepeatable presence as a happening or an event, that its traditional models were blind to its own processes of dissociation as a system of reproduction. Auditory distress could recover something of music theatre’s insistence on the ‘now’ and ‘here’ of the event. The issue of whether music theatre has auratic power is, however, secondary, and, today, perhaps an obsolete debate since the distinctions between high-brow and low-brow have deteriorated in the post-dramatic paradigm.

What has changed drastically under the cultural strains of dissociation is that we no longer perceive music theatre as one whole, construed by a master genius (the artist-composer) in the image of Wagner, or the visionary in the persona of Artaud. On the contrary, the splits in our perception prevent us pinpointing one authoritative voice that is in control of the meaning behind the whole representation. As such, this music theatre has much in common with Artaud’s total theatre concept that aimed at discomforting the spectator from multiple perspectives and sources. This dissociation into many authoritative voices in music theatre affects the listener as a subject of her or his perceptions, as a result of the meaning-making process. In its function as an (acoustic) mirror, music theatre enables the listener to recognise her or his mutual projections as subject in the absence of one authorial voice. Benjamin then claims that through this recognition, dissociation is recollected in unity. The listener reassembles the splits in the representations on stage and the auditory perceptions, and creates a new unity through her or his own meaning. It is in this signifying intervention and projection that the listener establishes her or his own subjectivity in relational terms (Silverman 1985: 196-8).

As I showed through my case studies, contemporary music theatre makes use of dissociation as a principle or strategy on many levels of experience for the listener to create a new sense of unity. However, the listener’s urge to find such unity is not unproblematic, as it cannot always be immediately resolved. By exposing the spectator to continuous split perceptions, The Wooster Group’s La Didone demonstrates how the listener tries to deal with the disruptions and fragmentations of the auditory space through her or his listening modes. Nonetheless, the performance illustrates how dissociation can lead to an impasse, a deadlock between perception and interpretation as a result of an overload of meanings and perspectives on the stage.

Dissociation affects the regulative system of perspectives in La Didone, as a schizophonic listening situation is presented between two parallel universes:
on the one hand, the baroque sound world of Dido in Francesco Cavalli’s *dramma per musica*, and on the other, the sound-effects of blips and beeps of Mario Bava’s science-fiction film *Terrore Nello Spazio* (aka *Planet of the Vampires* from 1965). The continuous juxtaposition of these two diegetic worlds and respective narratives could be said to aim at new connections, a new synthesis between sounds, texts and images in the attentive observer who tries to perceive all. Yet the auditory distress defies an evenly hovering attention that would suspend a position by the listener. Rather, as the juxtaposition bombards the listener with intensities, the listener feels urged to respond through her or his modes of listening, constantly shifting the attention. The performance reflects as such the choices that the listener makes through the listening modes in response to a general discomfort, to which the new syntheses give temporarily pleasure. The schizophonic perspectives, however, leave the play with meanings and shifts in attention open. There is no attempt to a (narrative) closure, no closed semiotics. Auditory distress brings forth continuously new signifieds, redundancies and slippages in meaning, constituting an endless regression of a unified whole (cf. Derrida’s notion of supplementarity).

The pejorative connotation of Schafer’s term ‘schizophonia’ (i.e. like acousmatisation, the splitting of a sound from its source or the condition caused by this split) also signals a fundamental negativity towards the modern subject who fails to synthesise all. In a similar pessimistic vein, Adorno (2002) refers to the failure in the listener to read music as a meaningful whole. Rather, the modern listener abides by ‘atomistic’ listening as opposed to structural listening:

> Atomistic listening, which loses itself weakly, passively, in the charm of the moment, the pleasant single sound, the easily graspable and recollectable memory, is pre-artistic. Because such listening lacks the subjective capacity for synthesis, it also fails in the encounter with the objective synthesis that every more highly organized music carries out. Atomistic behaviour, which is still always the most widespread, and certainly the one on which so-called light music speculates and which it cultivates, merges with the naturalistic pleasures of the sense of taste, the de-artification of art from which the latter, over the course of centuries, struggled free with considerable effort and always pending reversal (Adorno 2002: 318).

As a result of the decline of music as auratic art, Adorno’s critical stance towards atomistic listening is based on the presumption that this type of listening would prevent the listener perceiving music as ‘intellectual’ or meaningful (‘Geistiges’) to the mind. As *La Didone* demonstrates, the constant dissociation in the listening attention indeed brings the interpretative efforts of the listener to an impasse that overwhelms and destabilises a sense of a unified ‘self’. Consequently, I have conceptualised two other responses that...
enable the listener to regain a sense of coherency over the remainder and dispersal of signifieds: narrativisation and auditory imagination as two specific and interrelated modes of relating to sound or music.

Another aspect of dissociation is exemplified in *Men in Tribulation*: the fetishisation of autonomous sound. In this performance that incorporates some of Artaud’s ideas on total theatre, an electroacoustically controlled feedback loop divides the sound from its source body, giving a sense of a ‘body without organs’, an imaginary body made of sound. In Benjamin’s line of argument, this fetishisation could imply a separation of the artwork from the contingencies of history, giving the listener a suspended moment of pleasure for the repeatability itself outside temporal awareness. However, it would be an illusion to think that the feedback loops do not bring about any cultural-historical references. The ‘globalised’ sound of technologically induced noise imposes a sense of oppressive, territorialised space in the listener. In this way, the performance subverts the fantasies of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as total theatre by replacing it with another kind of total space: a technologised version of Artaud’s vibrational space.

In the effects of autonomised sound on the listener, Steven Connor (2000) observes a close relationship between pre- and post-technological experiences. Audio technologies actualise some of the desires which predate them, reviving the ‘powers of the uncanny and excessive’ that are associated with dissociated sound and voice: “Vocal and acoustic technology must therefore be understood partly as a process, not of Weberian disenchantment of the world, but of re-enchantment” (Connor 2000: 40). In music theatre, this re-enchantment by means of audio technology could create a new *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a new phantasm of coherence against the splits in our perceptions and listening subjects, against the alienations of the auditory subject in the modern world as Buck-Morss (1992) suggested. However, this theatre poses another characteristic strategy against this tradition of such

---

204 Adorno (1965) also suggests imagination as a solution to atomistic listening and the absence of a musical whole: “If the true musical whole does not impose a blind dominance of so-called form, but is rather result and process in one – very closely related, by the way, to the metaphysical conceptions of great philosophy – then it makes sense that the way to understand the whole would have to lead up from the individual part, as well as down from the whole. Musical experience is all the more impelled to take this route since there are no longer any overarching forms to which the ear could entrust itself blindly. The means to such experience is exact imagination (*exakte Phantasie*)” (Adorno 1965; 2002: 323 2).

205 Nietzsche has referred to a similar influence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* on the modern subject: “Art, and especially the Gesamtkunstwerk, is important to the modern, alienated individual in bringing them in contact with others, with nature, and with the core (the will) of life itself. The Gesamtkunstwerk is thus the consummate modernist art work: ‘Man can only be comprehended in conjunction with men in general, with his Surroundings: man divorced from this, above all the modern man, must appear of all things the most incomprehensible’” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 48).
total space: a fragmentation of space that enables self-reflexivity of the listener as subject of the listening act.

3.2. Fragmentation: A Self-conscious Subjectivity

Another defining aspect of music theatre as reaction against the traditional models of total theatre is its fragmented construct as a post-modern structure of experience, which manifests in many ways. This fragmentation can be seen as an elaboration of ‘dissociation’. As I showed in chapter three, one of the strategies that contemporary music theatre shares with post-dramatic theatre is ‘musicalisation’ of text and stage. In this notion Hans-Thies Lehmann (1997 & 1999) recognises a general dramaturgical principle to break with the expectations of a logocentric, teleological, dramatic unfolding in a theatre play. It produces an auditive space beyond *telos*. Obviously, musicalisation is inherent to a long history and tradition of music theatre. Whereas musicalisation in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* aimed at turning music into theatre and synthesising all the media in the representation as a go-between for the spectator’s imagination, it has the opposite effect on the post-dramatic stage.

According to Lehmann, musicalisation takes part in a larger project of turning theatre into music as to fragmentise its logic and modes of reception. As a result, he describes such musicalised theatre performances as scenic poems with a ‘meandering’ narration. Rather than rendering one simple narrative, the theatre shows the process of narration as a production, a mechanism or a construct that raises consciousness for the spectator’s contribution to it. This idea has helped me to redefine narrative in terms of a proper mode of listening: narrativisation. This notion explains how the spectator can still perceive a theatre production as narrative when it refrains from any undeniable narrative development or tradition of storytelling. Narrativisation can then be used as a discursive mechanism to solve auditory distress and regain a sense of coherency or synthesis in the fragmented perceptions. Seen this way, fragmentation can still bring forth a diegetic space with fictional characters in which a sense of narration or narrative unfolds on the stage in relation to the music. However, it comes forth in the listener’s responses.

Since the 1960s, post-structuralist theory has insisted that any kind of text can be understood as open sign system (cf. Umberto Eco’s notion of the ‘open work’) where meanings are produced and written into them upon the individual impulses in the reader. However, as I have shown, the narrative

206 Fragmentation in cultural objects such as music in the 1960s had a different function than it has today: it was part of a cultural project to open the ‘work’ concept and its tradition. As much it is a modernist trope materialised in the avant-garde to seek disruption with the past through violence, chaos, stretching human perception (Attinello 2004: 154), the ‘fragment’ became a strategy of an art whose aim was “not that of creating harmonies but of overstraining the
The Frequency of Imagination

impulse does not only come about by the willingness and competence of the listener, who could interpret the music performance in a narrative way due to a human desire to make sense of the fragmentation. A narrative reading is not arbitrarily a matter of the individual’s competence to respond to a lack of meaning. Rather, the listener’s relation to the fragmentation comes with certain expectations that are cultural-historically and discursively shaped and that come about in relation to the perspectives that theatre offers as go-betweens in the interaction between the subject and auditory distress. As I showed through the music theatre performance *De Overstroming* by Peter Van Kraaij at LOD, the narrative impulse resides as much as in the performed texts of Auden’s poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* and Handke’s short story *Die Überschwemmung*, as in the promotional materials of the information brochure, the programme description or the press folder.

A significant aspect in music theatre’s narrative impulse is the absence or suspension of an authorial voice or power behind the representation. In the traditional definition of narrative, there is no narration without a narrator, so to speak. This has lead to a contrived search for an authorial voice in the ‘intelligence’ of a composer within the composition, a musical persona in Cone’s theory. *De Overstroming* however demonstrated that the presence of composer Jan Kuijken as musician on the stage does not need to bring forth an authorial voice in the experience of the music. Rather, the text by Peter Handke offers a point of listening to the careful listener as an entry point to narrativise the rather fragmented musical material: the perspective of the blind brother then offers a metaphor for the critical attitude to music’s narrative inclinations. *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* by Walpurgis, moreover, confirmed that a narrative voice on or off the stage is not necessary for stimulating a narrative impulse in the listener. Rather, the narrative impulse comes about as a response to the auditory distress in relation to the title and fragments of Juan Rulfo’s novel *Pedro Páramo*, which are distributed to the spectator through projections and the programme brochure.

Another aspect in the fragmentation of the spectator’s perception resides in the structure of perspectives that music theatre offers: instead of concealing the modes of production such as in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, the post-modern stage fragments experience by presenting its theatrical mechanisms. This presentation makes us aware of the process of mediation and its influence in our interpretative responses. Whereas auditory experience is so much about the imperceptible, this type of music theatre often literally shows the

medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable, subject-matter” (Sontag 1966: 287; qtd. Attinello 2004: 161). Through the performances I discuss, I tried to show that fragmentation does not aim at such a violent effect on the perceiver to break with traditions as such, nor is auditory distress accountable for such a strategy. Rather, the fragment is highlighted in the theatre as fundamental to the nature of our perception, and auditory distress proves to be inherent to every auditory perception as such.
mechanisms as prostheses of our experiences, which turn the attention on the perception itself and its ramifications for the listening subject. In this way, music theatre is much indebted to the post-dramatic scene in which such presentation aims to disrupt a linear communication of content as in the tradition of dramatic theatre. As such, post-dramatic theatre shows how a certain invisible logic is at work in the theatrical construction, which provides order according to our beliefs about the world, history and reality, as a closed world (Lehmann 1999: 288). Contemporary music theatre then seems to suggest that auditory distress, as fundamental to every auditory experience, operates in every auditory experience to contest this closed-off world contained in the theatre frame as its production is embedded in our perception and responses to the auditory distress.

The presentation of these mechanisms in the theatre also raises awareness for the historical construct of music theatre as a discursive matrix constituted by different media. Music theatre as ‘multimedia’ theatre no longer aims at a holistic arrangement that secures such a total experience, as modelled in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. Rather, it disintegrates and reveals the individual claims of these media on the perception of the spectator. De Overstroming presents us with an example of how the juxtaposition of signifying media such as text, music and image can guide the listener to narrativise the musical events. However, no unambiguous perspective is given that would help the listener to create a total world, moulding presentational, representational and diegetic spaces together. Rather, auditory distress intensifies the sense in the listener that there is more than one meaning. As a result, the theatre, as a sense producing construct, turns the interpretative act in listening to itself. In this way it turns discourse into a place of contestation, full of enigmas that the listener needs to solve, but without giving the expectation that there is only one coherent meaning.

Peter Boenisch relates this strategy of showing the construct of theatre to the aspect of intermediality and the gaps it necessarily creates:

Instead of closing down the multiple semantic potential offered into one coherent meaning, intermedial performances derail the message by communicating gaps, splits and fissures, and broadcasting detours, inconsistencies and contradictions. Therefore, intermedial effects ultimately inflect the attention from the real worlds of the message created by the performance, towards the very reality of media, mediation and the performance itself. The usually transparent viewing conventions of observing media are made palpable, and the workings of mediation exposed. Thus, intermediality manages to stimulate exceptional, disturbing and potentially radical observations […] (Boenisch 115).

These gaps in the representational system of contemporary theatre expose the construct of the theatre as a representation of a ‘total world’, exposing the spectator to a multiplicity of semantic potential. The intermediality that
The Frequency of Imagination

Boenisch refers to is, however, a specific cultural-historical practice in the theatre, which breaks with the model of the Gesamtkunstwerk. In a similar vein, the contemporary music theatre I have discussed questions this tradition by showing its own modes of production and representation.

As an example of this fragmentation of the stage, Blauwbaards Burcht deconstructs the delusions of the Gesamtkunstwerk as ‘phantasmagoria’ by marking its own theatrical construct. In Wouter Van Looy’s semi-scenic staging, the construct of the stage with video projection, supertitle boxes and a visible orchestra stimulates the listener’s imagination like in a concert or recital mode of production (Kivy 1994). The orchestra on stage secures the aesthetic pleasure of a concert, but due to its continuous presence in semi-darkness in combination with a dynamic light performance, the listener’s awareness resides in the background. The presentation of the orchestra at the centre is very telling for a post-modern culture that embraces the disenchantment of any phantasmagorical camouflage. However, to pick up on Connor’s idea, the disenchantment has become a new re-enchantment of musical delight, building up towards the pendant moment of the subject’s dissolution in aural bliss as staged in the collapse of Judith, Bluebeard’s latest and final bride. In the representation of text and lighting, she dissolves in the last room of Bluebeard’s castle, a metonymic space for his subconscious. As follows, the representational ‘stage of the subconscious’ in Blauwbaards Burcht questions the very essence of what can be visually represented and imaginatively suggested in the listener’s inner stage.

The fragmentation of the visual, ‘specular’ space enables the spectator to retain the image or concept of the theatrical construct. After creating the persona ‘Bluebeard’ as an imaginary body and his castle as an imaginary space, all that the spectator is left with is a desire for narrative closure, while darkness falls upon Bluebeard and his silent (vocalic) body on the stage. In this sense, the fragmentation retains a double awareness in the listener-spectator for the opacity of the medium music, as Peter Kivy also draws our attention to: while attending to the musical performance as the execution of a score, we imagine a fictional character (vocal persona) in relation to the vocalic body we perceive on stage.

The video projection in Blauwbaards Burcht by Kurt D’Haeseleer, however, aims at homogenising the experience again. It operates perhaps then as a new ‘phantasmagoria’, stimulating and ‘intoxicating’ the imaginative response in the listener against the auditory distress in the orchestral score and vocal performance. The video represents abstract, mental imagery, and thereby marks our imagining activity. Video could also mark a sudden split in our homogeneous experience of sound and image. In Ruhe, for instance, the video projection by David Claerbout catches our eye through the barely noticeable movement of wind blowing in a shadowy tree. This detail underscores unexpectedly the dissonances in the musical score by Annelies
van Parys, deconstructing Schubert’s musical motives and casting an element of threat into the listening space. Auditory distress is given significance here in relation to the image, suggesting that there is more than meets the eye.

Another counter-tendency against the fragmentation of the stage is a re-enchantment of immersion and aural bliss (‘jouissance’), which were also part and parcel of the Wagnertian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As I demonstrated through both *Blauwbaards Burcht* and *Men in Tribulation*, though in a totally different fashion, music has the ability to engulf the listener and, thereby, to immerse her or him in a sense of total surrounding. As a result, the listener would lose one’s ‘self’ as her or his senses take flight. I also showed through these performances, in relation to Barthes’s notion of *jouissance*, how this idea of the dissolution of the self is historically dependent and works in relation to certain conventions and expectations in reading the music as text. In that case, the question today is: What does it mean to be immersed by sound, to lose or surrender oneself to it?

The traditional models of the phantasmagoria and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* are no longer effective in bringing the spectator closer to the drama or the story. Rather, the post-dramatic theatre exposes this model and distracts any attempt at narration by fragmentation. Still, the enveloping aspect of sound brings solace to the listener as listening subject against the destabilising effects of auditory distress. It places us in the ‘midst of things’ (Ong 1971), bringing the spectacle down again to new intimate experiences. According to Theo van Leeuwen (1999), this aspect speaks of certain preferences in the consumption and experiences of a society, which comes close to the oral society as discussed by Walter J. Ong:

> Sound [...] ‘pours into the hearer’ (Ong, 1982: 72). It connects, and it requires surrendering oneself to, and immersing oneself in, participatory experience. A society which values sound over vision would therefore also be a society which values lived experience over detached analysis, memories over possessions, and subjective immersion and surrender over objective scrutiny, control and power (van Leeuwen 1999: 196).

Music theatre can bring across a counter-point to the visual noise and the overload of information of our times, through the fragmented perspectives of the theatre that create and manage focus in sharing intimacy, silent nuances that intervene the aural sense and bring the sound physically closer. It therefore draws out and plays upon some of the values of our society and culture today in the way we give meaning to certain experiences.

In *Men in Tribulation*, however, this all-engulfing gesture of the feedback loops through amplification, immobilising the listener in the listening space. The sonorous envelope imposes introspection on the individual listener about one’s own lived experience, while trying to ‘survive’ in the violent and oppressive effects of overexposure to haptic space. This brings me to my third
and last characteristic of music theatre in relation to its tradition and present-day aurality: through auditory distress, sound and its sonorous envelope impose an authority on the listener, whose agency and competence to respond in listening is at stake.

3.3. Agency and Authority in Listening: Competence and Discourse

The historically produced dissolution of ‘self’ and the destabilisation of the listener as subject, as consequences of auditory distress in our aurality today, finally raises questions about the authority of sound and the agency of the listener to act upon it. In chapter one, I explained how in relation to our own thresholds of hearing and listening, and to an acoustic horizon to which all the perceived sounds are pitched, the interventions of sound claim an authority over our bodies and sense of self. Due to a continuous receptivity and sensibility of the ear, auditory distress poses a threat to us, which makes us feel addressed and urged to respond in our everyday encounters with our surrounding soundscapes.

In the theatre and in the opera, the implications of auditory distress were long kept to a minimum under the sovereignty of drama. As Appia (1899) suggested earlier about melodrama in contrast to opera, auditory distress was often reduced to a deliberate effect in order to work on the spectator’s nerves. Even in modern text-based theatre, manuals of sound design (such as Kaye and Lebrecht 1992) instruct readers to be careful with sound so as not to disrupt the text. Music drama too kept auditory distress long at bay. The Gesamtkunstwerk offered the cure through synthesis and identity in relation to the drama. Yet this model is no longer sufficient in post-modern times. As I argued in chapter two, theatre by definition offers perspectives to deal with the auditory distress. However, contemporary music theatre and new stagings of operatic theatre generally do not provide easy solutions to the attentive listener. Rather, they intensify the auditory distress – through the deprivation model – where it addresses the listener to produce meaningful auditory experiences. As such, Artaud’s vision to stimulate and activate the listener through a general discomfort in a total surrounding of the theatre indirectly inspires this type of music theatre though in different ways of execution and context.

Agency manifests itself in the responses the listener makes in relation to the auditory distress. The listener’s ways of responding always predates the auditory distress or any sound production for that matter as they constitute the aural competences the listener has acquired over time. Ola Stockfelt (2004) stresses in this sense the importance of a self-conscious development of aural competences: “we must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active ‘idle listeners’” (93). My approach to music theatre therefore focused on these responses in the listener’s competency that help her
or him to position her or himself as an active but often idle listener against auditory distress. For contexts such as the theatre, where one cannot simply walk away or block the auditory distress by making sound oneself (like singing, whistling, etc.), we have developed cognitive mechanisms that help us to channel and process the auditory intensities, selecting what is necessary and meaningful through our attention.\footnote{Peter Boenisch remarks in this respect the reflection of existing cognitive skills in the theatre: “Before any world-making or content come into play, theatre always confronts its spectators with the ever-changing workings of perception: it is De Kerckhove’s training ground for the latest cognitive updates” (Boenisch 2006: 113).} What is meaningful is, however, restricted to an extent but also enabled by the cultural discourse in which the listening takes place. Therefore Stockfelt’s belief in competent and self-conscious listeners needs to be put in a more critical perspective. As such, aural competence and agency in listening reflect not only our subjective position towards sound and its possible meanings; it also marks our relation to the world, towards others and towards ourselves.

This reflection of our channelling and interpreting efforts in relation to others and the world was first demonstrated in Rokeby’s installation *n-Cha(n)t*. The installation presents us with a model of how listening and communicating through sounds embeds the human subject in an acoustic community. The soundscape was produced by a feedback loop based on speech recognition and repetition of syllables uttered by the visitor in one of the microphones. In this way, sound is marked as intervention, as every sound entry breaks the ‘chant’. Upon entering the sonorous space of chanting computer systems, the visitor could already feel as if she or he is trespassing. Being aware of one’s own intervention produces the space socially in relation to the ‘others’ that entrench the visitor in an acoustic community. Similarly, music theatre produces a listening space as a place inhabited by listeners. Through the subjective responses to the sound, the listener is rooted in a community of listeners that share a cultural discourse. The meanings that the listener produces in music theatre act upon and are enabled by this discourse as a response to the acoustic and auditory interventions that cause the auditory distress.

Each of the music theatre performances I discussed plays upon the listener’s personal capacity – or lack thereof – to respond to auditory distress on many different levels. As a result, they each call for an awareness of the listener’s competences, to a certain extent, and her or his relation as listening subject to an aural community with a shared, cultural discourse. Some of them comply with contemporary modes of perception such as in *La Didone*, or they rouse explicit resistance in the listener to what is to be experienced as against the oppressive space in *Men in Tribulation*. They each address and activate the individual listener through auditory distress to find or make meaning in relation to the structures of representation and experience. The listener’s
Do you see the story? Do you see anything? Joseph Conrad’s guiding questions in De Overstroming resonate to the blind brother’s perspective (focalizer) in Handke’s short story. These questions make us doubt what we truly see in the theatre or what we hear in Jan Kuijken’s music in terms of a ‘story’. It calls for a critical attitude towards the narrator’s authority and in its absence, the many authoritative voices in the theatre that influence our responses to the auditory distress and the semiotic remainder in music. Subsequently, in De Helling van de Oude Wijven the discursive listening perspectives are implied in the text and the spatialisation of the soundscapes with pre-recorded bell sounds, voices and electroacoustic compositions by Rob Zuidam and Klaas De Vries. The multiplicity of texts and lyrics in this performance aims to distract the listener, while there are enough impulses in the performers’ gestures (vocalic bodies) for the listener to imagine two fictional characters or personas transforming according to the atmospheres and diegetic worlds in the unfolding of one’s own narrativisations.

Distraction was also a productive ‘line of attack’ on the listener’s competences and desire to follow the double narrative in La Didone. As I already suggested, dissociation and fragmentation in the spectator’s perceptions could result at times in a rather distracted mode of listening towards the overload of information. I conceptualised this mode further through Barthes’s psychoanalytical listening that hinges upon an evenly hovering attention. This idea contests and temporarily suspends the urge in the listener to select what one regards as important in order to channel the auditory distress. Distraction as a common mode in modern aurality hinders the listener in her or his search for coherency. However, rather than dismissing it as antagonistic to structure and signification as Adorno implied in his notion of atomistic listening, both Barthes and Benjamin welcome the dispersal of attention and point to its claims on alternative meanings. Benjamin has drawn upon the social significance of a distracted mode of attention, as characteristic of modern art works that symptomise the auratic power in decline. John Mowitt (1987) explains how fragmentation and distraction lay bare the social aspect of perception:

Because post-auratic art operated in accordance with the principle of the fragment, the subject’s reception of it was characterized by distraction. Benjamin did not mean by this that one was unable to pay attention to the work, but rather that one could make sense of it without surrendering to its traditionally sanctioned patterns of identification. Unwilling to abandon significance for the ‘play of the signifier’, Benjamin emphasized the socially critical character of distraction and the habits of critical literacy that could form under its influence (185).
Today Benjamin’s idea of *post-auratic art* has been replaced by the ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-dramatic’ paradigm, which has shifted its social meaning of distraction against the status of contemplation in art, which Adorno defended so fervently. Yet I contend that the products of music theatre in contemporary aurality still carry the seeds of this historical idea in terms of its ramifications in the play of meaning and the listener’s ‘habits of critical literacy’. The latter suggests a self-reflexive competence of the subject to read the signs of theatre and music, despite or in spite of their dwelling on a perpetual semiotic remainder. Roland Barthes (1991) observed a similar mechanism in the modern listener’s attitudes of listening when he referred to it as ‘panic listening’:

> [L]istening grants access to all forms of polysemy, of overdetermination, of superimposition, there is a disintegration of the Law which prescribes direct, unique listening; by definition, listening was applied; today we ask listening to release; we thereby return, but at another loop of the historical spiral, to the conception of a panic listening, as the Greeks, or at least as the Dionysians, had conceived it (258).

In Benjamin’s post-auratic culture in the age of reproduction ‘unique’ listening was indeed at stake. Today, we have become so used to the reproductive technologies, which have also entrenched the stage, that also this idea of uniqueness – such as implied by ‘live’ or ‘exclusiveness’ in aesthetic consumption – is historically produced. But the concept of panic listening explains well our general response to auditory distress caused by excess, overload, overexposure, which have been so much shaped by our urbanite, industrial modes of perception.

The two specific responses I discussed – narrativisation and auditory imagination – moreover question the idea of an ‘applied’ listening in contrast to a ‘release’ in listening. The former suggests a more traditional, classical or even musicological mode of listening that applies certain concepts and tools that have been historically developed in order to secure continuity, coherence and contemplation. The latter refers rather to a willingness to surrender to the polysemy in listening to music theatre today. Music theatre has the capacity to reflect on both. As I argued in chapter three, narrativisation works as an applied narrativity in relation to texts, images, gestures. The imaginative response, which I discussed in chapter four, also lays bare the ‘application’ of associations, mental images, connections as suggested and contained by the representation in the performance. Nonetheless, auditory distress always disrupts the applications in listening as a response to our urge for a coherent experience that would solve the semiotic remainder and endless commutability of signifieds. Rather than giving closure to the listener, the performance of sound and music thrives on modes of ‘panic’ listening: we still tend to
surrender our selves when our discursive efforts and desire for coherency and stabilisation of the subject fail to solve the disruptions of auditory distress.

*Men in Tribulation* exemplifies the social effect of this compelling surrender when the listener feels surrounded and ‘trapped’ by sound and spectacle, for which Artaud’s ideas of a new kind of total theatre served as a main inspiration. In this context, I would like to repeat Artaud’s earlier supplications of a theatre that would “abandon individual psychology, enter into mass passions, into the conditions of the collective spirit, grasp the collective wavelengths, in short, change the subject.” (*Cahiers de Rodez* V: 153; qtd. in Weiss 1992: 279). Today, as *Men in Tribulation* suggests, the question of the subject in relation to the collective seems no longer to impose a desire for such a change. Rather, music theatre presents us with how the listener isolates her or himself from a community as a reaction to a new total space that oppresses the subject. The total surrounding presented here can be understood through Barthes’s critique of the totalitarian effect of sound when the listener fails to select what is necessary from the auditory surroundings to regain control over it:

It is against the auditive background that listening occurs, as if it were the exercise of a function of intelligence, i.e., of selection. If the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured; the ecological phenomenon which is today called pollution – and which is becoming a black myth of our technological civilization – is precisely the intolerable corruption of human space, insofar as humanity needs to recognize itself in that space (Barthes 1991: 247).

*Men in Tribulation* insists at times on polluting the listener’s senses and capabilities to respond in a new ‘total’ space. For Barthes, audio-pollution means the end of listening, as it prevents any discursive response or ‘intelligence’ by the living human subject, which enables communication with the surrounding world, the ‘Umwelt’ as he calls it. It is then perhaps a paradox that music theatre allows for a reproduction of noise and auditory distress through technological means, as it seems to suggest a new aesthetic pleasure. This re-enchantment as a result of technology’s dissociation processes, however, reunites the listener with an acoustic and auditory community, a new audience that forms a collective through its own introspection. The loud and continuous noisescapes in the performance do not only create a shared experience of discomfort in the listener, they also re-impose a certain organisation of sound that becomes “a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality”, as Jacques Attali has speculated (Attali 1985: 6; qtd. in Mowitt 1987: 179). The community that this music theatre addresses however recognises itself through its detachment from the surrounding world.
With this, I conclude with a critical moment in the listener’s surrender to the authority of sound and its sonorous envelope today. The contemporary listener senses her or himself becoming aware as listening subject exactly at the moment when she or he cannot control the responses to auditory distress. Since Freud’s revolutionary dissection of the psychoanalytical subject, it is known that the modern subject recognises itself in the mirrors of modern art as decentred, fragmented and destabilised. This recognition accounts for the desire of humans to regain control, produce coherency and channel all destabilising factors through discourse. In this respect, the Freudian subject tells us who we are in relation to what we block out. Auditory distress in theatre’s fragmentation of perspectives then not only makes us aware of the regulative and authoritative processes at work around us, but also within us. The self-reflexive stance towards the competences the listener brings in the theatre confirms our subjectivity in relation to general structures of experience in contemporary aurality. In this way, the solitude in the moment of introspection, when the listener distances her or himself for a brief moment from all collective experience and interpretation, brings the human subject closer to her or his humanity. It is in this way that ‘self’, as Don Ihde declared, “is a correlate of the World and its way of being-in that World is a way filled with voice and language,” and we can add to this, sound (Ihde, qtd. in Connor 219).

In the act of listening, the listener recognises her or himself as a human subject. Not only do the meanings of the auditory experiences occur to the listeners individually, but their identity as listeners is constituted by the meanings that occur (Mowitt 1987: 177). Contemporary music theatre then produces an experience of a faculty, a competency with which the listener manifests her or himself as an auditory self in relation to a community of other listeners. Through this process, music theatre has not only helped the spectator to develop from an ‘eternal spectator’ in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk into a self-reflexive, active, though at times, ‘idle’ listener. It has also offered a doorway for the listener to a new sense of collectivity, situating the subject within emerging structures of listening and sense-making through one’s own responses to auditory distress.

208 For this conclusion, I am inspired by John Mowitt’s article “The sound of music in the era of its electronic reproducibility” (1987). In this article, he investigates the socio-political aspects of the contemporary structure of listening, as he claims: “What I have stressed is that music, as an organisation of noise or sound, arises within the structure of listening I have outlined. Music’s social significance derives from the role it plays in the stabilisation of this structure, that is, how it articulates and consolidates structurally necessary practices of listening” (Mowitt 1987: 179). His idea of the stabilisation in the structure of listening could well be connected to my thesis that this urge is caused by the destabilising effects of auditory distress in the listener. Mowitt’s primary concern, however, is to show how human subjectivity as a general structure of experience is socially engendered. His claims add yet another perspective on the discursive mechanisms underlying human subjectivity.
4. The Future of Music Theatre and its Afterlife in Theory

Claiming what the future in music theatre will bring would not only be pretentious, but also unrealistic. At the end of this study, however, I feel the need to make some speculations and suggestions for further research both within the practice and theory of music theatre.

As I suggested in the introduction and conclusions, music theatre’s role in a history of aurality is still to be written. Socio-political aspects of listening in music theatre have been discussed only in the margins of my study. In the epilogue I already suggested some directions for a closer investigation of music theatre’s participation in the contemporary structures of listening, subjectivity, cultural memory and the social order that can be contested or confirmed through the ramifications of auditory distress. My arguments about distress in listening could therefore cast new perspectives on the burgeoning post-colonial approaches that look at the historical structures of experience in music and operatic theatre. One specific aspect that was not of primary concern in this study but calls for further research is the role of technology in relation to these structures and modes of listening. Another significant aspect that needs further research is the specific locality and relationality of newly emerging forms of music theatre in national contexts where subsidy policies and a desire for institutionalisation reflect ideological relations between state, art and society.

As for the practice of music theatre, research has become an integral component of any dramaturgical reflection in the theatre today. Knowledgeable attempts of any serious ‘practice as research’ are as yet developing, along with the urge to develop new forms of music theatre and new ways of addressing contemporary audiences. The range of concepts for music dramaturgy and criticism therefore needs expansion, for which the practice of music theatre is already intensifying its collaborations with educational and academic research institutes. More often, new styles in criticism are treating music theatre as a genre in its own right, and not in the operatic tradition which has its own rigid concepts. Distancing music theatre from this tradition would, however, obliterate its foundations and reasons for existence. Music theatre is therefore constantly in need of dramaturges, critics, teachers and scholars that can give an informed perspective to its relation to its traditions and present culture.

My thesis on auditory distress and aurality in music theatre could indirectly contribute to this ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, including dramaturgy, teaching, research and cultural criticism. One thing I have stressed in this study is that auditory distress should not be understood nor ‘used’ as a mere aesthetic strategy. It is the basis for the listener’s response and as such, it is inherent to every auditory experience. My concerns about auditory perception are not formulated nor intended for practical
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

purposes, but for analysis in the first place. This should, however, not prevent
the reader from unleashing the imagination that lies at the basis of this music
theatre yet in the making.
Acknowledgments

Who could have predicted the impact, when my auntie Mieke took my sister and me to a children’s theatre play in Antwerp? Who could have expected that music would soon feed into my early fascination for the theatre, when my mum and grandfather Petrus Verbelen demonstrated me the fundamentals of what was to become a life-time investigation of playing the piano, the accordion, the viola? And how is it now to be understood that only by sheer coincidence, my first real encounter with contemporary music theatre, *De Overstroming*, was the result of winning a free ticket from the Flemish radio station Klara? Even if the main credit should be to my loved relatives, I am grateful for these various moments that led me to this interest in music theatre.

Of course, the final outcome of this dissertation is only a drop in the ocean set against all those exciting people I was fortunate to cross on this research path. Without their constant encouragement and intellectual engagement, neither me nor this dissertation would have been the same.

My enduring gratitude goes first and foremost to Maaike Bleeker, who has never lacked in moral support since the first day she lifted my spirits before the first ASCA interview. As a colleague, a supervisor and a friend, she never failed to inspire me with her intensity of critical inquiry, ingenious simplicity and her insistence not to settle for easy answers. Besides her, I thank Luk van den Dries and my co-supervisor Christopher Balme, whose encouragement of my work led to me leaving Belgium for study in Germany and the Netherlands.

I am more than grateful to the many engaging people in the numerous discussion and reading groups I have been a part of in the past six years: my former colleagues and professors of the IPP Performance and Media Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz; my numerous ASCA friends, among whom I couldn’t possibly fail to mention Carolyn Birdsall, Sarah de Mal, Begum Firat, Saskia Lourens, Itay Sapir, Maria Boletsi, Paulina Aroch Fugellie, and my chess friend, Ernesto Illescas-Pélae; my companions in the sound reading group, most notably, Elke Huwiler, Milla Tiainen, Tereza Havelková and Anthony Enns; my conference ‘mates’, Pamela Karantonis, Dylan Robinson and Nic Leonhardt; my colleagues at the Theatre and Musicology Departments of Amsterdam with its most lively secretary Henriette Bitter, and most recently, my friend and colleague, Sruti Bala; my music theatre companions in the IFTR Music Theatre Working Group, TM in Amsterdam and the Beoordelingscommissie Muziektheater in Brussels; and in recent times, my new acquaintances at the IISH Institute, in whose library I wrote up the final versions of my chapters.
I would also like to express my thanks to several of my oldest friends in Belgium: Tom, Nico, Davy, Katelijne, Eline, Philip, Ann, Ken, David, Andreas, Vincent, Filip, who took it as their mutual assignment to abduct me during my most difficult times and take me far away from my books and worries. Among them, I cannot but articulate the joy I have experienced in working with the many young musicians in the orchestras where I played the viola. A special, warm and loving thought goes to the people who have untimely parted before the completion of my research, but who played an important role in my development: Jef Van Houtven, Gabriel Verstraete, Evelien van Ruijven.

I owe the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst and, even more, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, for the financial support and intellectual environment they have provided for me and my research. In particular, the care and support of Eloë Kingma at the ASCA office proved most indispensable in the 'long run' of my dissertation.

Before I finish this ungratifying task of not mentioning everybody, I thank my proofreader, Clare Donald, who was as speedy as my writerly shadow; and the music theatre companies and colleagues at the Theatre Institute, especially those who have helped me with the material and technical support in the realisation of this book and my defence, particularly: Hans Bruneel, Ann Overbergh, Sofie De Wulf, Guy Coolen, Sonja Peeters, Nele Dhaese, Haryanti Frateur, Caroline Basyn, Stef Depover, Ruud van den Akker, Henk Danner, Erik Lint.

Without the everlasting caring and financial support of my parents, I would have found myself in some tricky situations. And last, and therefore most considerable, I thank Görkem Akgöz. In her I finally found a challenging spirit that meets my hunger for seeking further horizons. For this, I am greatly indebted to her presence in my life.
Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)

Onder de titel “The Frequency of Imagination: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Contemporary Music Theatre” heb ik onderzoek gedaan naar het verbeeldend vermogen van geluid – inclusief muziek, stem, ruis, stilte – in muziektheater. Geïnspireerd door mijn ervaring van de muziektheatervoorstelling De Overstroming (2002), vertrekt dit proefschrift vanuit de opvatting dat het verbeeldende vermogen een gevolg is van de manier waarop de toeschouwer reageert op de verstorende werking van geluid op de zintuigen. Om die reden kies ik als centrale these en leidraad van het onderzoek dat geluid altijd een vorm van verstoring met zich meebrengt: een cognitieve interruptie die voortkomt uit het excess van zintuigelijke prikkels op het gehoororgaan en het zenuwstelsel. Vanuit die stellingname ga ik na wat de theoretische gevolgen zijn voor de auditieve perceptie van muziektheater. De metaforische ‘frequentie’ waarbij de verbeelding van de individuele toeschouwer in werking zou treden, waar de titel naar verwijst, situeert zich dan in de manier waarop de toeschouwer zich aangesproken voelt als luisteraar om te reageren op de verstoring van geluid.

De opzet van dit onderzoek was tweeledig. Enerzijds wil deze studie bijdragen aan de theorievorming rond hoe muziektheater betekenissen creëert in de reacties en posities van de toeschouwer ten op zichte van geluid. Anderzijds wil het de betekenis van muziektheater in kaart brengen met betrekking tot onze luistergewoontes en hedendaagse luistercultuur. Dit vraagstuk vloeit voort vanuit het inzicht van de Franse linguist Émile Benveniste (1971) die stelt dat betekenis altijd gegenereerd wordt in relatie tot een bepaald discours. Uit die stelling leid ik af dat het culturele discours ook onze manieren van luisteren en betekenisgeving aan geluid heeft gevormd, en daarmee onze opvattingen over auraliteit.

De term ‘auraliteit’ stel ik voor als een pendant van visualiteit (Jonathan Crary 1999), waarmee de multizintuigelijke ervaring van het muziektheater aanzet tot conceptuele verbindingen, eerder dan tegenstellingen. In het licht van Benveniste’s inzicht zetten de nog ontwikkelende theorieën rond audiocultuur en auraliteit mij aan tot een gelijkaardig onderzoekstraject met de studie omtrent visualiteit in het theater (cf. Maaike Bleeker 2008). De opvattingen omtrent geluid en auraliteit kunnen worden geanalyseerd vanuit de posities die de luisteraar aanneemt ten opzichte van de verstoring van geluid in het theater. Op die manier draagt mijn conceptuele studie van de respons in het luisteren bij tot een beter begrip van de werking van muziektheater, de modaliteiten van waarneming en betekenisgeving in het muziektheater, en van hun inbedding in het culturele discours. In mijn conclusie plaats ik enkele kritische kanttekeningen bij de historische implicaties van de luisteraar en het muziektheater in onze hedendaagse auraliteit.
In deze samenvatting geef ik per hoofdstuk weer hoe muziektheater perspectieven biedt op de betekenis van geluid in de reacties van de luisteraar via de concepten die de theatervoorstellingen genereren. De behandeling van de concepten in mijn casestudies maakt het op haar beurt mogelijk om het belang van de bestudeerde voorstellingen te plaatsen in de theorievorming omtrent zowel de specifieke betekenis van het muziektheater als de manier waarop de luisteraar betekenis geeft aan geluid in het theater van vandaag.

In de inleiding plaats ik de besproken voorstellingen van de casestudies in het moeilijk definieerbaar muziektheater, dat vooral sinds de jaren '80 – met internationale precedenten in de experimentele muziek van de jaren '50 – opkwam als verzet tegen bepaalde tradities in het theater en de opera. Mede door de continuïteit van oudere tradities, zoals het *dramma per musica*, heeft de recente ontwikkeling van het muziektheater in Vlaanderen en Nederland tot een productieve verwarring geleid over wat muziektheater is. Ondanks dat een historisch overzicht alsnog ontbreekt en deze theatervorm nog volop in beweging is, geef ik toch een aantal constanten aan in de zelfdefinitie en legitimatie van het muziektheater. Enerzijds wordt muziektheater als parapluterm gebruikt om alle genres aan te duiden waar muziek in theater een belangrijke rol speelt: gaande van de meest experimentele opera tot de meest triviaal musical. Anderzijds werd de term bewust ingezet om een exclusieve ruimte te claimen voor een nieuwe theatervorm, dat zich negatief laat definiëren in haar onvrede met bepaalde tradities van theater, musical en opera. Deze definitie past in een traditie van theatrale vormen die gebruik maken van muziek en het gesproken woord, maar die geen opera zijn in de strikte zin van het woord. Het is in die negatieve betekenis dat de besproken muziektheatervoorstellingen moeten worden begrepen.

Als organisatievorm onderscheidt het hedendaags muziektheater zich van het operabedrijf (en de vaak nog grotere, commerciële musical) in een bewuste keuze voor kleinschalig experiment dat een langere productietijd vraagt. Dit is vooral gegroeid uit een terugkeer naar het theater, die het hedendaagse muziektheater de ruimte bood om in een gemeenschappelijke ontwikkeling als het ‘postdramatische theater’ (Hans-Thies Lehmann 1999) zich te keren tegen een traditie van het drama. Als gevolg van dit verzet herkennen we vandaag een strategie die erin bestaat niet meer te streven naar een betekenisstructuur waar alles in de voorstelling in het teken staat van een duidelijk communicerbaar, logische of causale lijn naar één doel (*telos*), eindpunt of betekenis. Dit principe maakt het muziektheater de toeschouwer veelal bewust van het verstorend karakter van geluid, omdat deze eigenschap niet meer wordt gecompenseerd door eenvoudige verbeeldingsprincipes die de aandacht sturen – en daarmee omleiden van de verstoring – in het kijken en luisteren naar de voorstelling. Zo geeft het muziektheater aanleiding tot een nieuwe theorie waarbij de verstoring van geluid als conceptuele basis kan worden genomen om de relatie tussen toeschouwer en muziektheater te analyseren.
In hoofdstuk één verduidelijk ik, eerst aan de hand van de interactieve installatie n-Cha(n)t (2001) van David Rokeby, en daarna met betrekking tot de muziektheatervoorstelling Ruhe (2007-2008) van Muziektheater Transparant, dat verstoring de basis vormt van ons luisteren. Ik plaats die verstoring specifiek tegenover het belang van de luisteromgeving, het cultureel discours van een bepaalde akoestische ‘gemeenschap’ en de persoonlijke luistercompetenties van de luisteraar. Ik plaats die verstoring specifiek tegenover het belang van de luisteromgeving, het cultureel discours van een bepaalde akoestische ‘gemeenschap’ en de persoonlijke luistercompetenties van de luisteraar. De soundscape-analyse van R. Murray Schafer (1977) leert ons dat geluid altijd als interventie functioneert, omdat het steeds een ruimte veronderstelt: geluid moet bepaalde gehoordrempels en daarmee een akoestische horizont overschrijden om gehoord te worden. Omwille van dit mechanisme beargumenteer ik dat het appel van geluid op de luisteraar zich kenmerkt door een intrinsieke relatie van oncontroleerbaarheid ten opzichte van de hoorbare omgeving.

Dat onvermogen en het verlangen om geluid te beheersen wordt in Rokeby’s installatie gedemonstreerd aan de hand van een beeld op een monitor dat reageert op geluid in een microfoon: een vinger sluit een oor in geval van een te veel aan zintuigelijke prikkels. Het beeld geeft vorm aan het exces in het luisteren als oorzaak van de verstoring. Het exces geeft op haar beurt aanleiding tot een bekenisloosheid, een rest aan intensiteiten die niet kan worden geïnterpreteerd. Dit creëert een crisis in de luisteraar als ‘subject’ van de verstoring. Zoals Silverman (1983) beargumenteerd heeft, moet het subject dan ook worden begrepen als effect van de betekenisgeving in een bepaald cultureel systeem waarvan het subject niet kan worden losgekoppeld. Wanneer de interventie van geluid een te veel aan intensiteiten creëert, en daarmee betekenisgeving in de weg staat, komt het subject onder hoogspanning te staan. Ik stel vervolgens dat die crisis van het subject de individuele luisteraar aanzet om te reageren en daarmee controle te krijgen over het geluid binnen haar omstandelijke omgeving of context. De vingers in de oren stoppen als reactie op elke potentieel ‘gevaarlijke’ interventie van geluid is echter niet een duurzame oplossing. De lichamelijke beperking van het oor heeft geleid tot de ontwikkeling van cognitieve mechanismes, persoonlijke competenties om geluid te filteren en te kanaliseren. Op die manier roept het begrip van auditieve verstoring vragen op omtrent de bekwaamheid en zelfbeschikking van de luisteraar in relatie tot de autoritaire invloed van geluid, wat de luisteraar beweegt tot een cognitieve weerklank, een respons.

Ik beschouw vervolgens de luisteraar als functie van mijn analyse van de verstoring in het muziektheater. Die analyse wordt geleid door de bespreking van concepten die helpen zowel de perceptie van de luisteraar als de invloed van de specifieke verbeeldingsprincipes in het muziektheater voor het luisteren te begrijpen. De voorstellingen in mijn casestudies illustreren daarbij elk een fundamenteel aspect van die concepten.
De minimale enscenering in Ruhe demonstreert hoe de verstoring van geluid intenser wordt en tot een verhoogd bewustzijn kan leiden in een context van een tekort, veelal een visueel gebrek. De concepten ‘visuele depravatie’ (uit de neuropsychologie) en ‘akoestische/auditieve blik’ (uit een beschrijving van Jean-Paul Sartre, 1943) stellen mij in staat aan te tonen hoe geluid als interventie in de context van het theater de aandacht kan vestigen op de verstoring die inherent is aan elke geluidperceptie. Vervolgens helpt Ruhe mij de verbinding te maken tussen de luisteraar als subject en de psychoanalytische concepten ‘akoestische spiegel’ en ‘klankdeken’ (sonorous envelope). Deze principes verklaren hoe onze manieren van omgaan met geluid teruggaan naar de eerste kinderjaren, waarin we bewust worden van ons auditief ‘zelf’ in relatie tot het geluid van onze nabije omgeving. Steven Connor (1997) legt een soortgelijke verbinding tussen het luisterend subject en, wat hij noemt, de ervaring van het auditief zelf of ik. Wegens constant omgevingsgeluid is het ‘modern auditief ik’ oplettend eerder dan onderzoekend of ingrijpend in de hoorbare wereld. Geluid in muziektheater kan dan de luisteraar bewust maken in een ervaring van het ‘auditief ik’ dat herinnert aan de eerste ervaringen van geluid als een beschermend klankdeken.

Ruhe, daarentegen, creëert door samenzang letterlijk een klankdeken dat een nieuw soort verstoring veroorzaakt in een context van monologen over de SS. Wanneer de verstoring de luisteraar bewust maakt van haar eigen luisteren wordt het duidelijk hoe de positie van de luisteraar een belangrijke rol speelt in de manier waarop zij betekenis geeft aan geluid. Die positie is discursief: ze is verankerd in een cultureel-bepaald discours.

In de volgende hoofdstukken bespreek ik vervolgens drie manieren van positioneren in het luisteren door de toeschouwer als respons op de verstoring van geluid: luistermodaliteiten (hoofdstuk twee), narrativisering (hoofdstuk drie) en auditieve verbeelding (hoofdstuk vier).


Centraal staat de luisteraandacht als mechanisme om verstoring te kanaliseren, en de mate waarin die kan worden gestuurd door de luisteraar. Als kritiek op Ola Stockfelt’s these dat de luisteraar bekwaam is als zij zich bewust ‘ideale’ modaliteiten aanmeet om geluiden te kunnen beheersen, stel ik dat de luistermodaliteiten vaak onbewust verschuiven als respons op de verstoring. Eerder dan een bewust richten van de aandacht door de luisteraar, spelen perspectieven voor het kijken en luisteren in het theater een stimulerende rol.

Daar waar de luistermodaliteiten van hoofdstuk twee te kort schieten als uitleg van de betekenissen die de toeschouwer creëert in het muziektheater, stel ik narrativisering voor in hoofdstuk drie om de impasse van het exces in het luisteren te overbruggen. Ik beargumenteer dat narrativisering kan worden geconceptualiseerd als een volwaardige luistermodaliteit: een specifieke, dwingende vorm van semiotisch luisteren. In een context waar muziektheater juist rechtlijnige verhaallijnen uit de weg gaat, zoals in het postdramatische principe van ‘muzikalisering’, en ondanks de scepsis dat muziek in se nooit narratief *is*, kan narrativisering wel degelijk functioneren als een toegepaste narrativiteit. Het biedt de luisteraar aanknopingspunten om geluid en muziek te interpreteren, en de betekenisloze intensiteiten productief om te zetten in een coherent, gestructureerd en betekenisvol geheel. Ik beargumenteer verder dat narrativisering als resultaat kan worden beschouwd van het positioneren van de luisteraar tegen het exces en de impasse in het luisteren die verstoring van geluid met zich meebrengt.

Van belang voor de positie die de luisteraar aanneemt door middel van narrativisering is ‘focalisatie’: het perspectief van waaruit de toeschouwer de mogelijke narratieve ontwikkelingen interpreteert. Focalisatie kan de aandachtige luisteraar aanzetten tot narrativisering van de muzikale uitvoering vanuit een tekst (zoals een programmabladje of een gesproken tekst) of een beeld (projecties, de scenografie). Dit illustreert *De Overstroming* (2002) van
LOD en Het Net. Het motto uit Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in het programmabladje is een eerste aanzet: *Do you see the story? Do you see anything?* Het gedicht *Musée des Beaux-Arts* van W.H. Auden (een narratieve lezing van Pieter Brueghel’s schilderij *De Val van Icarus*) en een kortverhaal van Peter Handke geven verdere aanzetten. Het personage van de blinde, die als focalisator in het verhaal de beschrijvingen van zijn ziende broer niet voor waar aanneemt, kan vervolgens als metafoor worden geïnterpreteerd voor de sceptis omtrent narrativiteit van muziek. Op die manier kan Jan Kuikens cello-improvisaties op een akoestische compositie de luisteraar uitnodigen om de muziek te interpreteren in de context van het kortverhaal.

Om aan te tonen dat een volledig verhaal niet vereist is in muziektheater om de luisteraar tot narrativisering als betekenisstrategie aan te zetten, bespreek ik ten slotte *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* (2002) door Walpurgis. Aan de hand van een scène van vocaal exces, waar woorden slechts gesuggereerd worden, leg ik uit hoe de densiteit van vocale muziek aanleiding kan geven tot nieuwe narrativiseringen. In die context stel ik dat narrativisering licht kan werpen op minstens twee nieuwe paren van modaliteiten in het kijken en luisteren naar muziektheater: het waarnemen in termen van een concert/recital versus een representationale modaliteit (Peter Kivy (1994), en een orale versus een ‘geletterde’ modaliteit van luisteren (Derrick de Kerckhove 1997). Narrativisering nuanceert dan dat deze modaliteiten niet zozeer als tegenstellingen van elkaar moeten worden begrepen. Ze kunnen elk bijdragen in de narrativisering van bijvoorbeeld het vocale exces en de daarmee samenhangende verstoring in de voorstelling, afhankelijk van hoe de aandacht van de luisteraar verspringt tussen uitvoering en verbeeldingswereld. De performers geven op die manier aanleiding tot een voortdurende metamorfose van hun ‘vocale lichamen’ (Connor 2000) in de verbeelding van de toeschouwer: niet alleen de stem als lichaam op zichzelf, maar de gehele ‘muzikale’ en vocale ‘personae’ in de gesteek en uitvoering van de muziek kunnen gestalte geven aan denkbeeldige lichamen als gevolg van narrativisering. Hiermee suggereert narrativisering een correctie in Edward T. Cone’s stellingname (1974) dat virtuele personae projecties zouden zijn van narratieve instanties in de muziek. Eerder dan dat zij uiting geven aan een boodschap die de componist als geïmpliceerd auteur via de compositie zou willen uitdrukken, beargumenteer ik dat deze vocale personages tot stand komen als resultaat van een impuls in de luisteraar om de vocale expressie en het exces te narrativiseren.

In hoofdstuk vier bespreek ik een laatste modaliteit die de basis vormt van alle andere besproken luistermodaliteiten en, op een dieper niveau, van het menselijk vermogen tot betekenisgeving in het algemeen: de verbeelding. Ik stel voor dat ‘auditieve verbeelding’, zoals besproken door Don Ihde (1976; 2003) en Oliver Sacks (2007), ruimer moet worden beschouwd dan een polyfonie van waargenomen en verbeeldte geluiden, al dan niet als anticipatie
Summary

of associatie in de herinnering. Eerder dan een verstoring van die polyfonie ten opzichte van de innerlijke stem of stream-of-conscious van onze gedachten, en daarmee van onze ‘zelf-presentie’, kan auditieve verbeelding verklaring geven waarom geluiden buiten zichzelf betekenis krijgen. Als respons op de verstoring maakt de luisteraar namelijk betekenisvolle verbindingen met andere, ruimtelijke elementen in de voorstelling (licht, beeld, scenografie, lichamen), alsook met mentale beelden en concepten in het zogeheten ‘geestesoog’ (Mary Warnock 1976). De verbeelding is dan verantwoordelijk voor de verbindende werking, die zowel streed naar het invullen van leemtes in de waarneming door mentale beelden, als naar coherentie, eenheid en structuur. De voorstellingen die ik in dit hoofdstuk bespreek, echter, zetten die dubbele werking van de verbeelding te kijk. Ze geven elk een versie van het ‘theater van de verbeelding’ dat muziektheater in wezen is, en dat aanleiding geeft tot introspectie op het innerlijke theater in het verbeeldend vermogen van de luisteraar.


Ik breng Artaud’s ideeën over geluid indirect in verband met de ontwikkeling van het muziektheater, dat zich in haar legitimatiestrijd ook erg verzet tegen het Wagneriaanse operamodel, maar toch weer steeds een idee van totaaltheater en collectieve beleving recycleert. Vanuit de historische opvattingen en overwegingen omtrent de ‘totale’ ruimte in Wagner en Artaud concludeer ik dat door middel van de verstoring van geluid het muziektheater impliciet op het verleden reageert en in het heden verankert omwille van minstens drie, terugkerende thema’s in mijn casestudies: dissociatie, fragmentarisering en zelfbeschikking van de luisteraar. Dissociatie vind ik terug in de besproken voorstellingen op velerlei niveaus in de reproductie van een splitsing in zowel de perceptie (zoals het ‘schizofoon’ luisteren) als in het luisterend subject zelf (dat bestaat uit een pluraliteit van stemmen). Fragmentarisering is een verder doorgedreven effect van de splitsing. Het uit zich vooral in de ruimtelijke beleving van het muziektheater, waardoor de luisteraar tot een meer zelfbewuste subjectiviteit kan komen in haar positie ten opzichte van de verstoring van geluid. Het vermogen van de toeschouwer om zich zelfbewust te positioneren in het luisteren komt uiteindelijk tot stand in relatie tot de dwingende autoriteit van geluid en het cultureel discours, waarin zowel de luisteraar, het geluid als het luisteren zelf betekenis genereren.
Summary

Zo spelen het muziektheater en haar omgang met de verstoring van geluid een essentiële, historische en politieke rol in het luisteren. Ze activeren en scherpen de zintuigen aan van de toeschouwer als luisteraar, die in haar stille weerklink positie neemt in de steeds onder-hoogspanning-staande ruimte van auraliteit.
Bibliography


Balme, Christopher B. “Intermediality: Rethinking the Relationship between Theatre and Media”. In: *TheWis*, 01/04. *E-journal der Gesellschaft für
The Frequency of Imagination


Bierwisch, Manfred. “Gestische Form als Bedeutung musikalischer Zeichen”. Karbusicky 161-78.

Birdsall, Carolyn. “‘Affirmative Resonances’ in the City?: Sound, Imagination and Urban Space in Early 1930s Germany”. In: Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race, Sonic Interventions. Eds.
Bibliography


Bobkova, Hana. “Mengeltheater: Vormexperimenten in de jaren zeventig”.

Tomaat in perspectief; Theateervernieuwing in de jaren '60 en '70. Eds. Dennis Meyer, Paul Kaptein, Marx Arian et al. Amsterdam: Theater Instituut Nederland, 1994: 166-77.


Fabre, Jan. “Een stam dat ben ik. (Dia loog voor twee stemmen, geïnspireerd op teksten van Antonin Artaud)” In: Fabre, Jan. *Ik ben een fout,*
The Frequency of Imagination

Bibliography

---.  “Simulating Narratives: What Virtual Creatures Can Teach Us”.  In:  


Herman, David, ed.  Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis.  
Columbus: Ohio State University, 1999.

---.  “Toward a Transmedial Narratology”.  Narrative across Media: The  
Languages of Storytelling.  Ed. Marie-Laure Ryan.  Lincoln and London:  
University of Nebraska Press, 2004: 47-75.

Herman, David, Manfred Jahn & Marie-Laure Ryan, eds.  Routledge  
(Ppb, 2008).

Herman, Luc & Bart Vervaecck.  Vertelduivels: Handboek verhaalanalyse.  

Ho, Christopher.  “Antonin Artaud: From Center to Periphery, Periphery to  
2007.

Sheer 159-168.


Hull, John M.  Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness.  London:  

Huwiler, Elke.  “Storytelling by sound: a theoretical frame for radio drama  
analysis”.  In: The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and  


Ingram, Jay.  Theatre of the Mind: Raising the Curtain on Consciousness.  

Jahn, Manfred.  “Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama: Aspects of a  
Narratology of Drama”.  In: New Literary History, 32.3 (Summer, 2001):  
659-679.


Johnson, Mark.  The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning,  

(Ppb, 2001).
The Frequency of Imagination


Bibliography


Restivo, Angelo. “Recent Approaches to Psychoanalytic Sound Theory”. In: *Iris*, 27 (Spring, 1999): 135-141.

Richardson, Brian. “Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama”. In: *New Literary History*, 32.3 (Summer, 2001): 681-697.


The Frequency of Imagination

Bibliography


Turino, Thomas. “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music”. In Ethnomusicology, 43.2 (Spring - Summer, 1999): 221-225.


The Frequency of Imagination

**Parts of the arguments and case studies have appeared in:**


