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Immersed in Multiplicity: Subjective Time in a Time Crystal

abstract In this paper I look at “Peace for Triple Piano”, a video which represents a musical canon both in sound and image. I call this peculiar form, whose structure is endowed with symmetry in both time and space together, an AUDIOVISUAL CANON. Such a structure is what in physics is known as a TIME CRYSTAL. I argue that this time crystal creates a temporal interference

because, in this video, objects relate simultaneously to each other beyond the boundaries of what we commonly perceive as presence. Through a reading of Michel Serres, I propose a model to integrate this multiplicity of time based on hearing as opposed to listening. Finally, through Serres's concept of QUASI-OBJECT, I argue that this video, by making its audience integrate multiple networks, constructs a QUASI-AUDIENCE.

How would we perceive a space in which different temporalities overlap with each other and how would this affect our perception of time? The mathematicians and artists ViHart and Henry Segerman create such a virtual space in the music video "Peace for Triple Piano" (henceforth PfTP), where they visually represent a canon—an imitative compositional technique used in music. I call this peculiar form an AUDIOVISUAL CANON, the structure of which is endowed with symmetry in both time and space together. In this audiovisual canon, different present moments are

perceived as equally present, and this produces what I call a TEMPORAL INTERFERENCE. This paper will analyze this temporal interference in relation to questions of subjectivity. Drawing on Michel Serres, I propose a relational model of understanding subject and object based on the sense of hearing, one that attempts to integrate the multiplicity present in PfTP. I distinguish between hearing and listening to argue that, while listening is a practice in which the roles of subject and object are stable, hearing complicates this divide as it is inherently relational. This way of perceiving relationally brings me to the concept of the QUASI-OBJECT to argue that this audiovisual canon, by providing instructions on how it is to be navigated, turns the viewer-listener into its object, thus constructing what I call a QUASI-AUDIENCE.

This video performs a well-known canon—albeit of unknown origin—whose text is taken from the Roman Catholic Mass: "Dona Nobis Pacem" (Latin for "Give us peace"). A canon consists of one melody that is sung by multiple voices, each starting at a different moment, in such a way that all voices overlap in time, creating a harmony. This canon consists of three phrases and each phrase lasts twenty seconds. The video starts with the first phrase of the melody. When this voice arrives at the second phrase, another voice starts singing the melody from the beginning, overlapping with the first. This process repeats once again, adding a third voice. In other words, when the

three voices are singing, all three phrases are sounding simultaneously.

The first time I played this video, I encountered ViHart in a room, picking up some sheet music from a music-stand and sitting at what looks like two halves of a piano. She begins to sing and play the piano (fig. 1). I recognize that the round lines of the roof are signs of a distorted perspective; the shape of her hand reveals that the image I am seeing is not rectilinear but curvilinear. This image looks like part of a sphere projected onto two dimensions; in that case, the two halves of the keyboard are, actually, part of the same piano. This manipulation of perspective makes me feel self-reflexive about the way I make sense of these images: what kind of space is this?

Then, another person, Henry Segerman, appears in the frame. He comes in from the right side at the same time that ViHart gives him the sheet music and exits the frame, also from the right. Segerman hands the music back to her. Although I do not see ViHart, I can hear her from my right headphone, singing and playing some high keys on a piano. Wearing headphones makes me particularly sensitive to these technological manipulations: these sounds provide me with spatial information and, in turn, make me question the way I process this information. I ask myself whether there is another piano in the room. Then, I see her come back into the frame, hand a hammer to Segerman and sit back at the piano. She gives a sign and Segerman

uses the hammer to strike a triangle (fig. 2). This is the beginning of the canon's second phrase.

When ViHart starts singing the second phrase, I also hear the beginning of the first phrase, this time coming from the right headphone rather than from both. The second phrase is the only one in which the triangle is played. After Segerman hangs up the triangle he walks anticlockwise, leaves the hammer on the piano and walks out of the frame before the third phrase starts. I see ViHart in the video singing the third phrase, the lowest of all, at the same time that I hear the second phrase coming from my right headphone and the first one coming from my left headphone. My headphones continue to give me spatial information and I wonder what kind of space these sounds are creating.

A few seconds after the third phrase starts, I see ViHart entering the frame from the left side. But, wait a minute—I now see two ViHarts present in the video (fig. 3). The ViHart that just entered the frame places the sheet music on the music stand, plays some high keys on the piano, then takes the hammer that Segerman left and leaves the frame again. The ViHart that is still sitting on the stool takes the sheet music the other ViHart just left. At this moment, the canon and its choreography start all over again. How can this double presence of ViHart be explained? We should recall that ViHart left the frame during the first phrase. What we see now seems to correspond to the audio of that first phrase. This double presence is thus evidence

that this canon is not simply performed in sound, but also, somehow, in images. What technique makes this possible? And what kind of virtual spacetime is this technique creating?

The Multiple Presence of Objects

It was the strangeness of seeing two different presences of ViHart in the same frame that made me realize that there was more to see in this video: I discovered then that I was looking at a so-called 360° video. In a 360° video, we are able to drag the image of the video to look around the room where the video was made. When doing this we realize that by turning 360° we go around this room not once but three times. In other words, we need turn only 120° to go around the room once. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to each of these rooms as a sector. When turning from one sector to the next, we notice that each sector shows one different temporal version of the melody: in each sector the events are shifted twenty seconds in time, just like the different phrases of a canon. It becomes clear now that this video indeed visually performs the overlapping temporalities of this canon's musical form. The video technique used here creates what I call an audiovisual canon: a canon both in sound and image.

I perceive this space from an axis around which I rotate and, given the temporal difference between the sectors, I move not only in space but also in time.

The authors of this video explain in "The Making of 'Peace for Triple Piano'" that a structure with such characteristics is known in physics as a TIME CRYSTAL (Segerman). This is a structure which has a pattern that repeats itself in time and space *together*—in contrast to normal crystals which are structured in three-dimensional patterns that unfold only in space. The concept of the time crystal was first theorized in 2012 by Nobel Prize winner Franck Wilczek. Since then, experimental realizations of time crystals have been developed in two different laboratories in the Universities of Maryland and Harvard(1). PfTP uses this model to create an audiovisual technique that seeks to visually represent the overlapping temporalities of a musical canon. Strictly speaking, the time crystal is formed when the video enters a loop—between 01:00 and 03:00. During the loop, the video's structure results in a pattern endowed with symmetry in both time and space together. The time crystal contains three temporal versions of the footage of the events that took place outside the camera—what I will call room-

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(1) Here time crystal refers to a physical system and not to the concept of CRYSTAL OF TIME introduced by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema II: The Time Image* as a metaphor to theorize techniques used in cinema. For Deleuze, a crystal of time is an image that takes the viewer out of the actual world by presenting "two sides, actual and virtual at the same time" (69). This type of image condenses aspects of time by including both the actual (present) and the virtual (non-present) in it.

events—which repeat in a loop every minute. In other words, the room-events take place multiple times in this crystal at different moments and places. To navigate between these events, we can move in space, by dragging the image, and in time, by using the video progress bar. In this time crystal, space, and time are structured in such a way that, at any given sector in the video, the sector on the right shows the events that took place twenty seconds back in time, and the sector on the left shows the events that are about to take place, twenty seconds forward in time. This means that if we turn one sector to the right and go forward twenty seconds, we travel to another point in the crystal where we can see the same events taking place. The operations that allow us to move between equivalent moments in both time and space are called symmetries. Other symmetries are: moving two sectors to the right and going forward forty seconds; or moving one sector to the left and going backwards 20 seconds. In both cases we move towards the same event, or an equivalent one.(2) The set of operations used to navigate between equivalent events is called in mathematics a Symmetry group. This is another way of saying that the relation

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(2) The same thing would be true if we were to navigate the sheet music of this canon, having the three melodies written one under the other, and the edges of the page connected, forming a tube—the horizontal axis representing time and the vertical space.

between the events in this video has a precise group structure, an observation I will return to later.

Going around the sphere, I discover that while some objects are present three times, others are present twice, and the sheet music is present only once. I will refer to each of these as object-impressions. I prefer this term over impression of an object because the latter fails to account for the fact that impressions are not independent from the object itself, nor should they be reduced to it. We should also not consider object-impressions to be copies, because a copy implies the existence of an original, and in a time crystal all impressions are equally real and present. I also discover that while some objects (like ViHart and the triangle) stay in the same sector, others (like the sheet music, the hammer and Segerman) are able to travel from one sector to the next, either clockwise or anticlockwise. The fact that some objects move in between sectors makes me perceive this sphere not simply as three repeated versions of the same room-event but on a different level, as a unity in itself. In other words, we can say that we perceive these images as belonging to two distinct realities or networks. On one level, we perceive the time-crystal-events — the sphere as one system with its own characteristics — while on a different level, we recognize that the three sectors are different temporal versions of the room-events that took place in the particular room where this video was made. Therefore, this video shows a multiplicity of networks.

The question now is how we perceive this multiplicity. In the following frame, ViHart meets and looks in the direction of ViHart (fig. 4). ViHart-impressions are the only object-impressions in PfTP that are seen together in the same frame. Despite the fact that I see two of them, I know that they are two different temporal versions of the same ViHart-object. Nevertheless, they coexist, they show up together, they interact, they play the same piano, they even acknowledge each other. One is already included in the time of the other. Despite their time difference, they are equally present. They are the same and yet they differ. I call this an interference: a difference that strikes against, a noise in the channel of my perception. I will soon return to noise, but for now I define it as that which is perceived but which resists signification: noise is what must be filtered out in order to clearly perceive an object. It is what stands in between us and the object of our perception. In the case of this frame, the presence of the different ViHart-impressions stands between me and my sense of time, and it is in this way that I consider it to be an interference. How is it possible that in this time crystal we are able to perceive something as both one and more than one at the same time?

Subjective Time in a Time Crystal

This video is structured as a timecrystal. That is, a structure whose symmetries take place both in time

and space together. As mentioned above, the relation between these symmetries creates a group structure which is perceived by the viewer-listener as a multiplicity. In a time crystal, space and time behave in similar ways, and this leads to experiencing the present-moment as somehow shared between three different moments. All three present-moments share a place in the present-moment of the viewer-listener, who therefore perceives three different moments (objects) as equally present (as one). In other words, in this time crystal we are able to perceive an object as several impressions and still be able to make up for the fact that each impression, although complete in itself, is also part of a unity. Consequently, time perception becomes a matter of *relation*—of how things affect each other in the moment, rather than a matter of *being*—of the origin of things.

This time crystal I am trying to inhabit resists my understanding, interferes with my perception and makes me drift from the question of origins to the question of relations. Through a reading of Michel Serres, I propose that the sense of hearing is more apt than vision for the task of finding relations. In *Genesis*, first published in 1982, Serres writes: "I hear without clear frontiers, without divining an isolated source, hearing is better at integrating than analyzing, the ear knows how to lose track"(7). According to him, hearing involves much more than only the ears; it actually involves the whole body: all of the skin. That is to say

that hearing implies an immersion in a temporal space. It includes not only the object of our perception but also the network where we relate to that object. As a model, the sense of hearing is opposed to that of vision, through which the subject perceives a world from a point of view where they are not included. When we think, we become virtual and infinite; when we hear, we become embodied and finite. When we hear, we are immersed in spacetime. Once we start hearing the space around us, we realize that, in our perception, there is always background noise. For Serres, background noise is "the ground of our perception, absolutely uninterrupted, it is our perennial sustenance, the element of the software of all our logic" (7). Noise moves beyond the most important ontological divides: it "settles in subjects as well as in objects, in hearing as well as in space, in the observers as well as in the observed" (Serres 13). As I mentioned above, noise is an obstacle to perception, but it is also the condition of its possibility. Perception starts when the subject differentiates an object from the background noise — each object being one possibility out of the multiple, one possibility out of the set of all possible things. As soon as a phenomenon appears, it leaves the background noise so as to be perceived. Therefore, noise cannot be a phenomenon: "noise is not a matter of phenomenology, so it is a matter of being itself" (Serres 13).

Serres concludes the introduction of *Genesis* by saying that the "multiple had been thought, perhaps,

but it hadn't been sounded"(8). If we think multiplicity as pure difference, it follows that in multiplicity we cannot perceive or differentiate particular objects as the source of sound. Indeed, for Serres, multiplicity sounds to us like background noise. The fact that noise moves beyond the separation between subjects and objects means that noise is produced by both the object and the subject. In other words, noise is also the "trace of the observer"(61). The condition for being a subject, an observer, is that the s/he must make "less noise than the noise transmitted by the object observed"(61). Serres thus defines cognition as the "subtraction of the noise received and of the noise made by the subject"(61). If noise is also the trace of the observer, then hearing is a model of understanding that takes into account the noise that we, as subjects, produce in our relations. If pure multiplicity sounds like background noise, could time also be sounded? And if so, what would it sound like? Serres writes that he is:

> Well aware that time has no unity, no moment, no instant, no beginning, no end […] For all the times that I've been able to tell, all of them were unities. I am now attempting to rethink time as a pure multiplicity(6).

He is invested in thinking the multiple as such, "without arresting it through unity"(6). Since the form of PfTP emerges from a musical form, it follows that integrating

its temporal complexity should be comparable to the process of listening to a canon. That is to say that if we are to integrate the overlapping temporalities of this video without reducing them to one linear temporal channel, we should first learn how to integrate the different voices that sing this canon. As explained above, this canon consists of one melody that sounds three times, each version occupying a different temporal space. When listening to a canon, two different processes can be discerned. On the one hand, one tries to remember the melody so that every time that there is a new beginning, one can recognize it by recollecting the melody from memory. When this happens, the melody which comes to the fore sounds as if it were more present than the rest. On the other hand, one can perceive how the different temporal versions of the melody relate to each other at any moment; that is, one can listen for relations. In the former case, one is searching for origins, while in the latter one is drawing lateral connections.

Listening as a model of understanding implies the subject paying attention to the object that sounds; the roles of subject and object are thus stable. Hearing, on the other hand, is a model in which the subject is affected by the sounding object, meaning that the object is also an agent. This complicates the divide between subject and object. Hearing, as a relational model of understanding, includes not only the sounds/noises of the environment but also the position

of—and the sounds/noises produced by—the person perceiving. In hearing, our perception of time is affected by sounds/noises coming from a multiplicity of objects/subjects. As such, hearing as a model of understanding allows us to integrate a multiplicity of temporalities, turning what was once interference into information. As a result of this model, a relational object arises that is "multiple in space and mobile in time"(91). This new object has far-reaching consequences for how we understand the objective and the subjective.

Serres refers to a new kind of object that, instead of being a unity distinct in itself, gains significance in its capacity to order social relations. This QUASI-OBJECT is an object that is "more a contract than a thing, it is more a matter of the horde than of the world"(88). If social relations are understood as contracts, objects, Serres argues, are precisely what stabilizes those relations between subjects. As an example, Serres takes a ball around which players move: the ball maintains a "nucleus of organization"(87-88), which is to say that its meaning is not located in the ball itself—in its essence or distinctness as a ball—but within the relational network formed around it. A quasi-object is thus an object that organizes our social interactions through its capacity to designate us subjects.

In *The Parasite*, first published in 1980, Serres writes: that a quasi-object designates a subject "who, without it, would not be a subject"(225). It becomes clear that subject and object are not ontological categories;

instead, they are roles designated by a relation. Participation, for Serres, is the act of making the quasi-object circulate in the network of relations where it functions: "playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance" (226). A QUASI-SUBJECT is thus a subject who is capable of abandoning their individuality — their determination as subject — to become a constitutive part of a network. When this happens, "being is abolished for the relation" (228). The opposite of a quasi-object is an object "outside the realm of relationships" (*Genesis* 90), which is the object that science strives for. Nevertheless, Serres argues, the fact that the objects of science have become "fetishes to be worshiped" implies that they actually already belong to the realm of social relationships (*Genesis* 91).

Just as PfTP shows two distinct networks or realities, one can consider this video through the concept of a quasi-object in at least two different levels of determination. On one level, PfTP can be seen as a model that visually represents the multiple relations that take place simultaneously in a given network between subjects and objects. For instance, the hammer and the sheet music can be identified as quasi-objects because they organize the way that ViHart and Segerman relate to each other. As in the example of playing ball, where the body of the players becomes the object of the ball rather than the other way around, when ViHart and Segerman pass

these objects around, they become the attributes of those objects at the service of the performance. On a different level, PfTP is itself an object located within a historical and social context which determines the way people relate to each other. At the time of writing, this video had been viewed 156,377 times on YouTube. Many viewer-listeners write in the comments how much time it took them to discover the complexities of this video, its time crystal structure and its multiple networks. I argue that when we start integrating this complexity, moving in between different levels of determination, we ourselves become quasi-subjects. It is as though this video turns its viewer-listeners into its object, changing position with its subjects. The video constructs a kind of audience; the moment we start integrating the different levels of determination at work in PfTP, we thus become a QUASI-AUDIENCE.

Taking into account the fact that quasi-objects determine us as subjects, it follows that we become determinate when we think of ourselves as part of a network. For instance, it is not the same experience for us as subjects to think of this video in general—as any video—as it is for us to consider it as a particular video available on YouTube, uploaded on 26 February 2018, with a certain number of views and comments. In the first case, one's singularity is not displaced, while in the second case one becomes part of a network, determinate, a number, one out of hundreds of thousands of people. In other words, the less

determinate that I am, the less I include myself in the networks of relationships in which I engage and the more I behave as a point of origin for the things that I perceive — as is the case in vision. In contrast, when I think of myself as a relation, I am able to include myself in the networks in which I function: I become a quasi-subject – as is the case in hearing as a model of understanding. Therefore, in order to integrate the multiple networks taking place in PfTP, we must first be able to interchange positions with our objects so as to become the object of our objects. Then, through the quasi-objects, one is able to move in between different levels of determination — between the time-crystal-events and the room-events — in order to draw connections between the networks.

In order to demonstrate this, I ask why is it that in the sphere we find two hammers and only one piece of sheet music at all times? If I am to conceive of this question as a quasi-subject, I must first observe the way the quasi-sheet-music and the quasi-hammer relate to their networks. Since PfTP is a visual representation of a canon, I start by asking the sheet music: what part of the melody of this canon are you hearing? Then I follow the sheet music around the sphere to hear what it hears. I learn that the sheet music is present only during the first phrase of the canon, which means that it is traveling from the first phrase in one sector to the first phrase in the next sector to the right. This indicates that at the level of

the room-events, it takes twenty seconds for the sheet music to return to its place by turning around the piano clockwise. At the level of the time crystal, it takes three phrases for it to go around the sphere. This means that, at this level, the sheet music manages to somehow skip the second and third phrase. In contrast, the hammer is present twice in the whole sphere. When observing the hammer, I learn that it takes two phrases for it to move from one sector to the next one on the left. This also means that, at the room-event-level, it takes two phrases for the hammer to return to its place by turning around the piano anticlockwise. The hammer hears two phrases in total, the second phrase (in which it is being used to play the triangle), the first half of the third phrase (when it rests on the piano), and the second half of the first phrase (when it is taken by ViHart, and also the few seconds when the hammer and the sheet music are closest to each other). Therefore, at the time-crystal-level, the hammer manages to skip the second half of the third phrase and the first half of the first. It takes two phrases for it to go around the piano (or to the next sector) and six phrases to go around the sphere (or around the piano three times). In this way, I am moving in between levels of determination — from the time crystal to the events outside the camera — to draw connections between the networks. The more connections I am able to draw, the more I am able to integrate the different networks. Since different

networks or realities emerge at the same time from the images in the screen, I conclude that these are actually quasi-images. Quasi-images are a way of thinking different visual realities that are in constant relation to each other.

If I am able to perceive different temporal relations in PfTP emerging from quasi-images, it must be because time is not simply linear. Serres writes: "The customary, I hardly dare call it ordinary or basic, experience of time is that it, at times, is composed of instants, and that, at times, it flows by, devoid of units" (*Genesis* 115). PfTP uses symmetry in both time and space to create a kind of temporal interference in the viewer-listener, which exposes the fact that time, before being composed of instants, is a noisy multiplicity.

> Time is not, as a rule, a line, although it may become one, and then start selecting, sorting, eliminating, getting all at once bushier and bushier with bifurcations: another time on top of time, appears; time, nonlinear, is, most often, a sheet or a field. (*Genesis* 115)

Time, although sometimes one, is never simply one. This makes me reflect on my own subjective time: I realize that my sense of presentness depends on a networks of relations in which I am included, and that, in turn, I am able to move in between different

networks which designate me a subject. The actual world already has a virtual organization attached to it by social interactions: subjects relate to each other through objects that slow down those same interactions. The account of these interactions is another way of speaking about history. In a similar vein, Serres argues that it is the object that "makes our history slow" (*Genesis* 87). Every time we recognize an object, we do so from a particular network which gives us a level of social determination and a sense of time. This means that objects are always taking part in our social interactions, and in turn, it is our social history that determines the way we recognize those objects. In PfTP, the symmetric structure formed between time and space that interferes with our intelligibility (when two temporal versions of the same object relate to each other) is the same structure that prevents us from investing in perceiving one impression as more real or present than another. Through *hearing* relations as a model of integrating multiplicity, we come to perceive this interference as a multiplicity of temporalities.

Conclusion: Ontological Reflections

"Peace for Triple Piano" performs what I have called an audiovisual canon, that which creates multiplicity in time and space. In order to integrate such multiplicity, I have presented a model of understanding based on the sense of hearing. Serres argues that hearing is

better for integrating this multiplicity than vision because sound affects the whole body. I have argued further that hearing differs from listening in that the latter reproduces stable subject/object relationships. Through the concept of the quasi-object, I argue that time arises from a noisy relation which cannot itself be reduced to either subjectivity or objectivity. This is because perception necessarily takes place in a time which is itself part of a sociohistorical reality. Only by ignoring the noise that emerges from the multiplicity of networks where time takes place — by ignoring the noisy complexity of the relational networks in which we participate — can we come to perceive of an object as completely external to our position/place as historical subjects. PfTP posits that the networks in which we are included designate us as subjects and give us a sense of time. This video, by asking its audience to integrate a multiplicity of networks, constructs a kind of audience that I have called a quasi-audience — that is, an audience that exceeds the categories of subject and object.

We relate to our environment by dividing its multiplicity into unities — into objects. Although this is a necessary practice, it also brings with it a kind of noise which makes us somehow deaf to the fact that the objects of our perception are never simply external to our social realm. This is a way of reducing the alterity of the non-living, of imposing control over everything that we consider as not us. In short, this is a practice of

making boundaries. Encountering historical (quasi-) objects requires an ethical practice. I want to point out that, from my reading of a non-historical and non-political object like PfTP, ethical questions also arise. Through the reading of this audiovisual canon, I argue that if we are to perceive multiplicity, we need to start including our own spacetime in our perception in such a way that we can question the position and the time from which we perceive. According to Serres, what we perceive as our subjectivity — the I — is never really a singularity: "The I is nobody in particular, it is […] an open and translucent welcome of a multiplicity of thoughts, it is therefore the possible" (*Genesis* 31). To gain determination by thinking in relations instead of in origins is an ethical gesture, that of abandoning one's individuality to temporally become more than oneself.

biography Emilio Aguilar is a singer specialized in the performance of music from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. He currently combines his professional work with an interdisciplinary project between the University of Amsterdam (Cultural Analysis) and the Conservatory of Amsterdam (Early Music Singing) in which he researches material-discursive practices to bridge the gap between the speaking-thinking and singing-performing body.

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fig. 1

ViHart playing the piano with sheet music in hand, screenshot from ViHart, "Peace for Triple Piano." *YouTube*, 26 February 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRW3FMuttY, 0:06.

fig. 2

Segerman striking the triangle, screenshot from ViHart, "Peace for Triple Piano." *YouTube*, 26 February 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRW3FMuttY, 0:29.

fig. 3

Two ViHarts, screenshot from ViHart, "Peace for Triple Piano." *YouTube*, 26 February 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRW3FMuttY, 0:58.

fig. 4

ViHart looking at ViHart, screenshot from ViHart, "Peace for Triple Piano." *YouTube*, 26 February 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcRW3FMuttY, 3:05.