

# Earworms

By Timothy Morton

This essay will argue that musical sounds are independent beings in their own right, just like worms. Indeed, it is going to use the example of the earworm to demonstrate this. In turn, the fact that the earworm is an independent entity in some sense has profound implications for how we listen to, compose and analyze music, and in particular on how to think what is called *soundscape*. And the fundamental detail here is that this new thinking will be strongly ecological.

While the essay does this, it will become clear that the differences between sound, noise and music, the differences between foreground and background, and the differences between a single thing and a group of things—a tune and a city, part of a city and another part of a city, and so on do not evaporate into nothing at all. Rather they become “weird”: that is to say, they cease to be thin, rigid and metaphysical. So do the differences between listening, playing, hearing and composing—between tunes and tuning.

Moreover and likewise, it will become impossible to sustain thin or rigid differences between being active and passive; between being a person and being a thing; between life and nonlife. At the Tuned City Brussels sound art event in 2013, Felicity Ford was right to say “Thanks to Brussels for all the sounds.”<sup>1</sup>

We have all heard earworms, those irritating tunes or parts of tune that seem to live rent free in our heads. Why do they do that? Answering that it is because they are so compelling begs the question. How and why are they so compelling? This essay is going to explore the strange, loopy logical structure of earworms, and explain why it is better not to try to get rid of them, but rather to coexist with them and possibly embrace them.

Edmund Husserl demonstrated that sentences are independent beings. Biologically reductionist psychologism was asserting in the nineteenth century that logical sentences were symptoms of healthy brains. And what is a healthy brain? One needs sentences to describe it. And what is a sentence? A symptom of a healthy brain. We have an infinite regress. So sentences cannot be symptoms of healthy brains. They must exist from their own side. The sentence—*This sentence is a symptom of a healthy brain*—cannot be a symptom of a healthy brain.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, promising, hating, hoping, aspiring, fearing... a “phenomenon” is precisely this manifold of data and the mode in which that data is interpreted. In turns this means that ideas don’t just plop naked from the sky. Ideas always have a color and a flavor. When I think about a piece of chalk, I am thinking in chalk mode. When I hear Debussy’s *Trio for Flute, Viola and Harp*, I am hearing in Debussy mode. This manifold is an “object” insofar as it is autonomous. An object stretched “between” traditional notions of subject and object, rather like a worm. This worm-like manifold floats like a specter ontologically distorting the realities of which it is the appearance. Although it is real, we cannot locate where this distortion or twist begins and where the reality starts. This strongly suggests that things are not capable of being pointed to directly, even by themselves; rather, they are intrinsically curled or twisted

or “veering” (a term I use later), exemplifying what Heideggerian deconstruction calls *nothingness*. A thing is dappled, rippling, undulating, spectral, flickering with shadows, stuttering, phased, crackling, noisy.

A sentence has its own logical DNA, then, and it is mind independent. A sentence is a kind of entity, an “object” in the terminology used by Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). A sentence has its own grammatical, syntactical and sonic genome. In this sense, a sentence is like a virus. Viruses are chronologically subsequent to bacteria, in evolutionary time. But they are logically prior, since they encapsulate the strange loop that exists between a physical system and a semiotic one, a loop between what OOO calls *appearing* and what it calls *being*. This loop is intrinsic to things such as bacteria as well as things such as viruses. Although they require bacteria to reproduce, viruses tell us something true about bacteria.

In the same way, what is called a riff (shruti, lick, chop) has its own logical, semiotic and physical DNA. A sound, considered in this sense, is like a virus—which is why the term *earworm* is highly appropriate. We could think of ideas as viral structures for which minds are vectors. In the same way, earworms are spread by humans and other related vectors, such as MP3 players. Riffs are logically prior to the tunes (and so on) in which they find themselves.

This logical priority of the riff or virus implies that distinctions such as natural/unnatural, sound/noise and so on fail when subjected to enough analytical or musical pressure. This failure is not due to the fuzziness of (human) perception or subjectivity, or the context in which sounds appear. The failure has to do with the deep ontological structure of entities as such: they are riven from within between what they are and how they appear, even to themselves.

It would be better to think sounds as entities in their own right, coexisting in an ecology of sonic hosts and parasites, in which the host/parasite distinction is neither thin nor rigid. Entities that in some strong sense display something like agency and something like affect. Earworms. This essay examines the implications of thinking this way. So-called “ambient” phenomena are an ideal way to probe this thought.

## Every Sound Is a Loop

First let us examine the loop quality of the sonic entities that I now start to call earworms. A sound is a physical entity. Yet it is also an aesthetic appearance. Naturally the aesthetic appearance of a sound can also act as a carrier wave for semiotic signals. But even without an explicit meaning or semiotic quality, a sound is internally riven. That is to say, a sound is split between its essence and its appearance: what it is and how it appears. There is a certain sound wave of a certain frequency. To me, a human sitting in a Boeing 777 at 35 000 feet, it sounds like the deep roar of an engine.

How can I know that there is a gap between being and appearing? I can, for instance, note the difference between *counting* and *number*. *Counting* is something that appears—I can show you counting on my

fingers (one, two, three). But when you ask me to show you number, I can't do it—all I can do is resort to counting again, pointing to fingers that represent numbers. Yet counting depends on number. There is a gap between number—the essence—and counting—the appearance.

How perfect that the esoteric Buddhist analogy for emptiness, the lack of inherent identity out of which everything arises, is sound. Where does a sound start? Where does it stop? Consider a bell. In what part of the bell does the sound inhere? The clapper? The metal cylinder? Where does it start and stop? This doesn't mean that there is no sound at all, but that we can't point directly to sound. There are car alarms and piano pieces by John Cage, and they are different. Yet we can't point directly to car alarm sounds and to a performance of *Sonatas and Interludes*. When I hear a sound, I discover myself in a totally interconnected, entangled interspace, a place that some call the aesthetic dimension. This dimension is strictly where causality lives—and so it is a magical, slightly dangerous at the best of times, demonic dimension. Despite its seemingly ancient provenance, this notion that causality is part of the aesthetic is a deep implication of modern—that is to say, post-Humean, which is to say two hundred years old—causality theory.

I use the term *entanglement* because it is evident that sounds tell stories about the physical objects that make them—and there has to be more than one physical object in order for a sound to arise.

Consider the most basic sound: a beat. A beat is made when one wave intersects with another wave. Thus in order for there to be a beat, there must also be  $1 + n$  waves occurring. A sound is an elegy to what OOO calls the *withdrawal* of these  $1 + n$  waves: the fact being that they cannot be accessed in their entirety by anything, including themselves. A beat is the footprint of a present absence. A beat is the ghost of a thing. There is something intrinsically spectral about sound. And on this view, just one beat is already a kind of earworm. It has all the properties we have been examining so far. This means that there is no fundamental atom of sound to which one can reduce anything. A symphony could be an earworm. A small fragment of the symphony's first movement could be an earworm. A chorus in a pop song could be an earworm. A part of that chorus could be an earworm.

The palpable physicality of the sound as an explicit being with a certain size and shape withdraws from access—yet I hear this sound, just this actual sound, the roar of this jet engine surrounding me, slightly behind me, as the plane skirts the edge of Newfoundland. The sound as appearance is the uncanny doppelganger of its physical facticity. This is the sound of a jet engine, not the sound of a rubber band going boing, boing. A sound is an isotope of a thing—like it, but unlike it.<sup>3</sup> A sound is therefore uncanny: familiar yet strange; familiarly strange; strangely familiar.

Yet I cannot locate the gap between the essence of the thing and its appearance anywhere at all in my given, ontic, phenomenal space. Things fail to come with a little dotted line on them and a little picture of scissors that says “cut here”—we have no idea where to cut to separate the being of a thing from its appearance. Up until the modern age, which is to say the later eighteenth century—which is now to say the beginning of the Anthropocene, the moment at which humans by releasing carbon compounds into the atmosphere in sufficient quantities become a geophysical force on a planetary scale—up until this contemporary age, the task of philosophy was construed to be locating the dotted line and cutting. But this is strictly impossible? Why? Because whenever I look for the gap between essence and appearance, all I discover are more appearances. The gap is ontological, not ontic, which is to say not given: I cannot point to it.

Thus a sound is a strange loop, like a Möbius strip. A Möbius strip is a very strange object. It has *less* dimensions than it seems to—it

only has one edge and it only has one side, whereas it appears to have two. A Möbius strip is a *non-orientable surface* in the topological terminology. That means that I cannot locate its front or back, its top or bottom, anywhere. I am unable to find where the twist in the strip begins, the famous twist that forces my finger onto the “other” side of the strip when it traces the strip. The twist is everywhere. There is no dotted line. On the one hand, a sound is a physical thing. On the other hand it is a semiotic thing. But we cannot locate where the physical stops and the semiotic starts anywhere on the surface of the sound. A sound is a Möbius strip—a strange twisted loop whose twist is everywhere.

A sound is therefore a self-contradictory, weird entity. Just like DNA: a physical structure that is also a semiotic one, in the right kind of environment. A sound talks about the physical entities that made the sound. And yet it doesn't talk about them. This is fundamentally because a sound is always a collusion between  $1 + n$  things. We don't hear the wind in itself. We hear the wind in the trees. We hear the wind in the doorway.<sup>4</sup> The sound we hear is a story about trees, wind, human ears, distance, this hood I'm wearing over my head, and so on.

## Mal-Functioning

Consider *Air Pressure Fluctuations*, by Felix Hess. Hess places contact microphones on the window of his New York apartment. Then he presses *record*. For several weeks the recording happens. Then he speeds up the sound three hundred and sixty times. When Hess does this, the sound of traffic in the street becomes the tinkling of tiny insects. A new sound becomes audible. It is a sound like the hum of a distant lawnmower. A faint yet palpable vibration. It is the sound of the standing wave of air pressure over the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>5</sup>

What is being heard here? A sound that is beyond the normal range of human hearing to be sure, but a sound that is happening, functioning, executing, nevertheless. The vibration of a pressure wave. What is being heard is the functioning of a thing—this functioning is normally impossible to detect. The environment is what we call the functioning of things that are invisible to the extent that the way they function—their appearance—is so habitual to us as to have disappeared.

This disappearance is only relative to our habitual perception of a thing. But this habit is only covering up the gap between how a thing appears and what it is. When you think about an environment, you are thinking about a host of functions, things that execute their specific being—a tree rustles, grass waves, buildings echo. To function is constantly to mal-function, because of the gap between what a thing is and how it appears.

To function is to mal-function, because to function is not to exhaust the gap between phenomenon and thing, but rather for that gap to be in a state of suspension. This state is just like musical suspension, the coexistence of  $1 + n$  melodic lines that shift over one another in such a way that they are related, yet distinct. They are out of phase with one another such that for instance we hear one changing, while the other one appears still.

It is possible to detect a spectral word within *malfunctioning*, namely a strange new term, *mal-functioning*. A slightly evil functioning, insofar as the aesthetic dimension, which just is the intersection and clash of appearances and appearances, suspended over the deeper clash between appearances and things, is a total dimension from which it is impossible to extricate myself, physically (employing very good acceleration for instance) or cognitively (employing some concept of metalanguage). I find myself among sounds, glued to them: they are viscous, when I pull away they stick to me. This means that, for instance, the snippets of speech about Tuned City 2013 that participants heard in the daily wrap-up documentation are immediately folded into the sonic space, rather than floating above

it—we cannot achieve escape velocity. “Layering different sounds on top of each other” (The Orb) does not mean that one sound is enabled to explain fully all the others.<sup>6</sup> There is no top level.

When I say “slightly evil” what I do not mean is *actually evil*. What I mean is that the gap between being and appearing cannot be reduced, so I am left in a realm of ambiguity that much Western philosophy has called evil, in particular the kind of evil Plato thinks. Plato sees art as an earworm from some demonic beyond that is causal—it infects your head with all kinds of thoughts—and like dirty candies lying in the street, you don’t know where they’ve been before they ended up in you.

Because functioning is mal-functioning there is no way to achieve what Alvin Lucier says he wants to achieve in *I Am Sitting in a Room*: the smoothing out of irregularity. Instead, what that piece gives birth to is a demonic realm of appearance that floats ontologically in front of things.<sup>7</sup> A palpable, bell-like gauze of rainbow sound wafting like a theatrical curtain. An irreducible viscous medium. A thing, with its own gap between being and appearing.

The script of *I Am Sitting in a Room* is its own commentary. A metalanguage is folded back into an object language, like the speech folded back into the sonic fabric in the Tuned City documentation just mentioned. Alvin Lucier is so beautifully explicit, so honest about his intentions, about how he wants the piece *I Am Sitting in a Room* to function:

I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice, and I am going to play it back into the room again and again, until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves, so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear then are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.<sup>8</sup>

The act of sitting in a room is itself an innocent seeming functioning of a human body. Yet what Lucier achieves is an astounding, spectral sonic gauze, an undulating froth of sound like pealing bells. Sitting in a room is not so innocent. Functioning is mal-functioning.

An earworm is a special entity that is part of the general environment—that is, the general atmosphere of mal-functioning that makes up the environment. We call it an earworm because for some reason, we have become susceptible to this particular entity, just as one might get the flu, or not, depending on one’s resistance to the flu virus. We notice the environment when it ceases to function smoothly, when we get some kind of flu. An earworm is a strange, inside-out reminder that we inhabit a sonic environment.

What we perhaps imprecisely call *atmosphere*, then, is better described as a nest of worms. A host of mal-functioning entities. Consider tools—like an earplug or an ear or a car or a street on a special sound walk—that lose their obviousness, sometimes by being used “properly.” Even to function, on this view, is to mal-function. Functioning is a rare form of mal-functioning. What is highly significant is how biologically and ecologically accurate such a term is. What we call *environment* just is a host of lifeforms and their extended phenotypes—the ways in which their genomes operate on beings that are different from them. The term *environment* contains a modification of the word *veer*, a verb that is hauntingly situated between activity and passivity, and that suggests a curvilinear, per-ver-se movement. When a ship veers, is it moving of its own accord or being pulled by the current? An environment is not a neat encircling: it is intrinsically twisted, mal-functional.

## Vectors

Now we are in a position to think about earworms in a precise way. An earworm is a mal-functioning loop that has a specific,

determinate structure. Such a loop can only exist if it is reproduced, for instance by a human mind.

An earworm has the same form as a virus. A virus is a physical entity that is also semiotic. It is a loop of code, RNA or DNA, that can only exist on the inside of another entity that it has forced to reproduce itself.

We are earworm vectors. From a certain point of view, then, a human being is an entity whose task is to reproduce a certain musical phrase by Katy Perry over and over again, for no reason.

What is susceptibility to earworms? Why do we become earworm vectors? Because earworms want to be reproduced—and this means, in the absence of a metaphysics of consciousness and volition, that the earworm is a strange loop that is inherently unstable, constantly trying to cancel itself out. Consider the Liar, the sentence that says “This sentence is false.” On the one hand, it is false, is it is lying—so it is not false, it is telling the truth. On the other hand, perhaps it is true, in which case it must be false, in which case it is lying. The Liar is true and false at the same time. In other words, it is *dialethic*, double-truthed. The trouble with double truth is that as Lacan says “What constitutes pretense is that in the end you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.” If I could see through the double truth I could reduce it to one.

A thing is a Liar in this sense, because its appearance tells the truth about it—but its appearance is not its essence, so its appearance is lying. And yet we can’t check in advance to find out where the truth stops and the lie starts. We can only impose our will on appearing in hindsight, backwards. A profound ambiguity lies at the heart of appearing—which is to say how causality functions, which is to say how a bell sounds when it is struck. A sound is a ghost that haunts us. It haunts us precisely because it presents us with a riddle that begs to be solved—the riddle of the gap between being and appearing—but which cannot be solved. It is thus a futural riddle—it might be solved, or not, at some point. This possibility floats on top of a deep insolubility, in the same way that the predictable future floats on top of a radically unpredictable one, a futurity rather than some atomic now-point (its size is irrelevant) that is *x* atomic now-points away from this one that we call *present*.

In this regard *a sound is the past*, insofar as it is a story about two or more things that made it. The wind brushed against the leaves just so, listen... On the other hand, *a sound is the future*, insofar as it opens up this region of wanting-to-be-solved. A sound is not the present, if we think of the present as a definable atom of any size (one nanosecond, a century, a million years). What sounds evoke is oneness, a shifting, relative motion between past and future. This is what it means to think sound without the metaphysics of presence, which for reasons I shall give soon is the right way to think sound.

When we try to peel appearing away from being, we cannot do it, because there is no pre-given, obvious dotted line between being and appearing, and nothing like a pair of scissors in sight. So in trying to peel appearing away from being, we ironically create all kinds of appearances. Consider DNA. It is trying to unzip itself, to resolve its inner instability. Yet when it does so, it ironically ends up reproducing itself. The very act of trying to die is also an act of reincarnation.

An earworm has its own logical DNA: it has a structure that is independent of the mind that is its vector. How can we know this? We can know it because logical statements of any kind are mind independent. If they were not, then we would be stuck in an infinite regress. If logical statements were only brain firings, then that statement would also be a brain firing, and we could never check its veracity.

An earworm lives in your brain. You are its vector. We live in a symbiotic ecology. A fungus growing in a certain caterpillar forces the caterpillar to climb up a tree, where it will burst and allow the fungal spores to be released to maximum effect. *Toxoplasma Gondii*

is another kind of worm, an amoeba that lives in your head. This amoeba tunes you to cats. You try to seek them out, because cats are the main vectors for this amoeba. It is possible that a neurotoxin released in some people's brains by this amoeba could cause schizophrenia. An earworm is just like that, in a sense. You become susceptible to it. You allow it to live in your head, even when you don't consciously like it. This couldn't happen unless earworms were profoundly independent beings, in the same way that amoebae and viruses are independent beings. It is only that viruses, like earworms, need another entity to enable them to reproduce. They are parasites. But at a certain resolution, the distinction between host and parasite breaks down.

## The Sick Rose

Reverse engineering from this thought about neurotoxins and symbionts that live in your head, we might speculate as to whether earworms are like hallucinations, a kind of proto-thought. It's quite possible that thinking as such is an emergent property of the kinds of hallucination we have learned to have by co-evolving with plants and mushrooms, as some ethnobotany is now beginning to explore. Perhaps this is why earworms are so compelling—why indeed we write music that contains them. Because they are like human made models of the kind of symbiotic entity that arose from other forms of symbiosis: namely, thoughts that arose from hallucinations that arose from plants. Isn't a hallucination a compelling, earworm-like thought that grows like a plant, without your will? Isn't that what is either wonderful or disturbing about it?

A hallucination, a thought, a flower, an earworm, a virus. None of them can exist without something else. But in a way viruses and thoughts and flowers are the logical precursors of the physical things that have them—brains and bacteria and plants, for instance. Brains and bacteria are the chronological precursors of viruses and thoughts. Bacteria came before viruses chronologically, but logically, viruses come before bacteria. They are as it were the condition of possibility for life forms: nonliving strands of code, foreign intelligences as Schopenhauer puts it that force other strands of code to go into a loop. Because isn't this what being a strand of code in a physical format means in the first place? DNA is an inconsistent molecule that is trying to unzip itself into nonexistence. In the very attempt to cease, it ironically reproduces itself, since as Schopenhauer and his follower Freud argued, the purpose of life is death, but in following that purpose, you make more of yourself and continue life.

I see a deep similarity between a flower and an earworm. We could call both *tropes*—that is why an anthology is a collection of poems, because *anthos* is Greek for *flower*. In the same way that hallucinations underlie thoughts, tropes underlie meaning. This in itself is weird, because a trope is a kind of meaning. A hallucination is a kind of thought. We seem to be in a loop, the strange kind of loop I have been discussing where there is a twist between physicality and significance that one cannot locate anywhere on the ontic surface of the loop.

A trope appears only to be the flower of rhetoric, as they say, whereas it is in fact its logical precondition. This is because rhetoric is about making people susceptible to arguments. Which is why it is really based not on words per se but on listening. Which is why Section II of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a powerful, comprehensive account of different kinds of affect. The affective environment is the susceptibility of the audience, and the job of the orator is to work directly on that susceptibility, to give them some kind of flu. There is no such thing as a totally empty, neutral or silent space. Silence in rhetoric simply means listening, which means susceptibility, and in the end music is a special kind of listening in itself, or as Miles Davis said, or rather as a rhetorical earworm often attributed to Miles Davis says, "You have to play a long time to sound like yourself."

The useless beauty of a flower or an earworm is thus not a cynical ruse to make more earworms. It just is a kind of viral code that serves no purpose, but which, when caught in another system—say a bee's search for nectar, ends up ironically reproducing itself. Thus viruses, flowers, iridescent wings, Kantian beauty, tropes, earworms and daft ideas that float around in my head all share something. They are symptoms of an irreducible gap between being and appearance that eats away at the metaphysics of presence from the inside. Eats away, like a parasite in a host, at the idea of a being as a stable, homogeneous chunk beneath appearances, whether we think that with Plato, Aristotle, or with contemporary atomists and reductionist materialists. And here I am arguing that not only might viruses and tropes and flowers share something, some kind of family resemblance. They might *actually* be part of the same physical family. So that when I hear an earworm, I really am hearing a trope. And when I use a trope, I really am reproducing a virus. And when I get a virus, I am flowering. Don't forget that an old definition of "parasite" concerns not animals but plants. And that plants require parasites, or as Schopenhauer says, "the foreign intelligent individual," to reproduce. It is like that poem by William Blake, "The Sick Rose." It nicely (for us) combines the themes of flower and worm in a single image:

O Rose, thou art sick.  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, the worm flies through a sonic welter, a howling storm. A generalized environment of mal-functioning. Slightly evil, at least seemingly, because it just functions, executing its storminess without rhyme or reason. But thinking the storm as really evil, or the worm as Satan, would be going too far. The poem seems to want to dare us to do that. But Blake poems are like earworms, or thoughts in search of a suitable mind. The suitable mind in this case speaks a lie in the form of the truth, which is the case with all Blake's songs of experience. Shock horror; life involves sex and death, and it is difficult to tell them apart. Life must therefore be intrinsically evil and corrupt. And I, the one who thinks this, am pure at least in my thinking that thought. Pure me over here, evil life over there.

This attitude—pure me, evil world—is what Hegel calls the *beautiful soul*, and it exemplifies evil.<sup>10</sup> The attitude that sees evil as a thing over yonder that I can somehow eradicate, this attitude is itself evil.

Against the cynical reason in the poem, which Blake appears to be satirizing by turning it into a cartoon of itself, we could assert that the rose couldn't be what it is unless this twisted worm—invisible because we can't directly see it but can only infer it by its results—could be its parasitic symbiont. The rose is susceptible. Which brings us to our final argument.

## After Demystification

Symbiosis means that we can't determine in advance which organism has priority over which, which in turn means that relationships are predicated on the impossibility of a perfect relation.<sup>11</sup> To exist is to be susceptible to the kind of destruction that the worm causes the rose. Why? Precisely because to exist is already to not quite be yourself—to be caught in a loop between what you are and how you appear. To exist is to be *fragile*, in an ontological sense, whether you are a rose, a worm, Nelson Mandela or a black hole. Even a black hole eventually evaporates because it emits Hawking radiation. Nothing

can escape from a black hole—except for the black hole itself. Even the densest object in the universe is fragile.

Another way of saying this is that for every logical system, there must be at least one sentence that the system can create that the system can't prove, *in order for that system to be true on its own terms*. This is what Kurt Gödel did to Russell and Whitehead, which in a way is what earworms do to my head, or what invisible worms do to roses.<sup>12</sup> Even the most rigorous logical system must be able to produce sentences that say, "This sentence cannot be proved," precisely because of its rigor, not in spite of it. A logical system must be capable of making strange loops, just as RNA is capable of creating viruses, or music is capable of creating earworms. This also means that we will always be susceptible to at least one earworm. I'm sorry to break it to the purists. Because we are also fragile entities, we can accommodate things that are inconsistent with our being, on all kinds of levels: viruses, cancer, earworms and Justin Bieber.

The normative distinction between high critical art and kitsch thus breaks down. Every sound is an earworm. So the difference between the most unpalatable sound art, and the most disturbingly palatable Katy Perry, collapses. We had better not keep insisting, then, that we are making sounds that are all that different from Katy Perry. This business is sometimes called *modernity*. In modernity high art tries not to be an earworm. But since this is strictly impossible, we are left with impoverished sonic weapons against the perceived problem, namely the commodification of everything. It is the case that in an ecological age, the distinction between sophisticated and unsophisticated aesthetic judgment becomes blurred at the very least, because there is no one proper scale (the human one) from which to assess everything. This is what the collapse of anthropocentrism means for phenomena such as hearing and sound. So our analysis of sounds as earworms, as discrete phenomenological beings, is highly congruent with what comes after modernity, namely ecological awareness.

Anthropocentrism, *not anthropomorphism*. Whenever I hear a sound, my entire phenomenological style anthropomorphizes that sound, whether I intend to or not, because I have just this pair of ears, just these memories, just these ingrained sonic experiences, and so on. This is far less of a problem than we think, because just as I anthropomorphize the earworm, so the earworm is earworm-morphizing me. When I hold a cup, the cup is cup-morphizing my fingers as much as I anthropomorphize the cup. Who is in charge of whom? Things appear to be veering. The problem is located in thinking that *only* anthropomorphism (rather than that plus cup-morphism or earworm-morphism) is going on: that there is only one reference frame in which things are happening. Nonhuman entities have some kind of agency, even some kind of imagination: the wet sand makes a poem about my feet when I step through it. Imagination is marvelously cheap and pervasive—there is no teleology in evolution, and consciousness has been hugely overvalued as a special teleological bonus prize for being "complex" or "highly evolved." Cups, viruses, my hair, parts of me, all apprehend, other things apprehend things in a way that never quite coincides with them. I am anthropomorphizing Hess's *Air Pressure Fluctuations*. But the piece also –morphizes me. We cannot police the gap between being and appearing. We cannot restrict it to one place in the universe—the gap between humans and everything else. Reality is riddled with trillions of ontological cracks.

From this point of view, the criticism that capitalism reduces things to objects is disingenuously anthropocentric, because it is based on the idea that being an object is the worst thing that could happen to you, because objects underlie appearances and are bland and gapless. The commodification of everything is not the problem. The problem is *the metaphysics of presence*, namely the idea that a thing differs from its appearance in some uncomplicated way such that to exist is to be constantly present "beneath" appearance. Things

are lumps decorated with various kinds of accidental candy such as color or sound.

The notion of commodification as such relies on this metaphysics, which has five basic features. First, we have the idea that underlying an appearance is some deeper, more real, more substantial entity. Secondly, there is the idea that we can subtract appearance and get that entity. Thirdly, that such an entity consists in a constant presence, despite appearances. And fourthly, that philosophy consists in finding the dotted line between being and appearance, and the right kind of scissors.

But fifth and most importantly, the metaphysics of presence relies on a consistently accepted single reference frame; the anthropocentric one. Things only appear to be constantly "there" as a function of a certain (human) gaze. Transcending anthropocentrism thus implies transcending the metaphysics of presence.

## Flu of Coexistence

The difference between high critical art and kitsch might then be a difference not in quality but of quantity: more or less earworms, more or less susceptibility to earworms, more or less earworm virulence. The idea that critical music is to be valued because it is hard to follow or remember has as its logical shadow the idea that kitsch is bad because it is easy to follow and remember. Because it has already stuck in your head. Because it is a successful earworm. On this view, critical music can only produce more or less impotent earworms. Elitist aesthetic judgment is not only politically violent, but also logically impossible. But acting as if one can delete pleasure and desire altogether, that the problem is *being compelling*, is also logically impossible.

Thus the tactic of opposing the aesthetic dimension with all one's might never works. The person who says, "I only listen to noise music because I can't remember any of it" is deluding themselves about what is happening, and about the political effectiveness of this tactic, if that is she or he is keen to transcend the world of commodification. As with spinach, or the idea of worthy or good art in general, impotent earworm production is focused on collapsing a rift that cannot be collapsed: the rift between existing and<sup>13</sup> appearing, which constitutes the semiotic-physical loop of an earworm. Thus a striving towards non-existent Nature is still happening in the most supposedly anti-Natural, demystificatory, critical high art. This striving cannot be completed for reasons given, and it only reproduces an idea virus of its own, the metaphysics of presence. Such a striving seeks impossibly to resolve an implicit contradiction at the heart of what it means to be a thing.

Since as outlined (via Gödel) reduced susceptibility to earworms is only ever temporary, it would be better to concentrate one's attention on making more potent earworms, earworms that could overcome Justin Bieber, for instance. The struggle is not against the aesthetic as such, as if it could be stripped off of things. This is a magical war of spell and counter-spell. Rather than trying to get rid of its worm like nature, music might revel in it—it might simply try to be *more* compelling than Justin Bieber, to affect our susceptibility to a greater extent, which is to say, to work with our fragility—which in turn is to say exploit the invisible gap that worms within us between what we are and how we appear.

This tactic puts some detail into the idea that the trouble with capitalism is not that it is too pleasurable (the standard religious view of consumerism) but that it is *not pleasurable enough*. This is another sense in which commodification is not the problem. It is not that we now *desire* things where once we healthily *needed* things. Such a notion also recapitulates a metaphysics of presence—needing is wanting only what is proper, namely what appears within a rigidly defined reference frame. So the notion of need is caught in anthropocentrism. Once we allow other reference frames to be as valid

as the human one, it becomes unclear what propriety of any kind means anymore.

While capitalism itself is often held to have undermined much of the metaphysics of presence, the form this undermining takes leaves a striking part of that metaphysics intact—the form is demystification. High critical art shares with capitalism this demystifying urge: “All that is solid melts into air.”<sup>14</sup> What they have in common is demystification, which just is the elimination of contradictions, most deeply at the level of being versus appearing. This eliminative strategy actually preserves the metaphysics of presence, by positing, however transcendental, beneath or behind appearances, a real that is more constantly present than appearance. A subtractive real.

The ideological mode of demystification is called cynical reason. But the persistence of earworms force us to question cynical reason. Earworms, however, are about susceptibility, which is about what one could call *ingenuousness or sincerity*.<sup>15</sup> Sincerity means not that you must have a straight face all the time and never laugh. Sincerity means that you are always shrink wrapped in your phenomena. You cannot achieve escape velocity from them, because when you try, there you are, doing that—or in the words of the great phenomenologist Buckaroo Banzai, “Wherever you go, there you are.”<sup>16</sup> Cynical reason thinks that it can achieve escape velocity from sincerity. But this is strictly impossible, because a thought requires a mind, and so on: there are intractable symbioses involved in existing and thinking.

The point then is not to try (and inevitably fail) to achieve escape velocity from things. The point would be to try to create earworms that we can live with. The point would be to examine the earworms we already have and, if we don't like them, try to create some kind of allergy medicine for tolerating them. In turn, philosophy should get out of the metaphysical boundary policing business, and into the allergy medicine business, if it is going to carry on in an ecological age.

An earworm is a profoundly environmental entity, because it is a physical being that is also a story about  $1 + n$  other physical beings. Thoughts, minds, earworms, ears and worms coexist in an aesthetic-causal configuration space. Ecology, which just is post-modernity, means: preserving as many entities and relationships as possible. And this means preserving as many gaps between being and appearing as possible. This means attuning ourselves to the difference between what things are and how they appear—which when we do it not just in thought but in physical practice, amounts to preserving the beings that currently exist on Earth. The job of philosophy in all this is to make us susceptible to susceptibility, which is the ability to tune. We can become more and more susceptible, catching the flu of nonviolent coexistence.

## About the Author

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## Endnotes

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- 2 Edmund Husserl, “Prolegomena to All Logic,” *Logical Investigations*, tr. J.N. Findlay, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.1–161.
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- 5 Felix Hess, *Air Pressure Fluctuations* (Edition RZ, 2001).
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- 10 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 383–409.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality,” tr. Barry Stocker with Forbes Matlock, *Angelaki* 5.3 (December, 2000), 3–18.
- 12 “On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems,” tr. Martin Hirzel, <http://www.research.ibm.com/people/h/hirzel/papers/canon00-goedel.pdf>, accessed 3 April 2014.
- 13 I capitalize Nature precisely to de-nature it, in other words to highlight the fact that we are dealing here with a concept rather than with a reality.
- 14 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 1987), 12; William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 19.
- 15 José Ortega y Gasset, *Phenomenology and Art*, tr. Philip W. Silver (New York: Norton, 1975), 63–70; Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 39, 40, 135–143, 247.
- 16 W.D. Richter, dir., *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the Eighth Dimension* (20th Century Fox, 1984).