The frequency of imagination: auditory distress and aurality in contemporary music theatre
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Chapter 5
Epilogue: Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

The Frequency of the Imagination investigates the practice of listening and the listener in contemporary music theatre performances. I initially started this investigation from the thesis that auditory distress is caused by any sound or music, urging for a response in the listener. The distress is namely a result of the intervening, disturbing and/or excessive qualities of the auditory intensities in the listener’s senses and cognition, since sound is always surrounding or ‘enveloping’ the perceiver, penetrating the continuously susceptible ears. As a general response to auditory distress in our everyday environments, the listener can block, filter and channel the unnecessary or undesired intensities through cognitive mechanisms.

As one of the implications of channelling the distress in the focused listening situation of the theatre, I showed how the listener creates meaningful auditory experiences by placing the sounds in relation to her or himself. This placement involves the listener adopting a certain position through which she or he relates to the sounds. This positioning, in turn, always implies a relation to an acoustic community within which the listener perceives and relates to her or his auditory experiences. This mode of relating to sounds or music is motivated by the underlying question: What does the sound mean to me, and how do I relate to it? Channelling the auditory distress therefore always incorporates a mode of relating and positioning one’s ‘auditory’ self in the act of listening to the auditory experiences.

I subsequently discussed three responses as coping mechanisms to auditory distress: a wide-ranging set of listening modes (chapter two), and more purposely, narrativisation (chapter three) and auditory imagination (chapter four). These responses helped me to explain how the listener spatially relates and positions her or himself to sound or music in order to deal with the auditory distress. I therefore proposed the modes of listening as tools to analyse the listener’s responses. These listening modes suggest certain aural competences that not only depend subjectively on the listener’s private development in listening, but also on the specific cultural discourse in which the act of listening takes place.

The discussion of a first set of listening modes clarified how the listener attributes direct causes and meanings in relation to her or his attention that make the sounds come to rest in the listening space. I then argued that the theatre always implies regulative mechanisms that manage the way the listener uses attention as embedded in a certain aural culture. By discussing the ways the theatre manages the listener’s attention, like, for instance, the ‘schizophonic’ or split perspectives in La Didone, I showed how the listener’s responses in shifting attention help her or him to position her or himself spatially in order to gain control of the distress caused by sound. My analysis
of *La Didone*, however, ended in an impasse of the listener between her or his perceptions of an evenly hovering attention and her or his interpretations guided by semiotic listening, regardless of the cognitive and cultural competence of the listener. As a result of excessive shifting between listening modes, a suitable frame in listening is lacking that would guide the listener’s attention and rule out contradictory interpretations. In this way, there is always a semiotic remainder that pushes the listener further in her or his pursuit to make the auditory experiences meaningful.

To solve the insufficiency and concomitant deadlock in listening, I introduced two specific modes of relating to sound and music in the listener that imply certain discursive positions in meaning-making: narrativisation and auditory imagination. I redefined narrativisation as a specific semiotic mode of listening, which enables the listener to structure the auditory events according to given patterns of expectation and experience. I showed how narrativisation can often be guided by a verbal text or programme note, which helps the listener to relate the music or sounds to fictional and diegetic spaces.

In the discussion of *De Overstroming* and *De Helling van de Oude Wijven*, it became apparent that this second response to auditory distress is sometimes too restrictive to solve the remainder of meaning that music or sound generally produces through its excess of intensities. As a third response, I defined auditory imagination as part and parcel of the listener’s imaginative capacities to produce associations (mental images) and relations according to less restrictive patterns that aim to create a sense of coherency and continuity in the auditory perceptions. Using the case studies of *Blauwbaards Burcht* and *Men in Tribulation* I showed how in these imaginative responses to auditory distress the listener can produce an imaginary space in relation to her or his own body and position in the listening space. By means of these three discussed responses to auditory distress, the listener ultimately positions her or his ‘auditory’ self, thereby producing a sense of space.

As a result of this positioning, I concluded that the notion of ‘spatialisation’ in contemporary music theatre includes more than the representations of space implied in the sound(scape). Spatialisation, rather, reflects the listener’s position as materialised by her or his responses to the auditory distress. The perspectives and frames that music theatre offers to the audience also have a significant role to play in the listener’s sense of spatialisation that is produced in these responses. In chapter two I explained that both theatre and music (or the soundscape) always offer certain perspectives that ‘manage’ the way we perceive. Conventional forms of dramatic theatre, music theatre or opera generally retain a coherence between the spectator’s expectations and the given perspectives on the represented events, which usually channels the attention away from any possible levels of auditory distress that could disrupt the drama. This coherency generally
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

supports dramatic action, characterisation, and the production of a fictional world (a field, an atmosphere).

In contrast to the dramatic tradition, experimental or ‘new’ music theatre often does not aim at such a coherency. Rather, it makes the individual listener aware of the auditory distress by disrupting conventional patterns of looking and listening. As a result, the awareness for the auditory distress activates and marks the position of the listener who produces meaningful relations in her or his experiences of music theatre. As I argued in chapters three and four, this awareness does not need to disrupt the imaginary production of fictional characters and spaces. Rather, it calls for a self-reflective attitude in the listener towards the active role and position that she or he takes in order to deal with the distress in relation to the perspectives or ‘points’ in listening. The awareness thereby highlights that the creation of characters and spaces is not just visually translated on the stage, but depends on the listener’s responses.

In the present epilogue, I want to relate the awareness of the listener who positions her or himself to the wider concerns of music theatre in relation to its past, present and future. In the previous chapters, I argued that the discussion of the listener’s responses to auditory distress contributes to an understanding of how these new forms of music theatre work in relation to their cultural contexts, and specifically to aural culture. An exhaustive understanding of music’s theatre role as aesthetic practice in today’s culture(s) of listening and society needs much more theoretical underpinning of a socio-historically informed approach than the one I have presented so far. I therefore do not wish to make any serious claims of historical evolution and relationality of music theatre and its traditions, which would succeed the conceptual aims of this study as stated in the introduction. Nevertheless, a historical understanding is needed if we want to conceptualise the significance of auditory distress in music theatre’s recent developments as embedded in the culture in which it operates and receives meaning.

To limit my scope in these concluding paragraphs, I will focus on the relation of space-sound-subject in the idea of spatialisation as an extension of my conceptual approach in chapter four. Within this relation, I observe three major implications or functions that the music theatre productions I discussed in my case studies seem to symptomise:

1. The listener’s auditory experiences in music theatre burgeon on dissociation, a fundamental split between sound and its embodiment of a source or an image (acousmatisation). This idea of a split also extends to other levels of the performance, as, for instance, in the conscious display of theatrical mechanisms that channel or manage the listener’s attention.
2. A further implication of this dissociation is that music theatre deliberately fragments the listener’s experiences, thereby putting the idea of synthesis at stake and causing rather distracted ways of listening.

3. As a result of these two disruptive processes, the listener becomes aware of the power or authority of sound through auditory distress and the agency or position she or he needs to exert. In response to the disruptions, the listener appears to seek new coherencies, relations and structures that unify the experiences again.

Before I elaborate on these three issues in relation to my case studies, I will present how they came to my attention through a historical discussion that focuses precisely on the sound-space-subject relation through the ideas of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’.

To be more precise, I will introduce two influential agents as moments in opera and theatre history that stand out and that have steered the analysis in theatre scholarship, even when they are not invoked directly: Richard Wagner and Antonin Artaud. Both have a major influence in the conceptualisation of space in the theatre, be it indirectly, through the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk. Although Artaud does not make any aesthetic claims about music theatre directly, I recognise a dialogue in his work with the historical ideas of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a spatial construct and aesthetic project. He reacts against the political and ideological implications of the total artwork as a critique against Occidental culture. In this critique, he proposes a new notion of space that aims at sensitising the modern self. Music theatre today seems also to respond to these operatic and theatrical traditions through the production of space. Therefore, I juxtapose Wagner and Artaud’s ideas about ‘total artwork’ in order to discuss the changing concept of space in music theatre. Within this very limited historical debate of the relation between sound-space-subject, I briefly discuss the Wagnerian model of the Gesamtkunstwerk as it appeared as a prominent staging practice in opera, followed by the visions of ‘vibrational space’ by Antonin Artaud as an indirect reaction to Wagner in a theatre tradition. I then propose to relate

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192 I thereby choose not to reproduce the more traditional debate of Richard Wagner versus Bertolt Brecht, who are frequently placed against each other as opposites in the debate of German opera and its fate in the 1920s.

193 I am aware of the possible methodological problems this discussion might bring about. To say the least, discussing two historical conceptualisations of ‘total artwork’ in very different socio-cultural contexts is not appropriate for a historically informed analysis. I therefore do not intend to make any serious claims of historicity with invoking this debate. Nevertheless, the present speculations intend to give a new perspective on the historical study of music theatre that has been so much influenced by the conceptualisations of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’ in present-day music theatre and its scholarship.
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

contemporary music theatre to these discussions, ideas and practices of space by way of the three issues stated above.

In relation to this historical dialogue that I instigate, I want to discuss the specific role and implications of ‘auditory distress’ in music theatre as mechanisms that make the listener aware of her or his position in contemporary aural culture. In so doing, the spaces thus created through the listener’s position to auditory distress open up the theatre as a site of contestation: music theatre questions what it means to create meaningful auditory experiences in relation to the cultural discourse and culture(s) of listening today. Seen from this angle, history teaches us about how music theatre as a medium and artistic practice should be understood in relation to historically dependent modes of sense perception. The following historical debate therefore aims to explore these modes in relation to the ideas about the listening space, the aesthetic experience and the perceiving subject.

Before I position this exploration in relation to my case studies, I will first stage a series of confrontations between Susan Buck-Morss, Theodor Adorno and Adolphe Appia, who have all commented on the aesthetic implications of the Gesamtkunstwerk in the Wagnerian tradition. Subsequently, I will pose Artaud’s invigorating ideas about vibrational space against this discussion.

1. Auditory Space in the Wagnerian Tradition of Gesamtkunstwerk

Historically, the concept of space in music theatre found its most influential model in the Gesamtkunstwerk (‘total artwork’), to which Richard Wagner contributed with his legendary essay Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (1849; first published in English in 1899). As the structure of ‘intermedial’ or hybrid art forms, the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk lived through its staging practice of opera and traditional music theatre. Although according to Sheppard (2001), music theatre today has, for aesthetic reasons, been claimed or has claimed itself to be antagonistic to the operatic tradition, which is identified with Wagner’s music drama’s, to which it is much indebted.\(^{194}\) I will chart here the main problems of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a model for ‘total’ space in music theatre’s staging practice from an aesthetic point of view.

Susan Buck-Morss (1992) gives a historical perspective on the aesthetic implications and innovations of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. She points

\(^{194}\) Sheppard situates music theatre’s complicated relationship to the tradition of Wagner as a problem of what is to be understood as ‘modernist’: “Modernists looked upon nineteenth-century opera, ballet, and theater as empty entertainment. In contrast, they hoped to create works that would have direct spiritual or political impact in performance. Music theater was often intended as a transformative device that required a receptive audience willing to engage in the performance, rather than a passive audience expecting to be entertained. Of course, Wagner’s music dramas had been composed in a similar ‘modernist’ spirit and with similar intentions, but modernists found many excuses for rejecting his example, and many outlets for alleviating their Wagnerian anxieties” (Sheppard 2001: 6).
out that its technological novelties – such as the darkening of the listening space – were used to cover up the heterogeneous experiences of the modern everyday outside the auditorium. According to her, the unity of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was superimposed against the disunity of the senses under the conditions of modernity and its aural culture. Technology then assisted the channelling of the sensory overload, the fragmentation and the sensory impoverishment of our modern existence (Buck-Morrs 1992: 26). As a way to channel out the acoustic disruptions of modern life, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* offered an experience, structured by a unifying intelligence – the ‘grand’ synthesis – that would steer the listener’s attention away from the fragmentation. This way of structuring experience through an idea of total artwork also has spatial implications. In this respect, the arena shape of the auditorium in Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth was revolutionary, as was the relocation of the orchestra in a pit below the stage. These spatial innovations have deeply influenced the staging practice of opera and music drama up until today. However, as Buck-Morrs explains, this tradition relies on given assumptions on aesthetic experience in relation to listening modalities that have been attributed to the auditory subject in modern life.

When compared to my thesis about auditory distress, the synthesis that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* aims at in the spectators’ imaginations could be threatened through music’s intervening power and disruption in the listener. The visual representations that support the dramatic content on stage have therefore the function to secure a sense of coherency in the listener’s imagination and prevent these auditory interventions from raising attention to the opacity, remainder and excess of intensities in meaning-making processes. Not only do perspectives and the distance they claim play a very important role in this, as I explained earlier, but the musical structure itself was also designed to support the immersion of the listener into the imaginative realms of the drama.

In relation to this immersion, Theodor Adorno (2005) refers to the phantasmagorical products of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would make its construct of synthesis into an ‘intoxicating brew’ to the senses. He highlights how this synthesis is based on the listener’s figments of the imagination: “Wagner’s operas tend towards magic delusion, to what

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195 The word “intoxicating” actually comes from Nietzsche’s critique against Wagner in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872): “It is with German music, and specifically with Wagner, that this Dionysian spirit is let loose. But, Nietzsche continues, there are dangers in the direct absorption of such an intoxicating spirit: if, he asks, it was possible to hear the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* without the aid of word or scenery, as purely a ‘vast symphonic period,’ would he who thus hears the ‘heart-chamber of the world-will’ not ‘collapse all at once?’” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 43). Ironically, the word ‘intoxication’ was used by Wagner himself in his revolt against the opera tradition of Rossini, which he expressed in his *Oper und Drama* as “the intoxication of an opera-night’s narcotic fumes” (Wagner 1943; trans. William Ashton Ellis 1995: 46). Adorno’s use of the word ‘intoxicating brew’ subsequently meant to criticise the phantasmatic effects of the Wagnerian music drama.
Schopenhauer calls ‘The outside of the worthless commodity’, in short towards phantasmagoria. This is the basis of the primacy of harmonic and instrumental sound in his music” (Adorno 2005: 74-5). As a modern prefiguration of acousmatisation, Wagner’s concealment of the orchestra serves the aesthetics of his phantasmagoria. Adorno therefore designates the orchestra as Wagner’s ultimate medium of the phantasmagoria: “The emancipation of colour achieved by the orchestra intensifies the element of illusion by transferring the emphasis from the essence, the musical event in itself, to the appearance, the sound” (87). According to Adorno, the synthesis that the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk strives for by concealing the modes of musical production and mediation is supposed to secure a complete satisfaction, a feeling of coherency that makes the spectator’s imagination take flight.

In line with Buck-Morss’s analysis, one could say that the ‘danger’ of auditory distress was incarcerated within the orchestra pit and rendered inoperative by the theatrical frame which was intended to make the spectator plunge into the dramatic experience and forget about the outside world. The phantasmagorical medium of the concealed orchestra needed to compensate for the distance between the visual space of the stage and the ideal listening point of the spectator in the auditorium, which was marked by the gap of the orchestra pit between them. With the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, Wagner realised his groundbreaking ideas of framing the spectator’s gaze in a total visibility of the stage, and in positioning her or him to have the ideal auditory experience. The model was set for future music theatre works on how to make the individual listeners forget their presence in the auditorium and totally immerse them in the drama on stage. The theatre was turned into a comforting environment that framed the acoustic events while invalidating the possible effects of auditory distress. Yet behind this comfort hides a conception of total space, controlled by an artist-composer. By implication, he also exerts his

196 Adorno (1952; 2005) conceptualises the phantasmagoria in Wagner’s music drama as a ‘dreamscape’, a fairytale, an enchanted garden, an illusion that deceives the senses. The phantasmagoria is an illusion in camouflage to be recognised in bourgeois society in need of its own survival (84). By concealing the process of poetic production and therefore ‘human labour’, the phantasmagoria would ideally create a perfect artifice that alienates itself completely from ‘nature’ and turns all aesthetic appearance into commodity artefacts (86). In this way, it would obscure its origins in order to emphasise its use value in terms of authentic and objective reality, giving the bourgeois spectator the illusion that it exists as an objective manifestation of itself (79-80).

197 Adorno (1952) refers to Chamberlain who describes the Wagnerian theatre in ways most similar to our modern cinemas: “[...] in the darkened room with a sunken orchestra and show pictures moving past in the background” (qd. in Adorno 1952; 2005: 96). Likewise, Friedrich Kittler (1993) draws to the similarity with cinema in that it immerses the spectator by stimulating the nerves: “For in the revolutionary darkness of the Festspielhaus – to which all the darknesses of our cinemas date back – the medium of music-drama began to play with and upon the public’s nerves” (216).
power and control on an audience as a collective that would share an equal and democratic privilege of enjoying ideal listening circumstances.

This concept of a total space has major implications on the listener and the role she or he plays as listening subject. Scenographer Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), known for his abstract designs and revolutionary use of stage light in his stagings of Wagner, testifies about these implications on the listener. He comments on the comfort of the listener in this particular tradition of staging Wagner:

Up until now, all we have asked of the audience has been to be still and pay attention. In order to encourage it in this direction, we have offered it a comfortable seat and have plunged it into a semi-darkness that favors the state of complete passivity which, it appears, is the audience’s portion. That comes down to saying that, in the theatre as elsewhere, we seek to set ourselves off as much as possible from the work of art. We have become eternal spectators (Appia 1912; qtd. in Bablet & Bablet 1982: 55).

Appia was one of the pioneers who, both in theory and in practice, advocated to activate the spectator in engaging her or him more with the work of art, and therefore, the drama expressed in the music. His comment on the Wagnerian tradition shows, however, a fundamental problem: the Gesamtkunstwerk renders ‘eternal spectators’ who perceive passively and indulge their comfortable distance to the artwork.

When Appia invokes the idea of auditory distress in his book Die Musik und die Inszenierung (1899), he categorises it to the ‘inferior’ use of applied music as a sound effect in melodrama, which he strongly distinguishes from serious opera:

At an inferior level it only serves to play mysteriously on the nerves of the audience, either to make this [effect] of the stimulation more accessible through the drama, or to highlight a conflict or a hidden dramatic anticipation towards the spectator, which threatens to deteriorate the scenic action (108; my trans. PV).

Here, Appia criticises melodrama for its degeneration of music as a function that conveys dramatic gestures by stimulating the audience’s nerves. His conceptualisations of music and staging are, however, symptomatic of a tradition of music(al) and operatic theatre that subcategorises music as supporting the drama and action on stage. Though on the brink of modern approaches to staging, Appia discusses music from a tradition that puts it in

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198 The original quote reads: “Auf einer untergeordneten Stufe dient es nur dazu, auf die Nerven des Publikums dunkel einzuzwicken, sei es, um dieses der Erregung durch das Drama zugänglicher zu machen, sei es, um einen Konflikt oder eine versteckte dramatische Absicht dem Zuschauer gegenüber zu betonen, welche die scenische Handlung zu sehr abzustumpfen droht” (Appia 1899: 108).
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

function of the dramatic gesture. He thereby confirms that the ideas of synthesis and coherency between music and drama still apply in both theatre and opera, though they are not desirable any longer as they have made the spectator passive and distant to the work of art.

Appia confirms the idea that the Gesamtkunstwerk ‘anaesthetises’ the spectator, as Buck-Morrs (1992) deduces from Adorno’s critique. The model of the Gesamtkunstwerk strives for synthesis and unity in the aesthetic experiences, which support most of the functions of the imagination as discussed in chapter four. However, in the twentieth century, this model is no longer sufficient. This model of total space had far-reaching, ideological implications on the ideas of society and the intervention of the artwork. With the collapse of the master-narratives and the authority of the artist-genius at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is no wonder that Artaud responds to the ideas of total theatre in ways that are much indebted to but also diverge strongly from the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. I contend that his ideas have contributed to another conception of space in relation to sound and the perceiving subject in the theatre. I therefore propose to place Artaud’s ideas about space against the theoretical debate of the total artwork, as raised here by Buck-Morrs and Adorno.

2. Artaud’s Conception of a New ‘Total’ Theatre: Vibrational Space

There is a lot of sound and fury in Artaud’s pamphletic texts on how theatre and its sound design should be.199 These normative statements belong to a theatre tradition that still holds on to a function of art as intervention in culture and society. Artaud’s theatre project stems from a general dissatisfaction with Occidental culture and society. His concept of ‘cruelty’ in his illustrious Théâtre de la cruauté was aimed at a theatre that would break with all culture, which is a much larger cultural project than only a reformation of theatre. Artaud was a major influence for many theatre avant-garde movements that have eventually lead to the establishment of post-dramatic theatre and its formulation in theory today. My purpose with posing Artaud against the Wagnerian tradition of Gesamtkunstwerk is to highlight how Artaud’s ideas on sound and ‘vibrational’ space in many ways recycle the idea of a ‘total space’, but with different aesthetic considerations and implications of its impact on the spectator. This comparison aims to contribute to an understanding of the idea of a total space, which underlies so much music theatre’s reactions today to the traditions of both opera and theatre.

199 I am aware that the discussion of Artaud’s ideas in a context of music theatre today is highly speculative and that Artaud’s legacy should not be detached from the cultural discourse of his time. When Artaud implicitly refers to an idea of auditory distress discomforting the spectator, for instance, this cannot simply be understood as identical to what I have studied in relation to contemporary music theatre.
In *Theatre and Its Double* (originally *Le théâtre et son Double* 1938), Artaud explains that sound is foremost used in his theatre to create a ‘vibrational’ space: “[...] sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent” (1958: 81). Through the idea and experience of vibration, he aims to address the spectator in a manner that is similar to snake charming. He goes on to compare the listener to a snake: like the snake in touch with the earth, the listener is in touch with musical vibrations, into a subtle massage; or as Artaud states: “I propose to treat the spectators like the snake charmer’s subjects and conduct them by means of their organisms to an apprehension of the subllest notions” (81). In such propositions, sound is primarily used for its embodied experience, producing a haptic space, much as I discussed in chapter four. Space has a significant function in Artaud’s vision to enclose the audience and enable an immediate experience of a total surrounding that goes beyond speech (logos) and theatre (representation).

However, Artaud sees a function in sound to immerse the spectator in rather a similar way to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He also seems to adopt uncritically Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘intoxicating brew’ in his essay “On the Balinese Theater” in *The Theatre and Its Double*:

> These howls [...], all within the immense area of widely diffused sounds disgorged from many sources, combine to overwhelm the mind [...]. Everything in this theater is immersed in a profound intoxication which restores to us the very elements of ecstasy [...] (1958: 64-5).

Artaud’s use of the word ‘intoxication’ does not carry the same negative connotations as Adorno’s critique to Wagner. The critique that immersion would generally ‘anaestheticise’ the spectator, as Buck-Morss (1992) points out, is opposed by Artaud’s sound system that means, rather, to activate the spectator through immersion and ‘ecstasy’, rapture, bliss. He thereby appears both to reproduce and pervert the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as both a spatial and acoustic construct with multiple, ‘democratic’ listening points in the auditorium. He replaces this model with a sound system of multiple sources and listening perspectives surrounding the spectator.

The impact of Artaud’s ‘surrounding’ theatre was to excite the spectator’s nerves in a direct, physical way. In his first manifesto, *Le théâtre Alfred Jarry* (1926), he writes that his spectator should feel caught as in a police raid on a brothel (Hollier 2004: 165). Artaud wants his spectator to feel unsafe and uncomfortable. The theatre should cause an inescapable awareness that would mark the subject’s presence in the event and space of the performance. In the

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200 See, for instance, Kahn (2001: 356-7) on the notion of vibrational space in Artaud’s *Le théâtre et son Double* (1938).
epigraph to my study, I referred to another description in this manifesto of the effects Artaud aims at with his new ‘total’ theatre:

The spectator who comes to us knows that he has just exposed himself to a true operation, where not only his mind but also his senses and his flesh are at stake. He will henceforth go to the theater as he goes to the surgeon or the dentist (Artaud 1948, 1974: 22; trans. & qtd. in Weiss 1994: 296).

Such descriptions clearly describe in what state of mind Artaud wants his spectator to be when leaving the performance. Though he never refers to auditory distress in clear terms, I read in these references a particular function of sound that leaves the spectator with physical distress. The spectator’s mind, senses and ‘flesh’ are at stake. Auditory distress can equally work on the audience’s nerves, ‘attack’ their senses and create gut feelings to their bodies or goose bumps to their skins. Sound can also intervene in their consciousness and thoughts, thereby affecting them in their deepest inner selves.

Artaud’s writings, moreover, transpire a general dissatisfaction about Western culture, which motivates the physical distress in his theatre. Sound and music are vehicles for him to break with Western theatre. He proposes to adopt tribal practices of trance that would materialise the vibrational space and immersion of the spectator:

I propose then a theatre in which physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theatre as by a whirlwind of higher forces. A theatre which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection. A theatre that induces trance, as the dances of Dervishes induce trance, and that addresses itself to the organism by precise instruments, by the same means as those of certain tribal music cures which we admire on records but are incapable of originating among ourselves (Artaud 1958: 82-3).

In comparison to Adorno’s critique of immersion in the Gesamtkunstwerk, Artaud’s vision of his new total theatre forms a counterpoint to the Wagnerian tradition and the culture it is embedded in. Whereas with Wagner the drama supports a synthesis in the senses and the mind by concealing the modes of production (the orchestra in the pit below the stage) and retaining thereby a safe distance, Artaud chooses not to create distance through drama but rather to immerse his spectators directly. Inspired by tribal music, his theatre aims at affecting the spectator most physically, making her or him surrender as in a trance. Through sound and music, the theatre can claim a certain authority over the spectator in an experience that draws near spiritual experiences of tribal music.
The Frequency of Imagination

The purpose of the spectator’s surrender in this new concept of total space also perverts the Wagnerian tradition through its political and ideological implications. Artaud’s cultural project namely aims to politicise the theatre through the sensory experiences of dread and immersion that serve to shake the individual by “sudden and unforeseen electricity” (Cahiers de Rodez IX: 43). Artaud explains this idea in a significant letter in August 1933 to Natalie Clifford Barney:

> The theater is an exorcism, a summoning of energy. It is a means of channelling the passions, of making them serve something, but it must be understood not as an art or a distraction but rather as a solemn act, and this paroxysm, this solemnity, this danger must be restored to it. In order to do that it must abandon individual psychology, enter into mass passions, into the conditions of the collective spirit, grasp the collective wavelengths, in short, change the subject (Artaud, Cahiers de Rodez V: 153; qtd. in Weiss 1992: 279).

Artaud envisions his theatre as a critical strategy that aims at re-activating the spectator, not only as an individual but also as a cultural agent in relation to others. The political resonances of stirring ‘mass passions’ and advocating ‘collective spirit’ are strikingly comparable to some of Wagner’s ideas on the connection between audience and the ‘human race’, which have lead to the criticisms of (ab)use of his operas for National Socialism and Nazi propaganda in the 1940s. However, the above citation helps me to weigh Artaud’s suggestions of a new ‘total’ space and theatre against this tradition and critique after Wagner.

Both Wagner’s and Artaud’s cultural projects aim at a politicisation of the individual through sensory means, though in opposite ways. Artaud’s suggestion to channel the passions and energies against distraction are not of an equal order as Wagner’s aspiration to channel the spectator through synthesis and integration of all the senses (‘synaesthesia’). Both Adorno and Buck-Morrs have criticised the all-encompassing, comforting fusion in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk that is based on the concealment of the fragmentation in the individual’s experience. Artaud, on the contrary, aims at an implicit awareness of the individual entering into mass passions through an immersion that causes dread and discomfort. In this way, Artaud’s theatre is rather a medium or tool that calls for a critical understanding of the power and authority that it conveys. This exemplifies a rupture with the tradition of the

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201 Some scholars have wrongly concluded that Artaud’s theatre would be moralist but not political. Susan Sontag (1973; 2004) speaks of a ‘spiritual’ and cultural revolution (92-3): “Artaud’s plans for subverting and revitalising culture, his longing for a new type of human personality, illustrate the limits of all thinking about revolution which is anti-political” (Sontag 1973; 2004: 93). On the contrary, I want to suggest here that Artaud’s language and cultural criticism cannot be detached from the political situation of his times. The revolution he envisions, however, enters foremost the individual through the senses in his theatre.
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

Gesamtkunstwerk while referring to it as a new ‘total’ theatre. However, it is of a significant other order with different political ramifications in the way it addresses the individual.

Artaud’s metaphor of ‘grasping the collective wavelengths’ should then be understood as a call for an acute introspection of the individual, aiming at transformation. In this same idealistic vein, Artaud writes in a letter that he wants to create “a work which causes the entire nervous system to feel illuminated as if by a miner’s cap, with vibrations and consonances that invite one to corporeally emerge in order to follow, in the sky, this new, unusual and radiant Epiphany” (Cahiers de Rodez XIII: 131; qtd. in Weiss 1994: 273). The religious terms in capital letters could be borrowed from Wagner. However, Artaud’s theatre does not serve the same ideology. As I already discussed through Hollier’s concept of the ‘ultimate cathartic sound effect’ in chapter four, sound and music in the theatre should create vibrations that affect the spectators physically and bring them to an overwhelming, undeniable consciousness.

Changing the subject through channelling collective energies, stirring the masses, and entering into a collective spirit are modernist ideas that today sound too tantalising or politically incorrect, especially in the post-Soviet period after 1989. The collective address in Artaud’s conception of a total space should, however, be understood in a modernist tradition that still aims at restoring a coherent experience by surrounding and immersing the spectator. My final case-study of Men in Tribulation in chapter four resembled many of Artaud’s ideas presented here in an attempt to open up the notion of ‘opera’. However, it became clear that the physical impact of surrounding the listener with sound had a different purpose and effect than Artaud would have meant in his time. In what follows, I therefore look at how music theatre positions itself towards the traditions of ‘total theatre’ and ‘total space’ in relation to its present-day audiences. In this final discussion, I will look again at the case studies and arguments I have examined in this study in order to conclude how the workings of auditory distress in music theatre have a significant function in present-day culture and aurality. Within this wider, cultural framework, the

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202The metaphor of the ‘collective wavelength’ has similarities with the tradition of an early-modern comparison of the listener’s soul to a piano that can be tuned, like in Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1911): “The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key” (Kandinsky 1911, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 70). Likewise, nineteenth-century notions of synaesthesia paralleled Wagner’s ideas of a Gesamtkunstwerk as artwork of the future that would tune to all the senses through correspondences between them. Synaesthetic correspondences were sometimes described in terms of a corresponding vibration. Douglas Kahn introduces in this respect his ‘figure of vibration’ as pronounced in the historical ideas of synaesthesia: “derived from several sources, including neo-Pythagorean ideas wherein physical laws of vibrating strings reverberated to harmonically map the Universe, occult ideas of cosmic coordination of essences, and scientific ideas that sound and light were distinguished by calibrated degrees of the speed of vibration” (Kahn 2001: 14-5).
case studies signal something significant about music theatre, not as isolated experiments in relation to its own history as aesthetic artefacts, but in relation to the listener and the cultural practice of listening.

3. Music Theatre’s Responses to Total Theatre Today

Every music theatre production – whether it is based on new musical material or a staging of existing work – always moves in-between tradition and its presence as cultural practice. Many of the modes of production and representation of music theatre are rooted in tradition (such as the musical genres, media, musical instruments or the orchestra it incorporates). Music theatre has also developed through its embrace of new technologies, performance styles and contemporary modes of perception that have given way to new aesthetic pleasures and meanings in the listener. In this way, I want to regard how, through its relation with tradition, such as with total theatre, music theatre directly relates to and acts upon aural culture today.

As I argued in chapter one, so much of what constitutes aurality – as a different perceptual category alongside visuality – is an effect of other kinds of forces and power relations that are not restricted to hearing and listening only. Aurality should not be mistaken with audibility or aural competence. Rather, it expresses how listening always takes place within a certain culture and discourse. As I have shown in this study, the listener tunes into memory, experientiality, and ‘preformed’ meanings in order to make sense of the auditory experiences. Awareness of aurality therefore takes account of how these meaningful experiences in music theatre exceed the subjectivity of the individual as they are always influenced and formed by the cultural discourse in which the listener defines what is meaningful. Aurality then accumulates the cultural norms, values, conventions, functions, meanings and so on of sound and aural perception, as contained by discourse. In this sense, I conceptualised how the listener’s responses as ways to channel auditory distress into meaningful categories are always discursive, and therefore culturally and historically defined.

I want to place these discursive responses to auditory distress in contemporary music theatre against the historical debate of space in total theatre. As I explained earlier, (new) music theatre as multimedia theatre positioned itself initially to the Wagnerian opera tradition and Gesamtkunstwerk in terms of both continuity and resistance. Similarly, I found in Artaud’s writings a dissident voice that both contests and reproduces the traditional models of total theatre and total space. By way of conclusion to my conceptual approach to the practice of music theatre, I deduce at least three fundamental aspects or functions that relate to these historical ideas: dissociation, fragmentation and authority/agency. I contend here that in its response to the traditions and current cultural issues, contemporary music
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

theatre incorporates these features in order to make the listener aware of her or his own position within present-day aural culture. I will now discuss each of these facets in relation to my case studies, with which I hope to disclose the workings and the role of music theatre in present cultural practices of listening.

3.1. Dissociation: Splits in Auditory Perception and the Listening Subject

One thing I have consistently attempted to demonstrate throughout this study is that music theatre calls on the listener to actively relate to the auditory experiences and that it thereby (re-)produces post-modern subjectivity in the responses it stimulates in the listener. In the address of these responses, auditory distress plays a major role in disrupting a sense of a stable and coherent auditory ‘self’ in the listener.

As I have shown in chapter 1 through David Rokeby’s installation *n-Cha(n)t*, auditory distress manifests itself as an excess of intensities that intervenes in the listener. In the controlled situation of the theatre, this excess could be intensified by sensory – mostly visual – deprivation of an ‘empty’ stage. The intervention of sound contributes to an intrinsic vulnerability and insufficiency of the listening apparatus in a continuous attempt to process or channel the excess through various modes of hearing and listening. As a result, the insufficiency produces a semiotic remainder that pushes listening to continue searching for meaning. Listening attention manifests itself then as primarily a defence mechanism in the listener to channel, block and control the excess. In so doing, the listener responds through her or his listening attention in relation to the intervening sounds and the caused auditory distress in order to be able to relate to them in meaningful, discursive ways.

Contrary to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which aimed at keeping the auditory distress of modern life at bay, music theatre today takes an alternative position by calling upon listening modes that have been established in our everyday environments and auditory encounters. In this observation, I explained how especially semiotic modes of listening are entrenched by the present-day aural culture. The attitudes of the listener as a ‘modern auditory subject’ are based on a fundamental split: a dissociation that is inherent to auditory perception, which became only more apparent with the rise of audio technology (technical reproduction and distribution of sound). Dissociation generally means a breaking into pieces, a separation, a disunity. This may imply neuro-psychological effects on the human subject, when the splitting affects her or his mental processes. In the context of my investigation, dissociation appears to be central to the auditory experiences in music theatre and my notion of auditory distress, which equally affect the listener and her or his cognitive abilities to respond by means of the listening modes.

To explain how dissociation has a bearing on our responses to sound from very early age, I pointed to the psychoanalytical model of the acoustic mirror,
which materialises our first contact with the outside world through the 'sonorous envelope'. I explained how the envelope of sound produces both comfort and distress by constituting our ‘selves’ in terms of both identity and separation.

Prior even to the Lacanian mirror stage in visual terms, this acoustic mirror makes the subject perceive itself as fundamentally different, while identifying itself with the object that produces the split: the mother’s voice as both a protection from and a dissociation of the surrounding world. In this way, the dissociative functioning of the sonorous envelope produces auditory distress as much as it offers a means to resolve it.

Guy Rosolato paved the way for the connection between this first experience of the sonorous envelope and our haptic experiences of music as a representation of a desire for this envelope in theatre today: a desire to impose coherency, continuity and identity against the dissociations of our modern world. I then introduced Josse De Pauw’s music theatre performance Ruhe to show how the sonorous envelope of a male choir can be used as an effective tool to soothe the listener’s senses under a blanket of sound. This representation of the sonorous envelope in its turn produced a new auditory distress in relation to the context of National Socialism or downright Fascism. As I explained in chapter four, the haptic space that results from our experiences of this sonorous envelope in the theatre comes about by an imaginative response as we seek coherence, contiguity and continuity in our auditory perceptions. Yet in relation to the monologues in Ruhe, this desire for coherence – as also strived for in the harmony of Franz Schubert’s songs – can stir dangerous political feelings such as fascism. In this way, this longing to undo the split in our perception is turned back at us as a mirror in which we hear ourselves listening and interpreting as subjects in relation to the perception of ‘others’. The sonorous envelope thereby puts us in touch with an acoustic community, as though singing in a choir or listening with others in an audience.

The sonorous envelope does not only account for an existential split between the subject and the surrounding modern world. It also shows how every sound always constitutes a split of its own object, body or cause. Using the concepts of acoustimatisation (Michel Chion) and the ‘ventriloquist’ effect of sound (Steven Connor), I explained how sounds always seek to come to rest in our efforts to interpret them. Acousticimatisation is an effect of technology that has found prominence in present-day aurality since as long as it has been possible to record and reproduce it (the phonographic apparatus). In cinema, acousticimisation is inherent to the film apparatus due to a mechanical limitation that always inserts a split between sound and image. Cinema, however, has brought about many strategies that make the listener forget about this split in order for her or him to immerse her or himself in the story.

See my discussion on Didier Anzieu’s protective ‘audio-phonic’ skin in relation to the ‘skin-ego’ in chapter one.
Acousmatisation, as Chion describes, at times even takes part in the diegesis (such as in horror effects) or acquires a place outside the diegesis as an off-screen voice or (extra-diegetic) music. Chion thereby demonstrates the authoritative power of sound through his concept of the *acousmêtre*, the master behind the curtain of visibility who is in control of the sound production and meaning.

However, as Mladen Dollar (2006) points out, the acousmatic process that splits sound from its body resides in every sound experience, prior to the entry of recording technology in modern aurality. Pierre Schaeffer (1966), R. Murray Schafer (1977) and Christian Metz (1980) have made us aware of the problematic definition of the ‘aural object’, which never completely equals its source body, even we know the latter with great certainty. As a consequence of this fundamental disparity in auditory experience, causal listening is one of the most fundamental modes of listening as a survival strategy of the listener. It defines the listening subject in relation to its surroundings, as Steven Connor (2005) describes: the modern listener is constantly ‘on the qui vive’. Though, rather than looking for real causes or origins in the physical space or, if not immediately visible, in our imagination (as a way of ‘aural gazing’), I conclude that we always attribute a place to the most significant sounds in our attention. We do this in relation to our sense of ‘self’ by positioning ourselves, and mostly, by giving the sounds meaning as a result of this positioning. In so doing, we seek to regain control over the uncontrollability of sound and the auditory space. Space can thereby be produced by the listening act as a result of our responses to the fundamental acousmatic nature of sound, which gives the sounds a place in relation to ourselves.

The acousmatic split occurs in music theatre on many levels and in different ways, contributing to a sense of dissociation as a productive principle. As Ruhe demonstrated in chapter one, this split can make the listener aware of one’s own position towards the auditory distress and its ‘vibrational’ space, much similar to Artaud’s sense. The sonorous envelope gives the listener a physical and spatial sense of coherency with which she or he can overcome the split. In relation to the texts of the SS-ers, however, this homogenic experience of a unified space is at stake. Auditory distress contributes to this unsettling of the homogenising strategies in the theatre and activates the listener in relation to these strategies. I have conceptualised this relation through the perspectives that theatre always inherently has to offer. Other than in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this music theatre does not aim to confirm a synthesis in the representation to secure a straight communication of dramatic content. Rather, it activates the listener and intensifies the listening act in a context that marks the split by not providing easy solutions or conventional perspectives to deal with the auditory distress.

Dissociation defies, moreover, an all-encompassing intelligence (a ‘genius’) or perspective on the world, as was the case in both Wagner’s and
Artaud’s conceptions of total theatre. Walter Benjamin (1935) refers to this process as inherent to the (modern) age of mechanical reproduction, which he sees reflected in the media of photography and film. Dissociation in these media withers away ‘aura’ or auratic power of the art object, distancing it from the fabric of tradition as an inevitable outcome of mechanical reproduction (Crimp 1980: 94). It has slowly affected all conditions of production in all areas of culture. Theatre has been always so much indebted to its unrepeatable presence as a happening or an event, that its traditional models were blind to its own processes of dissociation as a system of reproduction. Auditory distress could recover something of music theatre’s insistence on the ‘now’ and ‘here’ of the event. The issue of whether music theatre has auratic power is, however, secondary, and, today, perhaps an obsolete debate since the distinctions between high-brow and low-brow have deteriorated in the post-dramatic paradigm.

What has changed drastically under the cultural strains of dissociation is that we no longer perceive music theatre as one whole, construed by a master genius (the artist-composer) in the image of Wagner, or the visionary in the persona of Artaud. On the contrary, the splits in our perception prevent us pinpointing one authoritative voice that is in control of the meaning behind the whole representation. As such, this music theatre has much in common with Artaud’s total theatre concept that aimed at discomforting the spectator from multiple perspectives and sources. This dissociation into many authoritative voices in music theatre affects the listener as a subject of her or his perceptions, as a result of the meaning-making process. In its function as an (acoustic) mirror, music theatre enables the listener to recognise her or his own mutual projections as subject in the absence of one authorial voice. Benjamin then claims that through this recognition, dissociation is recollected in unity. The listener reassembles the splits in the representations on stage and the auditory perceptions, and creates a new unity through her or his own meaning. It is in this signifying intervention and projection that the listener establishes her or his own subjectivity in relational terms (Silverman 1985: 196-8).

As I showed through my case studies, contemporary music theatre makes use of dissociation as a principle or strategy on many levels of experience for the listener to create a new sense of unity. However, the listener’s urge to find such unity is not unproblematic, as it cannot always be immediately resolved. By exposing the spectator to continuous split perceptions, The Wooster Group’s La Didone demonstrates how the listener tries to deal with the disruptions and fragmentations of the auditory space through her or his own meaning. It is in this signifying intervention and projection that the listener establishes her or his own subjectivity in relational terms (Silverman 1985: 196-8).

Dissociation affects the regulative system of perspectives in La Didone, as a schizophonic listening situation is presented between two parallel universes:
on the one hand, the baroque sound world of Dido in Francesco Cavalli’s *dramma per musica*, and on the other, the sound-effects of blips and beeps of Mario Bava’s science-fiction film *Terrore Nello Spazio* (aka *Planet of the Vampires* from 1965). The continuous juxtaposition of these two diegetic worlds and respective narratives could be said to aim at new connections, a new synthesis between sounds, texts and images in the attentive observer who tries to perceive all. Yet the auditory distress defies an evenly hovering attention that would suspend a position by the listener. Rather, as the juxtaposition bombards the listener with intensities, the listener feels urged to respond through her or his modes of listening, constantly shifting the attention. The performance reflects as such the choices that the listener makes through the listening modes in response to a general discomfort, to which the new synthoses give temporarily pleasure. The schizophonic perspectives, however, leave the play with meanings and shifts in attention open. There is no attempt to a (narrative) closure, no closed semiotics. Auditory distress brings forth continuously new signifieds, redundancies and slippages in meaning, constituting an endless regression of a unified whole (cf. Derrida’s notion of supplementarity).

The pejorative connotation of Schafer’s term ‘schizophonia’ (i.e. like acousmatisation, the splitting of a sound from its source or the condition caused by this split) also signals a fundamental negativity towards the modern subject who fails to synthesise all. In a similar pessimistic vein, Adorno (2002) refers to the failure in the listener to read music as a meaningful whole. Rather, the modern listener abides by ‘atomistic’ listening as opposed to structural listening:

> Atomistic listening, which loses itself weakly, passively, in the charm of the moment, the pleasant single sound, the easily graspable and recollectable memory, is pre-artistic. Because such listening lacks the subjective capacity for synthesis, it also fails in the encounter with the objective synthesis that every more highly organized music carries out. Atomistic behaviour, which is still always the most widespread, and certainly the one on which so-called light music speculates and which it cultivates, merges with the naturalistic pleasures of the sense of taste, the de-artification of art from which the latter, over the course of centuries, struggled free with considerable effort and always pending reversal (Adorno 2002: 318).

As a result of the decline of music as auratic art, Adorno’s critical stance towards atomistic listening is based on the presumption that this type of listening would prevent the listener perceiving music as ‘intellectual’ or meaningful (‘Geistiges’) to the mind. As *La Didone* demonstrates, the constant dissociation in the listening attention indeed brings the interpretative efforts of the listener to an impasse that overwhelms and destabilises a sense of a unified ‘self’. Consequently, I have conceptualised two other responses that
enable the listener to regain a sense of coherency over the remainder and dispersal of signifieds: narrativisation and auditory imagination as two specific and interrelated modes of relating to sound or music.  

Another aspect of dissociation is exemplified in Men in Tribulation: the fetishisation of autonomous sound. In this performance that incorporates some of Artaud’s ideas on total theatre, an electroacoustically controlled feedback loop divides the sound from its source body, giving a sense of a ‘body without organs’, an imaginary body made of sound. In Benjamin’s line of argument, this fetishisation could imply a separation of the artwork from the contingencies of history, giving the listener a suspended moment of pleasure for the repeatability itself outside temporal awareness. However, it would be an illusion to think that the feedback loops do not bring about any cultural-historical references. The ‘globalised’ sound of technologically induced noise imposes a sense of oppressive, territorialised space in the listener. In this way, the performance subverts the fantasies of the Gesamtkunstwerk as total theatre by replacing it with another kind of total space: a technologised version of Artaud’s vibrational space.

In the effects of autonomised sound on the listener, Steven Connor (2000) observes a close relationship between pre- and post-technological experiences. Audio technologies actualise some of the desires which predate them, reviving the ‘powers of the uncanny and excessive’ that are associated with dissociated sound and voice: “Vocal and acoustic technology must therefore be understood partly as a process, not of Weberian disenchantment of the world, but of re-enchantment” (Connor 2000: 40). In music theatre, this re-enchantment by means of audio technology could create a new Gesamtkunstwerk, a new phantasm of coherence against the splits in our perceptions and listening subjects, against the alienations of the auditory subject in the modern world as Buck-Morss (1992) suggested. However, this theatre poses another characteristic strategy against this tradition of such

Adorno (1965) also suggests imagination as a solution to atomistic listening and the absence of a musical whole: “If the true musical whole does not impose a blind dominance of so-called form, but is rather result and process in one – very closely related, by the way, to the metaphysical conceptions of great philosophy – then it makes sense that the way to understand the whole would have to lead up from the individual part, as well as down from the whole. Musical experience is all the more impelled to take this route since there are no longer any overarching forms to which the ear could entrust itself blindly. The means to such experience is exact imagination (exakte Phantasie)” (Adorno 1965: 2002: 321-2).

Nietzsche has referred to a similar influence of the Gesamtkunstwerk on the modern subject: “Art, and especially the Gesamtkunstwerk, is important to the modern, alienated individual in bringing them in contact with others, with nature, and with the core (the will) of life itself. The Gesamtkunstwerk is thus the consummate modernist art work: ‘Man can only be comprehended in conjunction with men in general, with his Surroundings: man divorced from this, above all the modern man, must appear of all things the most incomprehensible’” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Shaw-Miller 2002: 48).
total space: a fragmentation of space that enables self-reflexivity of the listener as subject of the listening act.

3.2. Fragmentation: A Self-conscious Subjectivity

Another defining aspect of music theatre as reaction against the traditional models of total theatre is its fragmented construct as a post-modern structure of experience, which manifests in many ways. This fragmentation can be seen as an elaboration of ‘dissociation’. As I showed in chapter three, one of the strategies that contemporary music theatre shares with post-dramatic theatre is ‘musicalisation’ of text and stage. In this notion Hans-Thies Lehmann (1997 & 1999) recognises a general dramaturgical principle to break with the expectations of a logocentric, teleological, dramatic unfolding in a theatre play. It produces an auditive space beyond telos. Obviously, musicalisation is inherent to a long history and tradition of music theatre. Whereas musicalisation in the Gesamtkunstwerk aimed at turning music into theatre and synthesising all the media in the representation as a go-between for the spectator’s imagination, it has the opposite effect on the post-dramatic stage.

According to Lehmann, musicalisation takes part in a larger project of turning theatre into music as to fragmentise its logic and modes of reception. As a result, he describes such musicalised theatre performances as scenic poems with a ‘meandering’ narration. Rather than rendering one simple narrative, the theatre shows the process of narration as a production, a mechanism or a construct that raises consciousness for the spectator’s contribution to it. This idea has helped me to redefine narrative in terms of a proper mode of listening: narrativisation. This notion explains how the spectator can still perceive a theatre production as narrative when it refrains from any undeniable narrative development or tradition of storytelling. Narrativisation can then be used as a discursive mechanism to solve auditory distress and regain a sense of coherency or synthesis in the fragmented perceptions. Seen this way, fragmentation can still bring forth a diegetic space with fictional characters in which a sense of narration or narrative unfolds on the stage in relation to the music. However, it comes forth in the listener’s responses.

Since the 1960s, post-structuralist theory has insisted that any kind of text can be understood as open sign system (cf. Umberto Eco’s notion of the ‘open work’) where meanings are produced and written into them upon the individual impulses in the reader. However, as I have shown, the narrative

206 Fragmentation in cultural objects such as music in the 1960s had a different function than it has today: it was part of a cultural project to open the ‘work’ concept and its tradition. As much it is a modernist trope materialised in the avant-garde to seek disruption with the past through violence, chaos, stretching human perception (Attinello 2004: 154), the ‘fragment’ became a strategy of an art whose aim was “not that of creating harmonies but of overstraining the
impulse does not only come about by the willingness and competence of the listener, who could interpret the music performance in a narrative way due to a human desire to make sense of the fragmentation. A narrative reading is not arbitrarily a matter of the individual’s competence to respond to a lack of meaning. Rather, the listener’s relation to the fragmentation comes with certain expectations that are cultural-historically and discursively shaped and that come about in relation to the perspectives that theatre offers as go-betweens in the interaction between the subject and auditory distress. As I showed through the music theatre performance *De Overstroming* by Peter Van Kraaij at LOD, the narrative impulse resides as much as in the performed texts of Auden’s poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* and Handke’s short story *Die Überschwemmung*, as in the promotional materials of the information brochure, the programme description or the press folder.

A significant aspect in music theatre’s narrative impulse is the absence or suspension of an authorial voice or power behind the representation. In the traditional definition of narrative, there is no narration without a narrator, so to speak. This has lead to a contrived search for an authorial voice in the ‘intelligence’ of a composer within the composition, a *musical persona* in Cone’s theory. *De Overstroming* however demonstrated that the presence of composer Jan Kuijken as musician on the stage does not need to bring forth an authorial voice in the experience of the music. Rather, the text by Peter Handke offers a point of listening to the careful listener as an entry point to narrativise the rather fragmented musical material: the perspective of the blind brother then offers a metaphor for the critical attitude to music’s narrative inclinations. *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* by Walpurgis, moreover, confirmed that a narrative voice on or off the stage is not necessary for stimulating a narrative impulse in the listener. Rather, the narrative impulse comes about as a response to the auditory distress in relation to the title and fragments of Juan Rulfo’s novel *Pedro Páramo*, which are distributed to the spectator through projections and the programme brochure.

Another aspect in the fragmentation of the spectator’s perception resides in the structure of perspectives that music theatre offers: instead of concealing the modes of production such as in the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the post-modern stage fragments experience by presenting its theatrical mechanisms. This presentation makes us aware of the process of mediation and its influence in our interpretative responses. Whereas auditory experience is so much about the imperceptible, this type of music theatre often literally shows the

medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable, subject-matter” (Sontag 1966: 287; qtd. Attinello 2004: 161). Through the performances I discuss, I tried to show that fragmentation does not aim at such a violent effect on the perceiver to break with traditions as such, nor is auditory distress accountable for such a strategy. Rather, the fragment is highlighted in the theatre as fundamental to the nature of our perception, and auditory distress proves to be inherent to every auditory perception as such.
mechanisms as prostheses of our experiences, which turn the attention on the perception itself and its ramifications for the listening subject. In this way, music theatre is much indebted to the post-dramatic scene in which such presentation aims to disrupt a linear communication of content as in the tradition of dramatic theatre. As such, post-dramatic theatre shows how a certain invisible logic is at work in the theatrical construction, which provides order according to our beliefs about the world, history and reality, as a closed world (Lehmann 1999: 288). Contemporary music theatre then seems to suggest that auditory distress, as fundamental to every auditory experience, operates in every auditory experience to contest this closed-off world contained in the theatre frame as its production is embedded in our perception and responses to the auditory distress.

The presentation of these mechanisms in the theatre also raises awareness for the historical construct of music theatre as a discursive matrix constituted by different media. Music theatre as ‘multimedia’ theatre no longer aims at a holistic arrangement that secures such a total experience, as modelled in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. Rather, it disintegrates and reveals the individual claims of these media on the perception of the spectator. De Overstroming presents us with an example of how the juxtaposition of signifying media such as text, music and image can guide the listener to narrativise the musical events. However, no unambiguous perspective is given that would help the listener to create a total world, moulding presentational, representational and diegetic spaces together. Rather, auditory distress intensifies the sense in the listener that there is more than one meaning. As a result, the theatre, as a sense producing construct, turns the interpretative act in listening to itself. In this way it turns discourse into a place of contestation, full of enigmas that the listener needs to solve, but without giving the expectation that there is only one coherent meaning.

Peter Boenisch relates this strategy of showing the construct of theatre to the aspect of intermediality and the gaps it necessarily creates:

Instead of closing down the multiple semantic potential offered into one coherent meaning, intermedial performances derail the message by communicating gaps, splits and fissures, and broadcasting detours, inconsistencies and contradictions. Therefore, intermedial effects ultimately inflect the attention from the real worlds of the message created by the performance, towards the very reality of media, mediation and the performance itself. The usually transparent viewing conventions of observing media are made palpable, and the workings of mediation exposed. Thus, intermediality manages to stimulate exceptional, disturbing and potentially radical observations […] (Boenisch 115).

These gaps in the representational system of contemporary theatre expose the construct of the theatre as a representation of a ‘total world’, exposing the spectator to a multiplicity of semantic potential. The intermediality that
Boenisch refers to is, however, a specific cultural-historical practice in the theatre, which breaks with the model of the Gesamtkunstwerk. In a similar vein, the contemporary music theatre I have discussed questions this tradition by showing its own modes of production and representation.

As an example of this fragmentation of the stage, Blauwbaards Burcht deconstructs the delusions of the Gesamtkunstwerk as ‘phantasmagoria’ by marking its own theatrical construct. In Wouter Van Looy’s semi-scenic staging, the construct of the stage with video projection, supertitle boxes and a visible orchestra stimulates the listener’s imagination like in a concert or recital mode of production (Kivy 1994). The orchestra on stage secures the aesthetic pleasure of a concert, but due to its continuous presence in semi-darkness in combination with a dynamic light performance, the listener’s awareness resides in the background. The presentation of the orchestra at the centre is very telling for a post-modern culture that embraces the disenchantment of any phantasmagorical camouflage. However, to pick up on Connor’s idea, the disenchantment has become a new re-enchantment of musical delight, building up towards the pendant moment of the subject’s dissolution in aural bliss staged in the collapse of Judith, Bluebeard’s latest and final bride. In the representation of text and lighting, she dissolves in the last room of Bluebeard’s castle, a metonymic space for his subconscious. As follows, the representational ‘stage of the subconscious’ in Blauwbaards Burcht questions the very essence of what can be visually represented and imaginatively suggested in the listener’s inner stage.

The fragmentation of the visual, ‘specular’ space enables the spectator to retain the image or concept of the theatrical construct. After creating the persona ‘Bluebeard’ as an imaginary body and his castle as an imaginary space, all that the spectator is left with is a desire for narrative closure, while darkness falls upon Bluebeard and his silent (vocalic) body on the stage. In this sense, the fragmentation retains a double awareness in the listener-spectator for the opacity of the medium music, as Peter Kivy also draws our attention to: while attending to the musical performance as the execution of a score, we imagine a fictional character (vocal persona) in relation to the vocalic body we perceive on stage.

The video projection in Blauwbaards Burcht by Kurt D’Haeseleeer, however, aims at homogenising the experience again. It operates perhaps then as a new ‘phantasmagoria’, stimulating and ‘intoxicating’ the imaginative response in the listener against the auditory distress in the orchestral score and vocal performance. The video represents abstract, mental imagery, and thereby marks our imagining activity. Video could also mark a sudden split in our homogeneous experience of sound and image. In Ruhe, for instance, the video projection by David Claerbout catches our eye through the barely noticeable movement of wind blowing in a shadowy tree. This detail underscores unexpectedly the dissonances in the musical score by Annelies
Auditory Distress and Aurality in Music Theatre

van Parys, deconstructing Schubert’s musical motives and casting an element of threat into the listening space. Auditory distress is given significance here in relation to the image, suggesting that there is more than meets the eye.

Another counter-tendency against the fragmentation of the stage is a re-enchantment of immersion and aural bliss (‘jouissance’), which were also part and parcel of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. As I demonstrated through both Blauwbaards Burcht and Men in Tribulation, though in a totally different fashion, music has the ability to engulf the listener and, thereby, to immerse her or him in a sense of total surrounding. As a result, the listener would lose one’s ‘self’ as her or his senses take flight. I also showed through these performances, in relation to Barthes’s notion of jouissance, how this idea of the dissolution of the self is historically dependent and works in relation to certain conventions and expectations in reading the music as text. In that case, the question today is: What does it mean to be immersed by sound, to lose or surrender oneself to it?

The traditional models of the phantasmagoria and the Gesamtkunstwerk are no longer effective in bringing the spectator closer to the drama or the story. Rather, the post-dramatic theatre exposes this model and distracts any attempt at narration by fragmentation. Still, the enveloping aspect of sound brings solace to the listener as listening subject against the destabilising effects of auditory distress. It places us in the ‘midst of things’ (Ong 1971), bringing the spectacle down again to new intimate experiences. According to Theo van Leeuwen (1999), this aspect speaks of certain preferences in the consumption and experiences of a society, which comes close to the oral society as discussed by Walter J. Ong:

> Sound [...] ‘pours into the hearer’ (Ong, 1982: 72). It connects, and it requires surrendering oneself to, and immersing oneself in, participatory experience. A society which values sound over vision would therefore also be a society which values lived experience over detached analysis, memories over possessions, and subjective immersion and surrender over objective scrutiny, control and power (van Leeuwen 1999: 196).

Music theatre can bring across a counter-point to the visual noise and the overload of information of our times, through the fragmented perspectives of the theatre that create and manage focus in sharing intimacy, silent nuances that intervene the aural sense and bring the sound physically closer. It therefore draws out and plays upon some of the values of our society and culture today in the way we give meaning to certain experiences.

In Men in Tribulation, however, this all-engulfing gesture of the feedback loops through amplification, immobilising the listener in the listening space. The sonorous envelope imposes introspection on the individual listener about one’s own lived experience, while trying to ‘survive’ in the violent and oppressive effects of overexposure to haptic space. This brings me to my third
The Frequency of Imagination

and last characteristic of music theatre in relation to its tradition and present-day aurality: through auditory distress, sound and its sonorous envelope impose an authority on the listener, whose agency and competence to respond in listening is at stake.

3.3. Agency and Authority in Listening: Competence and Discourse

The historically produced dissolution of ‘self’ and the destabilisation of the listener as subject, as consequences of auditory distress in our aurality today, finally raises questions about the authority of sound and the agency of the listener to act upon it. In chapter one, I explained how in relation to our own thresholds of hearing and listening, and to an acoustic horizon to which all the perceived sounds are pitched, the interventions of sound claim an authority over our bodies and sense of self. Due to a continuous receptivity and sensibility of the ear, auditory distress poses a threat to us, which makes us feel addressed and urged to respond in our everyday encounters with our surrounding soundscapes.

In the theatre and in the opera, the implications of auditory distress were long kept to a minimum under the sovereignty of drama. As Appia (1899) suggested earlier about melodrama in contrast to opera, auditory distress was often reduced to a deliberate effect in order to work on the spectator’s nerves. Even in modern text-based theatre, manuals of sound design (such as Kaye and Lebrecht 1992) instruct readers to be careful with sound so as not to disrupt the text. Music drama too kept auditory distress long at bay. The Gesamtkunstwerk offered the cure through synthesis and identity in relation to the drama. Yet this model is no longer sufficient in post-modern times. As I argued in chapter two, theatre by definition offers perspectives to deal with the auditory distress. However, contemporary music theatre and new stagings of operatic theatre generally do not provide easy solutions to the attentive listener. Rather, they intensify the auditory distress – through the deprivation model – where it addresses the listener to produce meaningful auditory experiences. As such, Artaud’s vision to stimulate and activate the listener through a general discomfort in a total surrounding of the theatre indirectly inspires this type of music theatre though in different ways of execution and context.

Agency manifests itself in the responses the listener makes in relation to the auditory distress. The listener’s ways of responding always predates the auditory distress or any sound production for that matter as they constitute the aural competences the listener has acquired over time. Ola Stockfelt (2004) stresses in this sense the importance of a self-conscious development of aural competences: “we must develop our own reflexive consciousness and competence as active ‘idle listeners’” (93). My approach to music theatre therefore focused on these responses in the listener’s competency that help her
or him to position her or himself as an active but often idle listener against auditory distress. For contexts such as the theatre, where one cannot simply walk away or block the auditory distress by making sound oneself (like singing, whistling, etc.), we have developed cognitive mechanisms that help us to channel and process the auditory intensities, selecting what is necessary and meaningful through our attention. \textsuperscript{207} What is meaningful is, however, restricted to an extent but also enabled by the cultural discourse in which the listening takes place. Therefore Stockfelt’s belief in competent and self-conscious listeners needs to be put in a more critical perspective. As such, aural competence and agency in listening reflect not only our subjective position towards sound and its possible meanings; it also marks our relation to the world, towards others and towards ourselves.

This reflection of our channelling and interpreting efforts in relation to others and the world was first demonstrated in Rokeby’s installation \textit{n-Cha(n)t}. The installation presents us with a model of how listening and communicating through sounds embeds the human subject in an acoustic community. The soundscape was produced by a feedback loop based on speech recognition and repetition of syllables uttered by the visitor in one of the microphones. In this way, sound is marked as intervention, as every sound entry breaks the ‘chant’. Upon entering the sonorous space of chanting computer systems, the visitor could already feel as if she or he is trespassing. Being aware of one’s own intervention produces the space socially in relation to the ‘others’ that entrench the visitor in an acoustic community. Similarly, music theatre produces a listening space as a place inhabited by listeners. Through the subjective responses to the sound, the listener is rooted in a community of listeners that share a cultural discourse. The meanings that the listener produces in music theatre act upon and are enabled by this discourse as a response to the acoustic and auditory interventions that cause the auditory distress.

Each of the music theatre performances I discussed plays upon the listener’s personal capacity – or lack thereof – to respond to auditory distress on many different levels. As a result, they each call for an awareness of the listener’s competences, to a certain extent, and her or his relation as listening subject to an aural community with a shared, cultural discourse. Some of them comply with contemporary modes of perception such as in \textit{La Didone}, or they rouse explicit resistance in the listener to what is to be experienced as against the oppressive space in \textit{Men in Tribulation}. They each address and activate the individual listener through auditory distress to find or make meaning in relation to the structures of representation and experience. The listener’s

\textsuperscript{207} Peter Boenisch remarks in this respect the reflection of existing cognitive skills in the theatre: “Before any world-making or content come into play, theatre always confronts its spectators with the ever-changing workings of perception: it is De Kerckhove’s training ground for the latest cognitive updates” (Boenisch 2006: 113).
responses to the auditory distress move in relation to the perspectives, that manage the attention and the specific discursive matrix that the theatre offers.

_Do you see the story? Do you see anything?_ Joseph Conrad’s guiding questions in _De Overstroming_ resonate to the blind brother’s perspective (focalizer) in Handke’s short story. These questions make us doubt what we truly see in the theatre or what we hear in Jan Kuijken’s music in terms of a ‘story’. It calls for a critical attitude towards the narrator’s authority and in its absence, the many authoritative voices in the theatre that influence our responses to the auditory distress and the semiotic remainder in music. Subsequently, in _De Helling van de Oude Wijven_ the discursive listening perspectives are implied in the text and the spatialisation of the soundscapes with pre-recorded bell sounds, voices and electroacoustic compositions by Rob Zuidam and Klaas De Vries. The multiplicity of texts and lyrics in this performance aims to distract the listener, while there are enough impulses in the performers’ gestures (vocalic bodies) for the listener to imagine two fictional characters or _personas_ transforming according to the atmospheres and diegetic worlds in the unfolding of one’s own narrativisations.

Distraction was also a productive ‘line of attack’ on the listener’s competences and desire to follow the double narrative in _La Didone_. As I already suggested, dissociation and fragmentation in the spectator’s perceptions could result at times in a rather distracted mode of listening towards the overload of information. I conceptualised this mode further through Barthes’s psychoanalytical listening that hinges upon an evenly hovering attention. This idea contests and temporarily suspends the urge in the listener to select what one regards as important in order to channel the auditory distress. Distraction as a common mode in modern aurality hinders the listener in her or his search for coherency. However, rather than dismissing it as antagonistic to structure and signification as Adorno implied in his notion of atomistic listening, both Barthes and Benjamin welcome the dispersal of attention and point to its claims on alternative meanings. Benjamin has drawn upon the social significance of a distracted mode of attention, as characteristic of modern art works that symptomise the auratic power in decline. John Mowitt (1987) explains how fragmentation and distraction lay bare the social aspect of perception:

> Because post-auratic art operated in accordance with the principle of the fragment, the subject’s reception of it was characterized by distraction. Benjamin did not mean by this that one was unable to pay attention to the work, but rather that one could make sense of it without surrendering to its traditionally sanctioned patterns of identification. Unwilling to abandon significance for the ‘play of the signifier’, Benjamin emphasized the socially critical character of distraction and the habits of critical literacy that could form under its influence (185).
Today Benjamin’s idea of post-auratic art has been replaced by the ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-dramatic’ paradigm, which has shifted its social meaning of distraction against the status of contemplation in art, which Adorno defended so fervently. Yet I contend that the products of music theatre in contemporary aurality still carry the seeds of this historical idea in terms of its ramifications in the play of meaning and the listener’s ‘habits of critical literacy’. The latter suggests a self-reflexive competence of the subject to read the signs of theatre and music, despite or in spite of their dwelling on a perpetual semiotic remainder. Roland Barthes (1991) observed a similar mechanism in the modern listener’s attitudes of listening when he referred to it as ‘panic listening’:

...[listening grants access to all forms of polysemy, of overdetermination, of superimposition, there is a disintegration of the Law which prescribes direct, unique listening; by definition, listening was applied; today we ask listening to release; we thereby return, but at another loop of the historical spiral, to the conception of a panic listening, as the Greeks, or at least as the Dionysians, had conceived it (258).]

In Benjamin’s post-auratic culture in the age of reproduction ‘unique’ listening was indeed at stake. Today, we have become so used to the reproductive technologies, which have also entrenched the stage, that also this idea of uniqueness – such as implied by ‘live’ or ‘exclusiveness’ in aesthetic consumption – is historically produced. But the concept of panic listening explains well our general response to auditory distress caused by excess, overload, overexposure, which have been so much shaped by our urbanite, industrial modes of perception. The two specific responses I discussed – narrativisation and auditory imagination – moreover question the idea of an ‘applied’ listening in contrast to a ‘release’ in listening. The former suggests a more traditional, classical or even musicological mode of listening that applies certain concepts and tools that have been historically developed in order to secure continuity, coherence and contemplation. The latter refers rather to a willingness to surrender to the polysemy in listening to music theatre today. Music theatre has the capacity to reflect on both. As I argued in chapter three, narrativisation works as an applied narrativity in relation to texts, images, gestures. The imaginative response, which I discussed in chapter four, also lays bare the ‘application’ of associations, mental images, connections as suggested and contained by the representation in the performance. Nonetheless, auditory distress always disrupts the applications in listening as a response to our urge for a coherent experience that would solve the semiotic remainder and endless commutability of signifieds. Rather than giving closure to the listener, the performance of sound and music thrives on modes of ‘panic’ listening: we still tend to...
surrender our selves when our discursive efforts and desire for coherency and stabilisation of the subject fail to solve the disruptions of auditory distress.

*Men in Tribulation* exemplifies the social effect of this compelling surrender when the listener feels surrounded and ‘trapped’ by sound and spectacle, for which Artaud’s ideas of a new kind of total theatre served as a main inspiration. In this context, I would like to repeat Artaud’s earlier supplications of a theatre that would “abandon individual psychology, enter into mass passions, into the conditions of the collective spirit, grasp the collective wavelengths, in short, change the subject.” (*Cahiers de Rodez* V: 153; qtd. in Weiss 1992: 279). Today, as *Men in Tribulation* suggests, the question of the subject in relation to the collective seems no longer to impose a desire for such a change. Rather, music theatre presents us with how the listener isolates her or himself from a community as a reaction to a new total space that oppresses the subject. The total surrounding presented here can be understood through Barthes’s critique of the totalitarian effect of sound when the listener fails to select what is necessary from the auditory surroundings to regain control over it:

> It is against the auditive background that listening occurs, as if it were the exercise of a function of intelligence, i.e., of selection. If the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured; the ecological phenomenon which is today called pollution – and which is becoming a black myth of our technological civilization – is precisely the intolerable corruption of human space, insofar as humanity needs to recognize itself in that space (Barthes 1991: 247).

*Men in Tribulation* insists at times on polluting the listener’s senses and capabilities to respond in a new ‘total’ space. For Barthes, audio-pollution means the end of listening, as it prevents any discursive response or ‘intelligence’ by the living human subject, which enables communication with the surrounding world, the ‘Umwelt’ as he calls it. It is then perhaps a paradox that music theatre allows for a reproduction of noise and auditory distress through technological means, as it seems to suggest a new aesthetic pleasure. This re-enchantment as a result of technology’s dissociation processes, however, reunites the listener with an acoustic and auditory community, a new audience that forms a collective through its own introspection. The loud and continuous noisescapes in the performance do not only create a shared experience of discomfort in the listener, they also re-impose a certain organisation of sound that becomes “a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality”, as Jacques Attali has speculated (Attali 1985: 6; qtd. in Mowitt 1987: 179). The community that this music theatre addresses however recognises itself through its detachment from the surrounding world.
With this, I conclude with a critical moment in the listener’s surrender to the authority of sound and its sonorous envelope today. The contemporary listener senses her or himself becoming aware as listening subject exactly at the moment when she or he cannot control the responses to auditory distress. Since Freud’s revolutionary dissection of the psychoanalytical subject, it is known that the modern subject recognises itself in the mirrors of modern art as decentred, fragmented and destabilised. This recognition accounts for the desire of humans to regain control, produce coherency and channel all destabilising factors through discourse. In this respect, the Freudian subject tells us who we are in relation to what we block out. Auditory distress in theatre’s fragmentation of perspectives then not only makes us aware of the regulative and authoritative processes at work around us, but also within us. The self-reflexive stance towards the competences the listener brings in the theatre confirms our subjectivity in relation to general structures of experience in contemporary aurality. In this way, the solitude in the moment of introspection, when the listener distances her or himself for a brief moment from all collective experience and interpretation, brings the human subject closer to her or his humanity. It is in this way that ‘self’, as Don Ihde declared, “is a correlate of the World and its way of being-in that World is a way filled with voice and language,” and we can add to this, sound (Ihde, qtd. in Connor 219).

In the act of listening, the listener recognises her or himself as a human subject. Not only do the meanings of the auditory experiences occur to the listeners individually, but their identity as listeners is constituted by the meanings that occur (Mowitt 1987: 177). Contemporary music theatre then produces an experience of a faculty, a competency with which the listener manifests her or himself as an auditory self in relation to a community of other listeners. Through this process, music theatre has not only helped the spectator to develop from an ‘eternal spectator’ in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk into a self-reflexive, active, though at times, ‘idle’ listener. It has also offered a doorway for the listener to a new sense of collectivity, situating the subject within emerging structures of listening and sense-making through one’s own responses to auditory distress.

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208 For this conclusion, I am inspired by John Mowitt’s article “The sound of music in the era of its electronic reproducibility” (1987). In this article, he investigates the socio-political aspects of the contemporary structure of listening, as he claims: “What I have stressed is that music, as an organisation of noise or sound, arises within the structure of listening I have outlined. Music’s social significance derives from the role it plays in the stabilisation of this structure, that is, how it articulates and consolidates structurally necessary practices of listening” (Mowitt 1987: 179). His idea of the stabilisation in the structure of listening could well be connected to my thesis that this urge is caused by the destabilising effects of auditory distress in the listener. Mowitt’s primary concern, however, is to show how human subjectivity as a general structure of experience is socially engendered. His claims add yet another perspective on the discursive mechanisms underlying human subjectivity.
4. The Future of Music Theatre and its Afterlife in Theory

Claiming what the future in music theatre will bring would not only be pretentious, but also unrealistic. At the end of this study, however, I feel the need to make some speculations and suggestions for further research both within the practice and theory of music theatre.

As I suggested in the introduction and conclusions, music theatre’s role in a history of aurality is still to be written. Socio-political aspects of listening in music theatre have been discussed only in the margins of my study. In the epilogue I already suggested some directions for a closer investigation of music theatre’s participation in the contemporary structures of listening, subjectivity, cultural memory and the social order that can be contested or confirmed through the ramifications of auditory distress. My arguments about distress in listening could therefore cast new perspectives on the burgeoning post-colonial approaches that look at the historical structures of experience in music and operatic theatre. One specific aspect that was not of primary concern in this study but calls for further research is the role of technology in relation to these structures and modes of listening. Another significant aspect that needs further research is the specific locality and relationality of newly emerging forms of music theatre in national contexts where subsidy policies and a desire for institutionalisation reflect ideological relations between state, art and society.

As for the practice of music theatre, research has become an integral component of any dramaturgical reflection in the theatre today. Knowledgeable attempts of any serious ‘practice as research’ are as yet developing, along with the urge to develop new forms of music theatre and new ways of addressing contemporary audiences. The range of concepts for music dramaturgy and criticism therefore needs expansion, for which the practice of music theatre is already intensifying its collaborations with educational and academic research institutes. More often, new styles in criticism are treating music theatre as a genre in its own right, and not in the operatic tradition which has its own rigid concepts. Distancing music theatre from this tradition would, however, obliterate its foundations and reasons for existence. Music theatre is therefore constantly in need of dramaturges, critics, teachers and scholars that can give an informed perspective to its relation to its traditions and present culture.

My thesis on auditory distress and aurality in music theatre could indirectly contribute to this ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, including dramaturgy, teaching, research and cultural criticism. One thing I have stressed in this study is that auditory distress should not be understood nor ‘used’ as a mere aesthetic strategy. It is the basis for the listener’s response and as such, it is inherent to every auditory experience. My concerns about auditory perception are not formulated nor intended for practical
purposes, but for analysis in the first place. This should, however, not prevent
the reader from unleashing the imagination that lies at the basis of this music
theatre yet in the making.