

Hugues Dufourt and the Origins of His World

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the foundational principles of the spectral attitude, examining the contributions of Hugues Dufourt in relation to his training as a philosopher and his composition *L'Origine du monde* (2004). The chapter considers Gustave Courbet's painting of the same name, as the intersection of these two works provides a vantage point from which to consider a history of realism and functional aesthetics. In a discussion informed by the writings of Martin Seel, the chapter suggests how Dufourt, by linking his composition to Courbet, directs the listener to interact with objects of sensuous perception and objects of aesthetic imagination, with an eye towards elective affinities among artists that transcend time, place, and style.

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Origins

Occasionally, one reads a description casting doubt on Hugues Dufourt (b. 1943) as a “real” spectralist. The perception of his *faux* status may be traced to Castanet's labeling of him as such¹ and references to him as “not really a spectral composer.”² These demurrers argue that Dufourt has rarely used the analysis of pre-existing acoustic objects as the basis for his works. He has largely avoided structures literally derived from the overtone series, and he has never specifically attempted to approximate spectra in his compositions in the manner of his contemporaries Gérard Grisey (1946–98) and Tristan Murail (b. 1947). But an unduly excessive emphasis on his techniques and insufficient consideration of the philosophical foundations of his compositional aesthetic have led to a disregard of the factors that define Dufourt as, perhaps, the *Ur*-spectralist. More than Murail, Grisey, Michaël Levinas, and Roger Tessier, Dufourt's contributions to spectralism were and continue to be defined by his interests in philosophy and the history of music theory. These abiding fascinations were fundamental to his recognition of *musique spectrale* as an aesthetic of particular historical import. One must come to terms with the philosophical scope of the spectral attitude to appreciate Dufourt's contributions and to engage with a

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line of inquiry that, paradoxically, has placed him at a conspicuous distance from the movement he crucially defined.

As articulated in his 1977 *Selbstportrait*, Dufourt always conceived of himself as a composer-philosopher. Prior to his studies at the Conservatoire in Geneva with pianist Louis Hiltbrand (1961–68, assistant to Dinu Lipatti), and Jacques Guyonnet (1965–70, a student of Pierre Boulez), Dufourt earned his first academic degree in philosophy. While organizing concerts of contemporary music in his native Lyon, Dufourt simultaneously pursued certificates in morality and sociology, psychology, history and philosophy, and philosophy and logic (1963–64). After 1966, he studied with Georges Canguilhem (1904–95), whose revolutionary writings on the institutionalization of knowledge—including *Le Normal et le pathologique* (1943/52) and *La Connaissance de la vie* (1952)—influenced Pierre Bourdieu and Gilles Deleuze. In the 1970s, while producing concerts with L'Itinéraire (1975–81), Dufourt maintained strong ties with the people and ideas with which he engaged at the University of Lyon II. Collaborating with a host of ensembles and composing emblematic works that distilled the spectral attitude for first-generation audiences (*Erewhon*, *Antiphysis*, *Saturne*, *Surgir*), Dufourt continued to pursue academic projects at the Centre d'Information et de Documentation "Recherche Musicale," the École Normale Supérieure, the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the Sorbonne, the Ministries of Culture and Education, and IRCAM, as well as the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

All of Dufourt's artistic and scholarly endeavors have been colored by his philosophical training. In theory and practice, he has engaged with artefacts (those of others and those of his own creation) whose existence testifies to catastrophic changes in the arts and sciences. In the vein of Thomas S. Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962) and Michel Foucault (*Les Mots et les choses*, 1966), Dufourt has grappled with how ideas develop, mature, and supersede one another, exploring the paradigmatic shifts that alter how immediate experience is valued and described, and the conceptual frameworks that tether aesthetics to ideologies of scientific belief. This lineage is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the anthology *La musique spectrale: Une révolution épistémologique* (2014). It is fitting that Dufourt prefaces this volume with the phrase "la violence de l'art," a reference to Francis Bacon's *Novum organum scientiarum* (1620). In Bacon's time, mathematics, physics, and a new mechanics were redrawing the boundaries of an expanding knowledge base. The *Novum organum* defined the fundamentals of scientific experimentation, articulating a freshly plausible quest to uncover the "veiled secrets" of Nature and presenting a model for the modern researcher.³

Bacon heralded the advent of empirical investigations that would dramatically extend the powers of mankind, permitting earth's inhabitants a greater control over their environment. However, such scientific endeavors—even the practical advances associated with the compass, irrigation techniques, and the printing press—were seen as "violent" towards the natural world. Science's offense to Nature, the "torture of experimentation," was likened to physical violation in Bacon's 1607 treatise.⁴

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The new technologies do not, like the old, merely exert a gentle guidance over nature's course. They have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.⁵

As Nature's secrets were revealed, earthdwellers found their relation to their environment altered. The ability to understand the world according to systems of logical rules demystified experience. This had ramifications that extended beyond the practical. Acknowledging technology's impact on spiritual life, Bacon recognized the "disenchantment of the world," a concept which found modern expression in the writings of Max Weber. Indeed, Weber's conceptualization of "rationalization" would prove foundational to Dufourt's approach to spectral music, and later find explicit acknowledgement in Murail's *Les Désenchantement du monde* (2012).

"The increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives," Weber wrote.

It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that, if one but wishes, one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualisation means.⁶

Authorities such as Karl Jaspers, Weber's confidante, held that the concept of *die Entzauberung der Welt* came to Weber through Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), whose 1788 poem *Der Götter Griechenlands* refers to a "de-divinized nature" (*die entgötterte Natur*). Yet the concept of disenchantment imbued a larger intellectual tradition also influential on Weber: the lineage of Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). These German writers saw the mission of the artist as reenchancing the modern world through art, poetry, and music. Rilke described art's magic as an antidote "not against science per se but against the reductionism of all elements of life to scientific and technological solutions."⁷ His thought influenced Weber to the extent that his widow preceded her massive biography of him with an excerpt from Rilke's *Das Stundenbuch*. (Rilke himself attended one of Weber's lectures in November 1918.) Weber maintained that art (the erotic and aesthetic aspects of human existence) allowed an escape from the world of dead machines and bureaucracy, providing a form of salvation, especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism.

The anti-rationalist stance informed the endeavors of the composers of *L'itinéraire*'s first incarnation, who while decidedly engaged with technological rationalism assumed a stance that sought to suggest a liberation from over-intellectualization. This was a distinctive stance, in the waning decades of the twentieth-century, and in the world of institutionalized musical composition. In major European and American cultural centers, music

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composition had become, in spirit and method, inseparable from certain fields of scientific exploration. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of digital technology: a catalyst for advances in psychoacoustics and mass media. This same period also saw the growth of music theory as an independent discipline, as well as a concurrent industry dedicated to musical research, which became enmeshed with these other fields. These innovations seemed to promise a new era for music research. Theorists asserted that “the music of the future will emerge less from twentieth-century progressivist aesthetics than from newly acquired knowledge of the structure of musical perception and cognition.”⁸ Robert Cogan’s *New Images of Musical Sound* (1987) celebrated spectral analysis, proclaiming: “Only now, through a new synthesis of scientific and musical analysis, can we begin to probe the sonic enigma.”⁹ A review of this volume asserted that technology was bringing theorists “closer than ever to naming the unnameable in music.”¹⁰

Dufourt felt that the rationalization of contemporary music had come at a heavy price, and that musical creation had come to bear resemblance less to an artform and more to “an artificial experiment undertaken in the new environment of the laboratory.”¹¹ He expressed concern that the systemic association of art music with scientific exploration had undermined its evolution. Ironically, the increasing sophistication of music research had jeopardized the cultural status of music in the modern world.

Research requires of creation a kind of novelty that has no longer anything in common with art. Considered as a rational ploy, modern music is reduced to a kind of formal experiment and must submit to the imperialism of knowledge ... Musical creation linked to research appears doomed to production conditions as sterile as they are contrived. In this extraneous situation, musical creation is reduced to the condition of an experiment in knowledge.¹²

The early target of Dufourt’s critiques were the post-Darmstadt serialists, who propagated what Dufourt considered intellectualist doctrine, seeking validation in “the pristine, tireless realm of abstraction.”¹³ In contrast, he characterized spectral composers as privileging the individual’s immediate experience of the environment: “In art the individual is the only reality and groups do not count ... Creation takes off from the awareness of practical necessities and not from any ideology ...”¹⁴ Throughout his career, he would emphasize aspects of the musical experience that transcended conceptualization, questioning the value of theories designed to explicate the relations between concept and reality, or concept and percept, and suspicious of musical thought that “insists on passing itself off as science and, as a form of research, claims the theoretical and institutional status of science.”¹⁵ Dufourt grounded the nascent spectral attitude on a powerful historic foundation. Spectral music would express an aesthetic attitude towards re-enchantment and the restitution of sonic illusion. It would restore the integrity of the sensuously given, following the “tortures of experimentation” inflicted by the industries of digital technology, psychoacoustic research, institutionalized music theory, and mass media.

It is illuminating to examine the foundations of Dufourt’s spectral attitude in relation to his composition *L’Origine du monde* (2004), a piano concerto premiered at Strasbourg’s

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Festival Musica by the Ensemble Intercontemporain under Daniel Kawka, featuring the pianist Ancuza Aprodu. Inspired by the assertion that “music begins where painting ends”¹⁶ and proceeding with an eye towards its historical and aesthetic resonances, I will consider Gustave Courbet’s painting of the same name. The intersection of these two works provides a vantage point from which to consider a history of realism and functional aesthetics. In a discussion informed by the writings of Martin Seel, I will suggest how Dufourt, by linking his composition to Courbet, directs the listener to interact with objects of sensuous perception as well as objects of aesthetic imagination, with an eye towards elective affinities among artists that transcend time, place, and style. Particular figures who step forward include Canguilhem and Hiltbrand, mentors who directly contributed to Dufourt’s conception of musical production “as a process of self-creation that does not solely depend on what knowledge can give in isolation.”¹⁷ The examination of this musical work and this painting reveals something about the foundational principles of the spectral attitude, which transcend compositional technique.

Realism and Violence

L’Origine du monde (1866) was commissioned by the diplomat Khalil Bey, an Egyptian educated in Paris who held posts in Paris, Athens, St. Petersburg, and Vienna. A well-known cosmopolitan, Bey was referred to by Théophile Gautier as “ostensibly the first Easterner, the ‘first child of Islam,’ to enter the elite circles of the Second Empire France.”¹⁸

In 1856, Bey came into contact with Courbet at the World Exposition, at an exhibit of contemporary work from which the painter’s paintings were conspicuously absent. Courbet’s realism had already proved influential in the artworld, but the Exposition’s jury had rejected his submissions (*Un enterrement à Ornans* and *L’Atelier du peintre*) for their overt politicism. This was not without precedent. At the Paris Salon of 1850, *Un enterrement à Ornans*, the scene of a burial in the painter’s village, had been dismissed. *L’Atelier du peintre* featured similarly humble subject matter; it was a portrait of Courbet himself, casually posing with models, friends, and local tradespeople. In both instances, critics took issue with Courbet’s realist depictions of common people and daily life, which provocatively granted historic specificity to largely anonymous subjects. Ordinary events were depicted on a grand scale previously reserved for the mythic and aristocratic. Critics found it reprehensible that his formidable artistic skills would be devoted to such mundane subject matter.

Upon viewing Courbet’s *L’Après-dînée à Ornans*, one spectator complained that “no one could drag art into the gutter with greater technical virtuosity.”¹⁹ Paul Mantz, critic for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and a champion of Delacroix, referred to Courbet’s *Les Baigneuses* as “one of the grossest examples of reality.”²⁰ The language with which the painter’s works were received is indicative of their perceived social threat. The hostile critical response may have been exacerbated by the inflammatory language of Courbet’s supporters, like the politician Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who wrote: “It is to the entire world that Courbet says through his painting: ‘You are a bunch of lechers and hypocrites;

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I know you; I know what you want ... you are not hungry for natural beauty but for dirt.'"²¹

Rejected by the jury and motivated by financial as well as aesthetic concerns, Courbet exhibited his paintings near the Exposition grounds, in a pavilion of his own design. He charged admission and distributed a written manifesto ("Le Réalisme") to his guests.

I have studied, apart from any preconceived system and without biases, the art of the ancients and the moderns. I have no more wished to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor was it my intention, moreover, to attain the useless goal of art for art's sake. No! I simply wanted to draw forth from a complete knowledge of tradition the reasoned and independent understanding of my own individuality ... in a word to create living art, that is my goal.²²

Nearly a decade later, in the early 1860s, Bey left his diplomatic duties to devote himself to collecting.

Bey is often described as a collector of erotica, but this is not wholly accurate. He was determined to acquire works of value from painters who represented major traditions and suggested future aesthetics, and his collection included both landscapes and nudes. Lacking neither connections nor resources, Bey amassed a museum-worthy collection of 124 paintings, which he notoriously assembled and liquidated in less than three years. Among French painters from the first half of the nineteenth century, virtually every notable name was included. Many were represented by major works, most of which would have been included in any serious anthology of the finest French pictures of the nineteenth century.²³ Critically, Bey's collection exemplified the conflicts embodied by idealistic and realistic depictions of the female form. Some of his nudes (Proudhon's "dirt") were considered highly erotic, such as those of Ingres and Manet. Others, like Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, represented the new realism ("natural beauty"). Together, they revealed no mere penchant for erotica, but a sophisticated engagement with contemporaneous aesthetic debates and an awareness of their political and social ramifications.

Perhaps no painting better captures the radical implications of realism better than *L'Origine du monde*. As determined by the painter and his patron, the subject was female genitalia, presented without allegory or metaphor and rendered with photographic detail. Bey provided the title and most likely specified the size of the canvas which, for Courbet, was smaller than usual.²⁴ The Irish model Johanna Hiffernan (b. ca. 1842), muse and mistress of James McNeill Whistler, is widely believed to have posed for the portrait in 1865, while on holiday with Courbet, Whistler, and Manet at the seaside resort of Trouville. During this visit, Courbet began work on *Jo, la belle Irlandaise*; documentation linking these paintings is provided by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, in whose permanent collection *Jo* resides. Courbet's presence on the trip is documented in Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville* (1865), initially called *Courbet—on Sea Shore* and now housed in Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

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The completed *L'Origine du monde* placed its viewer in a precarious position, demanding an unusually public confrontation with “the terrifying eroticism of undisguised sex.”²⁵ In Bey’s Paris residence, it was hidden behind a curtain and rarely unveiled. Some critics who wrote about the painting admitted that they had never actually seen it. In 1889, Edmond de Goncourt praised *L'Origine du monde* yet qualified his evaluation of “this painting that I’ve never seen” (“cette toile, que je n’avais jamais vue”). Its suppression continued to the extent that it was thought lost, particularly during the Second World War, when it was taken to Hungary, seized first by the Nazis and then by the Soviets. After the war, it was purchased by Jacques Lacan, who hid it upon the request of his wife. Even today, curators fear the painting’s effect on museum-goers. In 2008, when *L'Origine du monde* travelled to New York for a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, it was exhibited behind a partition, “prudishly.”²⁶

Shrouding the painting reflects an attempt to avoid the “violence” that encountering it suggests. There is no question that an aura of violence inheres in the act of unveiling what is traditionally kept secret. The metaphorical violence inherent in Courbet’s revelation of the “Lady Jane” relates analogously to Bacon’s unveiling of Nature, as de-mystification. Yet the violence is not restricted to the treatment of the subject stripped bare, but extends to the observer, who is stripped of illusions. A non-negotiable quality inheres: the viewer is denied conventional distance from something previously thought inaccessible, and no safe or mutually agreed upon interpretation is offered. That which is revealed cannot be unseen; it cannot again become unknowable in the same way. *L'Origine du monde* exposes the subject but also, and perhaps moreso, reveals the vulnerabilities of its beholder. The encounter demonstrates *la violence de l’art*. Although metaphorical, this violence has the power to recast the beholder’s perceptions of reality.

Measured in terms of a strict and literal concept, it is always a *metaphorical* violence with which art attempts to overwhelm its recipient. With just slight exaggeration it can be said that, in this meaning, a moment of violence is inherent in all art. Its works aim at an animation that takes beholders for a short time out of the certainties and self-evident truths of bodily and mental orientation and understanding and thereby brings about a welcome disturbance of their perception and understanding.²⁷

In his quest to create a “living art,” Courbet addressed his viewer aggressively. Dufourt, in linking his *L'Origine du monde* to Courbet’s, acknowledges a similar agenda. He intends that his music trigger a transfer of energy from the bodies of the performer and instrument to that of the listener. His aesthetic goal is to establish a context in which perceptual priority is given to sound’s immediate experience, not its abstraction or representation. Aiming for this aforementioned “animation,” Dufourt seeks to momentarily overcome his listener’s certainties, orientations, and understandings. To do so, he also presents his materials in a realist manner without appealing to mechanisms of metaphor, allegory, or narrative.

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One might be tempted to identify Dufourt's *L'Origine du monde* as an example of musical ekphrasis, defined in contrast to program music as "a representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium."²⁸ The accepted conception of ekphrasis hinges on three factors: an original text functioning as source for artistic representation, a visual representation of that text, and a re-presentation of that text in another poetic language. Yet it is problematic to identify Dufourt's works as such, as his goal is not the representation, or re-presentation, of the original. "Dufourt has no interest in sonic ekphrasis ..." wrote a reviewer of *Lucifer d'après Pollock* (2001) and *Voyage par-delà les fleuves et les montes* (after Fang K'uan, 2010). "When Dufourt takes a particular painting as his starting point, it's rather the painting's intellectual ambience, its technical and aesthetic ramifications, that inform the compositional process."²⁹ Dufourt seeks to create bridges among artefacts, drawing attention not so much to their inner correspondences as the forces and energies by which they are animated (physical and cultural), the richness of their affordances, and the opportunities for aesthetic engagement they provide.

Often, the titles suggest these bridges. Notably, Dufourt has always titled his works in advance. It is his first act of composition. The title is the starting point, in his own words a "Proustian madeleine" suggesting the work's sensibility and orientation.³⁰ It neither reflects nor determines musical content but rather establishes its context, functioning "to unleash the works' technical-centripetal resonances, their historical 'force-fields.'"³¹ The role of Dufourt's titles exceeds that of illustration or commentary, historical reference, or nostalgic gesturing. Instead, they are mechanisms that set the scene for processes of his own creation, whose end result imbues them with a new sense and "justifies" their choice.

In works too numerous to fully recount in this context, Dufourt's titles reveal his affinities with creative artists of diverse aesthetics and media. Many refer to painters, such as *La Tempesta d'après Giorgione* (1976), *Le Philosophe selon Rembrandt* (1992), *Le Déluge d'après Poussin* (2001), *La Maison du sourd* (after Goya, 2001), *Les Chasseurs dans la neige d'après Breugel* (2001), *Les Chardons d'après Van Gogh* (2009), *La Supplice de Marsyas d'après Titian* (2018), *L'Atelier rouge d'après Matisse* (2020), and *Les deux saules d'après Manet* (2020). Others reveal Dufourt's interest in writers such as Samuel Butler (*Erewhon*, 1972–76), John Milton (*These Livid Flames*, 2014), Arthur Rimbaud (*L'éclair d'après Rimbaud*, 2014), and William Faulkner and Emily Vermeule (*On the Wings of the Morning*, 2012). Still other titles nod to composers, such as *La ligne gravissant la chute: Hommage à Chopin* (2008) and *Tombeau de Debussy* (2018). In all instances, Dufourt's titles evidence a desire to locate his work within a history of systems that define eras and theories of knowledge and experience. The knowledge of this history supplements (but does not supplant) the visceral, immediate experience of his music.

The title of *L'Origine du monde* renders explicit Dufourt's empathy for Courbet's realist project. The work dates from a fifteen-year period (ca. 2000–2015) in which Dufourt created substantial works for piano, including the concerti *L'Afrique d'après Tiepolo* (2005) and *On the Wings of the Morning* (2012), the duo *Soleil de proie* (2005), and the solos *Vent d'automne* (2011), *Le Fontaine de cuivre après Chardin* (2014), and *Reine Spannung*

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(2015), as well as *Rastlose Liebe* and *Erlkönig*. Proceeding methodically from work to work, Dufourt devised intricate choreographies of physical movement, theoretically cataloguing and practically exhausting all possible gestures the human body was capable of producing from the keyboard. He was inspired by Immanuel Kant's *Opus postumum* (1804), which addressed physicality (rather than metaphysics) and the categorization of environmental forces such as fluidity, rigidity, and cohesion. He was also influenced by the mathematician René Thom (1923–2002), whose writings on topologies and the interaction of forces and energies (notably *Stabilité structurelle et morphogénésis*, 1972) laid the foundation for catastrophe theory. Dufourt attempted the comprehensive exploration of the dynamic procedure of writing for the piano,³² seeking to create musical environments in which continuous actions contribute to a sonic environment of discontinuous change. Like Courbet, whose epic canvases elevated largely anonymous subjects, Dufourt presents the ordinary, even mundane, on a grand scale.

Indeed, in his notes on the *L'Origine du monde*, "a real-time spectrogram analysis of the piano's myriad acoustical traits,"³³ Dufourt speaks almost exclusively to its acoustic processes and qualities, with no mention of "higher" meaning. No information is provided regarding any kind of ideological orientation. Rather, he stresses dynamics, motions, and energies. Dufourt focuses on the sensuously given nature of the materials, which are brash and dazzle, with language emphasizing the immediacy of the experience: the singular perception and impression of forces at play. He describes how the ensemble's extensive percussion battery (including Tibetan and Japanese, gongs, vibraphone, bell tree, tam-tam, and cymbals) enhances the piano's resonance to convey a sense of timbral elasticity.

The treatment of the instrumental ensemble often resembles that of a synthesized sound being integrated into the piano resonance as if into a sphere of coloured potentialities It behaves like the outcome of a single malleable force eroding away its surroundings, developing its own setting and shaping its expansion like an indeterminate organisational and developmental power. The scheme is to infer evolving forms, articulated motions, and to give the listener, with singular perception, the impression of a process unfolding according to laws of generative dynamism.³⁴

Like Grisey, who merits significant chapters in *La Musique spectrale*, Dufourt conceived an "ecology of sound."³⁵ The first-generation spectral composers were united in their search for musical expression through the material itself. And while their use of ecological rhetoric has been construed as a metaphorical and arguably opportunistic use of language tied to post-1968 leftist politics,³⁶ it also cannily situated the development of spectral thought amid the many ecological and environmental philosophies that emerged in the late twentieth century. In retrospect, the emergence of spectral music can be related to the rise of ecological psychology, the response to cognitive psychology associated with the writings of James J. Gibson, including *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966) and *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979); and while ecological psychological perspectives do not deny the existence or function of cognitive processes, they

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maintain that something beyond the cognitive-psychological component is integral to the aesthetic appreciation of environments. The development of spectral attitudes in music can also be related to ecological aesthetics, which emphasize an enhanced awareness of the connectivities, relations, and events, and the unfolding of reality on different levels and scales. The contemporaneous emergence of the spectral attitude thus reflected a far-reaching paradigmatic shift.

Crucially, ecological stances dismiss the hard distinction between natural and cultural environments. As one beholds the beauty of the sunset or the ocean's majesty, the phenomena of the natural world resonate with their beholder as do works of art.

It is important to recognize the cultural specificity of perception, but since for human beings *every* circumstance and experience is cultural, there is no basis on which to propose some kind of primary pre-cultural experience characterized by spurious immediacy ... The same set of principles, therefore, can account for the ways in which perceivers pick up information from all parts of the environment – cultural and natural.³⁷

The early spectral attitude was in line with other ecological approaches which emphasized multi-sensory engagement with nature and the mutuality between organisms and their natural and cultural environments. Both Grisey and Dufourt were preoccupied with the opportunities for perception and sensation *musique spectrale* might afford; privileging the idea of sound as something animate, they sought to explore in their music what sound becomes in time, emphasizing the immediate apprehension of music as something forming, not as something formed. Dufourt and his colleagues placed a premium on perceptual immediacy, encouraging their listeners to contemplate their environment, relying on intuition—rather than to search for conflicts within it, seeking to resolve them.

As a philosopher uniquely attuned to recognize the historical import of the spectral attitude, Dufourt identified personally with this paradigm shift, which took place in his formative years and directly pertained to his scholarly orientation. Indeed, his ecological attitude can be traced to his early studies with Canguilhem, a physician who radically defined “health” as the ability of the individual to adapt to the challenges of the environment and linked “disease” to the inability to tolerate change.³⁸ Canguilhem's most striking contribution was the challenge he posed to mechanistic and reductionist approaches to biological medicine. In determining diagnosis and treatment, he emphasized the importance of context and privileged the qualities of individual feeling over biochemical and cellular abnormalities expressed quantitatively. “Context is critical,” he asserted, “because ... evaluating the environment defines one's state of health or disease through one's adaptability ... The total environment now becomes an equal partner with the whole individual in understanding the genesis of illness.”³⁹ Canguilhem's influence extended beyond the field of medicine, due in part to his early and passionate support of Foucault (whose thesis he oversaw) and Lacan.

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Canguilhem's ecological, contextualist attitude grounded Dufourt's. Like Canguilhem (and Courbet), Dufourt granted specificity and importance to subjects previously not considered worthy of discussion or evaluation. He preferred to consider the immediate experience of the individual, the affordances of that individual's environment, and the mutuality of that relationship. Ultimately, Dufourt would come to view not only spectral music but all of music history through an ecological realist lens.

Resonances

Jann Pasler has analyzed Dufourt's *L'Afrique* and *L'Asie d'après Tiepolo* from the perspective of narrative. She has suggested how, in these compositions, Dufourt voices an implicit critique of Western history and imperialism.⁴⁰ While one can appreciate some specifics of this analysis, the value of establishing point-for-point correspondences among musical timbres, events, textures, and processes and political or cultural messages is not clear. These works do not function programmatically; it seems unnecessarily reductive, for example, to state that "shrieking glissandi in the strings, scraping up and down the vibraphone—a colonization of the entire sound universe—suggest the conflict of life on earth, driven by desire, frustration, anger, and other strong emotions."⁴¹ To describe these works as examples of program music is to rationalize them from within. Yet Dufourt's texted practice suggests looking, instead, beyond the object at hand, exercising the imagination in ways that are not rational, to bring about a field of contemplation rather than pursue a line of reasoning. In considering the historical resonances of his music, in light of his own orientation as composer-philosopher, the listener might instead pursue questions that cannot produce singular answers and correspondences, and which lead not towards representational schemes but remystification. To this end, I will examine some of the historical and aesthetic resonances of Dufourt's music.

Dufourt's *L'Origine du monde* makes several references to Olivier Messiaen. Its scoring, for piano soloist, winds, strings, and exotic percussion, pays homage to *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956), referenced by name on the fifth page of the score. The "sphere of coloured potentialities" to which Dufourt refers in his notes evokes Messiaen the synaesthete. Summoning Messiaen is canny and tactical for other reasons as well. Around the time of *Chronochromie* (1960) and *Les Couleurs de la cité celeste* (1963), Messiaen began publicly to justify his idiosyncratic approach to composition by appealing to a shared psychological reality. In discussing his compositional techniques, he spoke openly about his perception of timbral-harmonic complexes, asserting the real nature of his experiences and maintaining that the relationship between sound and color was "one that could be seen and heard by everyone."⁴² Choosing to neither rationalize nor intellectualize his methods, he articulated an ecological perspective on the mutuality of the beholder and the artwork in context. In so doing, he elegantly disengaged himself from dogmatic debates and returned the discussion to topics of sensation and intuition.

The mutual, reciprocal relationship between the work of art and its beholder, which Messiaen embraced, is a mode of exchange that has been referred to as "sensuous given-

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ness.”⁴³ Seel defines aesthetic objects as those that, in their “appearing” (how they present themselves to their audience) transcend what is conceptually determinable about their image, feel, or sound. There is a difference between how the listener perceives sound on a psychoacoustic level and how the listener consorts with sound as an aesthetic object. The former mode of perception may be explained, with varying degrees of success, through psychoacoustic research; appeals can be made to cognitive universals and empirical tests that demonstrate, to some degree, causality. But the latter mode of aesthetic engagement involves processes that may necessarily transcend conceptualization, involving sensuously accessible phenomena and their resonance among the bodies that make and receive music. Aesthetic objects are those that are given in a sensuous manner, and to be engaged with and appreciated in that same spirit. I suggest that the aesthetic experience of spectral music is, ideally, not about what can be abstracted from the source of stimulation (structure, signification, or meaning) but rather about the stimulating qualities of the material itself, that which is immediately experienced, in which lies what Dufourt calls “the distinctive truth of ephemeral expression” (“la vérité typique de l’expression périssable”). He cites Canguilhem: “That which is fiction for the scholar—qualitative ‘appearance’—remains the direct stimulant, as the material of every artwork.”⁴⁴ This material resonates in context. Aesthetic perception is rendered no less substantial or tangible.

Like Courbet’s painting, Dufourt’s *L’Origine du monde* sets the stage for aesthetic resonating. Aesthetic resonating occurs in situations in which traditional forms have been dissolved, in which the work of art prompts dramatic processes of reorientation. When conventional interpretive strategies and learned schemas are rendered ineffective, and traditional narratives fail to satisfy, the perceiver engages with the work in a process of reformation. The work creates an aesthetic context that lays bare the dynamics and energies of the encounter for which it is a catalyst. It is distinguished by both being the process and revealing itself as that same process.

What the work of art reveals in this way is above all *its* processes, not a general, extra- or transartistic process of becoming and passing away. The work of art brings nothing to light; it brings to appearing, and it brings first of all itself to appearing, in such a way that we the beholders can frequently find *something* brought to appearing. The forces operating on or in the work of art are *its* forces – produced by the construction of the work, operative in the dynamics of its appearing.⁴⁵

The real, immediate quality of the encounter with *L’Origine du monde* relates to Dufourt’s desire to locate the expressive power of music in “its ability to present non-objective themes endowed with implicit energy.”⁴⁶ Aesthetic resonating takes place when the listener becomes engaged with the reality that the music creates. In this work, the sounding reality is one of near-ceaseless activity, characterized by violent attacks in the piano (single tones in the lowest registers, dense chords in the middle tessitura) which trigger shimmering volleys of gongs and cymbals. The air trembles in the presence of vibraphone tremolos, string harmonics wavering in their highest registers, and the hooting and rat-

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ting of low woodwinds. The timbre of the “solo” piano itself is drowned in a wash of in-harmonicities. As soloist and accompaniment constantly subsume each other, Dufourt’s work embodies “the only *concertante* paradigm that accurately reflects his Courbet-inspired philosophical researches.”⁴⁷

In this experience, too, nothing but the sensuous appearing of the work is opened; no extra-artistic meaning for which the work could serve as confirmation is revealed. The work is the source of *its own* energy of appearing; only in this way can it also bear witness to other energies, if the case may be.⁴⁸

The ensemble unleashes the energy of resonating. It is what it reveals. It reveals what it is. The listener does not become part of or lost in the work but exists as part of its kinetic environment.

Collection

In 1954, on the recommendation of Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan acquired Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde*. Like Khalil Bey, Lacan was a collector. His collecting, however, was less deliberate. He assembled watercolors, oil paintings, sculptures, and original editions. He also gravitated towards furniture, archeological artefacts, bespoke clothing, and custom-made shoes. He fancied furs and ingots of gold. He filled notebooks with his neologisms, initially inspired by *Finnegans Wake* but later descending into a “verbal frenzy ... an abuse of language that turns thought into a pile of words, into delirium.”⁴⁹ Lacan stockpiled his own writings as well.

He therefore preserved the typed volumes of his seminars and the off-prints of his articles, now become unobtainable, in his desk drawers, as if he never managed to detach himself from them. He looked at them lamenting Or distributed them by way of reward, with subtle dedications or ambiguous confidences. He exhibited them secretly, like a hidden treasure similar to the wide-open genitals of *L’Origine du monde*.⁵⁰

Lacan was a hoarder. Yet the objects he collected, like the stolen epistle in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” were less of interest in themselves than they were powerful for what they signified. Lacan’s repetitive collecting was a way to assuage his own fears. In the terminology of Freudian psychoanalysis, which he applied to Poe’s short story in his 1956 seminar, it functioned as a means to seduce his own despair. Collecting was a ritual performed to distance uncomfortable truths, unwanted realities, and secrets:

The portable pantheon of painters, writers, and musicians that Dufourt has established (most obviously, through his work titles) suggests another kind of collection, but one generated by a different impulse. Dufourt’s “collection” of works musical, visual, and literary was born of the need to neither possess the unattainable nor to resurrect the past. Rather, through his collecting, Dufourt makes explicit the origins of his world, suggesting the creative lineage from which he sees each

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work as descendent. Each of his compositions offers a novel environment for immediate experience. Yet each has unique origins, and a genesis Dufourt feels obliged to share. It is postulated that art is a thought, an expression of the world or a translation of the world, and also that it has a history which also must be taken into account. The composer is obliged to assume an explicit and critical role. The function of the composer transforms. Little by little, it officially becomes that of the philosopher.⁵¹

As becomes apparent, Dufourt conceives his compositions as objects of aesthetic consciousness. They are given to the listener within the environs of sensuous comprehension for immediate perception. Situating the individual experience on a grand scale, they are titled so as to lead towards aesthetic imagination and aesthetic projections of the imagination. The artworks that Dufourt draws together—such as Courbet's painting and Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*—become objects of sensuous imagination; not inherently present at the moment of their apprehension, they are made present through the acts of remembering, anticipating, or fantasizing appropriation.⁵² In his compositional practice, Dufourt welcomes a double presence: the object of perception and the object of sensuous imagination, which engage in processes of mutual, reciprocal contextualization.

Considering an ecological approach to the experience of spectral compositions by Murail and Grisey, three levels of engagement have been described, in which the listener is invited to contemplate the music itself, to experience the atmosphere it evokes, and to imagine musical connotations.⁵³ Spectral attitudes towards composition and perception are distinguished by these contemplative, corresponsive, and imaginative perspectives. Taking Dufourt's *L'Origine du monde* as an example, a world of timbral distortion, elasticity, and warping is offered to its beholder as an environment for sensuous perception. The listener is immersed in an environment characterized by the richly metallic tone colors of piano and percussion, whose jarring attacks are underscored by sustained tones and tremolos in strings and winds. Temporally and physically, the listener is suffused in the environment and aware of its emergent properties: not only processes of becoming and passing away but also interacting forces of erosion and accretion, and dynamic energies suggesting continuity, discontinuity, and rupture. Listeners perceive, respond to, and interpret these states of predictability and unpredictability on many levels, relating to their engagement and personal estimation of what the environment affords. Through the act of aesthetic imagination, listeners may also appreciate the rich historical resonances of *L'Origine du monde*, in a way that acknowledges Dufourt's and Courbet's affinities. Dufourt's music offers a portal between these two works, from which one might behold both in the context of a historical time contracted in upon itself.

Dufourt's deep connections to the musical past and obsession with relics can be traced to his mentor Louis Hiltbrand, a composer-pianist strongly convinced of the historical relevance of performance. At the Conservatoire, Hiltbrand's task was to prepare piano students for competitions and concert careers; his most successful include Domonique Merlet (b. 1938), Thérèse Dussaut (b. 1939), Danielle Laval (b. 1939), and Frank Lévy (b. 1939). Immersed in the music of Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, Chopin, Liszt,

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and Bartók,⁵⁴ Hiltbrand was sensitive to listeners' and performers' psychological ties to the historical repertoire and the associational strategies by which they fashioned themselves through their musical collections. In "Réflexions sur une vie musicale contemporaine" (1967), he articulated this perspective.

The literature of our musical patrimony has never been as intensely explored as it is at present; for the past fifty years, more or less, our Western world has become a vast museum where the artistic testimony of lost epochs or civilisations (or [those] that are in the process of disappearing) are presented in an effort to understand them. It is as though, in our present musical life, we need references to justify our existence.⁵⁵

To Hiltbrand, the musicians' role was to resurrect and commemorate the past. Dufourt proceeded, as a composer and philosopher, as if mindful of his mentor's aphorism: Memory is the future of the past ("La mémoire, c'est l'avenir du passé").⁵⁶ As a composer and philosopher, Dufourt would act as a caretaker in the vast museum of artistic testimony, enabling his audiences to interact with what he referred to, in his discussion of Hiltbrand, as "man's archaic inheritances, his deepest fears, his psychic residues of a bygone past."⁵⁷ His conception of the spectral attitude was thus fundamentally shaped by his fascination with the cyclical nature of history, particularly as relating to the historically post-modern, and his independent understanding of his own individuality born of an intense engagement with tradition. His musical works would provide environments in which listeners would engage with what ideas, as well as sounds, become.

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