The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre

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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 Blauwbaard's 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 ‘headspace’ 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

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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 ‘headspace’. 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 consciousness, 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

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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 pentagonic 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
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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.\(^{145}\) Here, I discuss those characteristics of

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\(^{145}\)‘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\(^{th}\) 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
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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
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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 world and apply to other sensual experiences as to guarantee a sense of unity in our perceptions.

Warnock (1976) traces back the bridging function of the imagination in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who not surprisingly synthesised the insights of both rationalist and empiricists philosophies: “In Hume, and still more clearly in Kant, it is the imagination which has emerged as that which enables us to go beyond the bare data of sensation, and to bridge the gap between mere sensation and intelligible thought” (34).
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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
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).
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

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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
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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

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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). 

156 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.

157 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).
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.

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

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.

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

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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.
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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...

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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.

(The 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 Kékcsakillő 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 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).

166 See Bruno Bettelheim’s much later published study *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976).

167 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.
the theatre. 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

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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).¹⁷⁰

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 diegesis 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). 171 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

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 armory 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 narrativizations 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).173 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

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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’Haeseleer 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 disenchanting 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
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 Sleichim deliberately calls his music theatre performance a *non-linear opera* for countertenor, performer, actress, saxophone trio and electronic music. 

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 Sleichim 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 Sleichim 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).
The Frequency of Imagination

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 performance 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).
The Imaginative Response: Auditory Imagination and Spatialisation

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 Sleijchim’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 Sleijchim 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. Artaud formulated this notion in order to express

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1 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

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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 or 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).

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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. 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 personified in the musicians of the Bl’ndman 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 1964; 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’.
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.\(^\text{184}\) 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 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 noisescap[e 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

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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 noisescap... 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 noisescapereproduces 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 noisescapere-tains 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 territorialised 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.\(^{186}\)

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.\(^{187}\) 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

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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.

187 I have suggested the term ‘audio autism’ elsewhere in an essay on Men in Tribulation (Verstraete 2004).
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.

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188 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).

189 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. 
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.

of the station *Radiodiffusion française*, because of the so-called “inflammatory, obscene and blasphemous” nature of the politically and religiously volatile text (Barber 1993: 157; qtd. in Sheer 2004: 6). Allen S. Weiss (1992) refers in this context to the superhuman qualities that radio has often been ascribed to due to its acousmatic effects: “Radio is, *a fortiori*, the acousmetric medium, where the sound always appears without a corresponding image. This concrete presence and generality of the pure materiality of sounds by themselves bears all of the features traditionally attributed to the Judeo-Christian God and proffers the oftentimes paranoid invitation for us to lose ourselves in its totality. These features of the disincarnate voice – ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, omnipotence – cause the radiophonic work to return as hallucination and phantasm; it is thus not unusual to find the radio fantasized as receiving messages from the beyond, serving as a spiritual transmitter in overcompensation for a psychotic dissociation from one’s own body” (Weiss 1992; 1994: 301). Seen in the context of the as yet developing art of radio play, it could be understood that Artaud’s radio piece was perhaps too *unheard* of for its time to be broadcasted.

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.

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 *Blauwbaard’s 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.
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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.