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Back to sensuality itself. Jocelyn Benoist's anti-phenomenological turn?

It would probably not be an overstatement to say that the history of phenomenology has been shaped by the schisms that have been brought about by its successive heretics. Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Henry, Jacques Derrida — to name but a few — have all denied the central tenets of the Husserlian tradition, only to return to some marginalised (in their view: not radical enough) threads of Husserl's philosophy. When compiling this rich tradition of phenomenological non-conformists one should add Jocelyn Benoist, although not without some reservations. An alumnus of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, the former director of the Husserl Archives in Paris, he specialises in Brentano, the early Husserl, Frege and early analytic philosophy. Inspired, on the one hand, by Merleau-Ponty's thought, and on the other by his early confrontation with analytic philosophy (especially John McDowell and Charles Travis), Benoist rejected a phenomenology centred on the category of intentionality and turned towards the materiality of experience understood in its sensuality (against both Kantian and Hegelian themes in phenomenology)¹.

The present paper is concerned precisely with this turn, which Benoist proposes as a corrective to phenomenology. Due to the complexity of the subject, I confine myself to the question of aesthetics and present Benoist's project within this area. To this end, I begin by juxtaposing two notions of perception: a Husserlian one and a Travis-inspired one, resulting in two

1 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, Paris 2013, p. 12–17.

understandings of phenomenology and two aesthetic projects. In section 2, I discuss the classical project of formal aesthetics (Georg Friedrich Meier, Immanuel Kant) and its limitations. In section 3, I present Benoist's phenomenology of sound sensuality and the project of poetics as a material aesthetics. Finally, I indicate how this transformation is reflected in art and translated into the understanding of phenomenology itself. The aim of the paper is twofold: on the historical side, I show how Benoist's project fits into the broader current of phenomenology (this will be served by systematic juxtapositions with other heretics of phenomenology, such as Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas); on the systematic side, I argue that this project not only does not have to stand in opposition to phenomenology, but constitutes an important correction of it, which the latter should assimilate.

Two notions of perception

In the very first sentence of *Le bruit du sensible*, Jocelyn Benoist expresses his dissatisfaction with the state of the contemporary philosophy of perception². We are faced with a certain paradox. On the one hand, with the development of the cognitive science and the decline of linguistic philosophy, sense-experience has returned to favour as a source of knowledge in analytic philosophy. Admittedly, within the mainstream, this has been instantiated in a naturalistic reductionism. However, in reaction, there has also been a tendency which Benoist calls the phenomenological turn in analytic philosophy, represented among others by John McDowell. On the other hand, although so much has been written recently about "perception", Benoist argues that perception itself is not a real subject of discussion in the way it deserves. For, it is common to confuse perception with perceptual knowledge³. Philosophical analyses are not concerned with perception itself, but with ways of founding knowledge on it, as evidenced

2 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 7.

3 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 9.

by the problem of access that is central to these discussions⁴. In fact, the problem is not new. If one reads Benoist's argumentation, it concerns both conjunctivism⁵ and disjunctivism, logical empiricism and criticism of the myth of the given, classical empiricism and idealism. It also applies to classical phenomenology. What these positions have in common is the reduction of perception to its epistemic role. Perception becomes a vehicle of information about the external world. It is real only to the extent that it allows one to gain a proper view of the world. Ideally, it should remain transparent⁶. Against this background, Benoist asks whether it is possible to conceive of perception as reality *per se*.

Accordingly, Benoist proposes a distinction between two notions of perception, which correspond to a radically different approach to a phenomenon: perception taken in its epistemic function and perception as sensuality⁷. In the first meaning, perception is always a perception of something; it is defined by its object. At first glance, it seems that the 20th century philosophy owes the rehabilitation of sensuality to phenomenology⁸. However, a careful reading of Husserl indicates that the place accorded to sensuality is not autonomous: it is not considered in itself, but is caught up into the logic of reasons⁹. Thus, phenomenology does not so much unveil the inner logic of sensuality as indicate how a phenomenon can constitute a fully-fledged part of the logic of knowledge. Objectivity becomes the norm of reality. In knowledge, the sensual loses its autonomous value and gains only an instrumental one — as a vehicle of truth. Truth itself, on the other hand, is defined on formal grounds.

Benoist contrasts such an understanding of perception with one based on its sensuality as a “flesh and blood presence” (*leibhaftig selbst*)¹⁰, following

4 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 19.

5 In the philosophy of perception, a family of theories for which veridic and apparent perceptions (illusions and hallucinations) share a common factor, e.g. indirect realism. Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 75.

6 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 207.

7 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 10–11.

8 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 47.

9 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 47.

10 J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 11.

a suggestion from Travis. In a private conversation, Travis asked Benoist why he wanted perception to be intentional whereas, if he perceives a thing, he logically does not have to aim at it, but simply has it¹¹. Benoist realised that, in order to do justice to perception, it is not enough to reform the understanding of intentionality alone (along the lines of Heidegger's being-in-the-world), but the category of intentionality itself must be abandoned. Some steps had already been taken in this direction by Merleau-Ponty, to whom Benoist regularly refers. In the context of the form of constitutive indeterminacy that characterises the sensual, he wrote: "Silence of perception = the object made of wires of which I could not say what it is, nor how many sides it has, etc. and which nonetheless is there"¹². Interestingly, the author of *The Phenomenology of Perception* reverses the Sartrean opposition of perception and imagination at this point. For Sartre, indeterminacy characterised imagination. In perception, but not in imagination, I could count the columns of the Pantheon. Merleau-Ponty reverses this distinction: it is the actual perception that is characterised by the surplus of sense content present in regard to epistemic content. In what concerns intentionality, one could say that, according to Merleau-Ponty and Benoist himself, in the imagination, the perceived is limited to what is perceived in the epistemic sense. Sense perception, on the other hand, corresponds to the reality that transcends the content of what is known.

Ultimately, however, Merleau-Ponty himself is not consistent enough, defending a certain weak form of perceptual intentionalism¹³. Benoist concludes that a phenomenology that would genuinely do justice to phenomena must free them from *logos*; we must liberate them from the power of language, which by its very nature is objectifying. But how can this be done? How can phenomenology be liberated from language, which is not only its tool but also its medium? It seems unable to do so on its own strength. In this regard, Benoist will refer to two extra-philosophical inspirations: the psychology of the Gestalt School and art. In this sense, he

11 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 15.

12 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible. Followed by working notes*, ed. C. Lefort, transl. A. Lingis, Evanston 1968, p. 268.

13 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 13.

follows in the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty himself, who claimed that true phenomenologists are artists¹⁴.

The turn from ideal to material phenomenology is matched by a similar shift in aesthetics itself. According to Benoist, aesthetics has to undergo a metamorphosis and become poetics, that is, not so much a theory describing works of art as the art of handling the sense matter. True to its etymology, aesthetics focuses on the spectator and her sense experience. It thus remains passive. Poetics, on the other hand, takes an active stance. It does not ask about the reception of the matter of experience, but about the way in which an agent performs on it. In this sense, following the Nietzschean route, what is needed is an aesthetics not from the point of view of the spectator or the critic, but of the artist herself¹⁵. The artist occupies a privileged place not because of what she creates from sense matter, but how she handles that matter.

The reform of aesthetics inspires Benoist on how to reform phenomenology itself: to move from a phenomenology built upon the notion of intentionality towards a phenomenology that does justice to sensuality as such. Poetics thus fulfils a philosophical task. It teaches how to de-epistemise sensuality: “the challenge of *poetics* — *to work with what we have* — would certainly lead to a much more radical contestation of the measure of the subject, or at least to *questioning her*”¹⁶. *Poesis* in this meaning is not a place for the manifestation of the sensual. For, contrary to a certain philosophical tradition, the sensual does not spontaneously manifest itself¹⁷. The role of *poesis* is a revelation, that is, the unveiling of sensuality. That sensuality which no longer refers to anything else, speaks of nothing. It ceases to be transparent and can be grasped as such.

Contemporary art breaks with representation, and ultimately with the Platonic scheme of revealing the extra-sensual truth¹⁸. In doing so, it draws

14 Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The world of perception*, transl. O. Davis, London–New York 2004, p. 93–94.

15 Cf. F. W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, transl. D. Smith, Oxford 1996, p. 83.

16 J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 201.

17 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, Paris 2017, p. 298.

18 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 298–299.

attention to the very way in which things appear, making it a study of sensuality itself. The artist thus becomes the master of a properly conceived phenomenology of the sensual. The phenomenon ceases to be a phenomenon of the real and becomes a real phenomenon. It gains autonomy. The sensual ceases to be an object of a gaze which always objectifies, classifies, subjects to one norm of objectivity or another. It becomes the matter which the artist handles. In order to understand this properly, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the opposition between classical, formal aesthetics (both as the theory and practice of art) and poetics.

The classical project of formal aesthetics

The two notions of perception and approaches to the phenomenon can be well illustrated by comparing the classical, Enlightenment project of formal aesthetics with the avant-garde art. In this section, with Benoist I analyse the foundations of Georg Friedrich Meier's and Kant's aesthetics to point out the limits of an intentional understanding of perception.

Benoist reconstructs formal aesthetics on the basis of *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* by Meier, a pupil of Baumgarten, and Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. It is in the former's aesthetics that he sees the beginning of phenomenological thinking. In *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, Meier introduced the concept of "aesthetic truth". In § 91, he analysed passages from the *Aeneid* which described sunrise and sunset over the sea. If Virgil wrote that the dawn rose from the sea or sank into it, he was far from logical truth. At the same time, however, he adequately conveyed a certain aesthetic truth (i.e. a sensual truth — in the etymological meaning of aesthetics). Benoist sees here the birth of phenomenology and the doubling of reality: of the objective world and of the perceived world. The introduction of aesthetic truth represents for the French philosopher the anti-Copernican reversal that would later be so characteristic

of phenomenology¹⁹. According to this conception, the role of art would be to show the phenomenal world (cf. impressionists).

Benoist believes that this approach is flawed as reality is not doubled. For what would be the basis for the difference between the two perceptions of objective and sensual? He cites Wittgenstein's reflections evoked by Anscombe:

He once greeted me with the question: "Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth turned on its axis?" I replied: "I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth". "Well", he asked, "what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the earth turned on its axis?"²⁰

Wittgenstein shows that appearance alone does not resolve in favour of either of the two competing truths. Not surprisingly, aesthetic truth is entirely relative for Meier. But by doing so it has nothing to do with reality. Visual experience alone does not speak more for one interpretation than the other. Benoist elaborates on this thought in the following manner: the sensual says nothing at all²¹. The error of all phenomenology lies in assuming the opposite: it makes the sensual speak. And this means to transcend itself and to point to something else. It deprives the sensual of its reality in favour of objectivity that is since conceived as a "more real" reality.

In that way, it is evident how Meier's aesthetics of representation corresponds to the classical phenomenological project. It is in that form that the aesthetics gains its canonical form in Kant. His aesthetics is essentially an idealist aesthetics: it cuts off the material, sensual element at the very starting point: "...the form of an object (rather than what is material in its presentation, viz., in sensation [*Empfindung*]) is judged in mere reflection on it [...] to be the basis of a pleasure in such an object's presentation..."²²

19 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 301.

20 G. E. M. Anscombe, *An introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, New York 1965, p. 151.

21 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 304; C. Travis, *The Silence of the Senses*, "Mind" 113 (2004) no. 449, p. 57-94.

22 I. Kant, *Critique of judgment*, transl. W. S. Pluhar, Indianapolis 1987, p. 30.

Sensuality becomes the vehicle that makes aesthetic experience possible, but only as an insensitive substrate, a tool. The experience of beauty is not sensual, but purely intellectual: it results from the work of the mind, which perceives the form of experience. At the sensual level, something can only be perceived as pleasant, while formal beauty detaches itself from experience itself and is located on the side of the subject. A consequence of Kant's strongly subject-centred philosophy is a subject-centred aesthetics. Aesthetic experience is an experience of a form imposed on sense data by the mind; an experience to the measure of this mental form. For Kant, the real is that which is ideal and, as a consequence, sensuality is itself to be found at the opposite pole to the real. It becomes real to the extent that it is subjected to a subjective form.

In aesthetics itself, this primacy of form over matter corresponds to the privileging of the sketch. Benoist quotes Kant:

In painting, in sculpture, indeed in all the visual arts, including architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts, design is what is essential; in design the basis for any involvement of taste is not what gratifies us in sensation, but merely what we like because of its form²³.

This is why, according to Benoist, the revolution of the colourists diagnosed by Baudelaire was not only a break with a certain aesthetics, but with the very meaning of aesthetics. That is because for Kant, and modern aesthetics, the colour is secondary, at most a filling of the sketch, being a matter of charm, of pleasure. Ultimately, however, “even where the charm [of colours] is admitted it is still only the form that refines the colours”²⁴. In both the fine arts and music (which, as Benoist suggests, is paradigmatic of Kant's aesthetics), the object of aesthetic experience is not colour patches or sounds, but the relations between them. Sensuality derives value from formalisation. The beauty of sense experience derives from its purity — and this purity, in turn, consists of homogeneity. Again, it is not the colour that

23 I. Kant, *Critique of judgment*, p. 71.

24 I. Kant, *Critique of judgment*, p. 71.

counts, but its form. In this way, classical Enlightenment aesthetics leads to the desensualisation of sense experience. “Aesthetic” means that which is sensual minus sensuality.

From form to the matter of sound

I mentioned that the paradigmatic form of formal aesthetics for Kant was music. In this section, I look at the modern aesthetics of the musical work, and the possibilities of developing a phenomenology centred on the sensuality of sound. In the next section I present, following Benoist, how this phenomenology is realised in the poetics of avant-garde music.

In analysing the aesthetic and poetic understanding of sound, Benoist starts from Kant's passage on the beauty of violin sound. Kant contrasted simple tone (*ein bloßer Ton*) with sound and noise (*zum Unterschiede vom Schalle und Geräusch*)²⁵. A few words of commentary are required on the vocabulary itself. In view of translational discrepancies, Benoist specifies that the German “*Ton*” is to be understood simply as a musical tone (formally defined), so that (in line with what was said in the previous section) Kant could call it beautiful. In contrast, *Schall* is to be understood as the corresponding physical acoustic effect — the vibration of the air. Finally, *Geräusch* means noise — not so much as something that breaks the silence, but rather the background noise²⁶. Quoting a definition from the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*: “a sound consisting of tones of different pitches, strength and timbre”, Benoist draws attention to multiplicity, variety as the essential characteristics of noise. Noise consists in the variety of pitch, force, and timbre of sounds, and as such it contrasts with the Kantian unified tone.

Benoist asks what tone actually is. If one assumes that, in classical music, a tone corresponds to a note, it might seem at first glance to be a natural phenomenon — one of many musical sounds defined by frequency.

²⁵ Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of judgment*, p. 70.

²⁶ Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 320–321.

However, Benoist notes that pitch alone is not a sufficient determination of a note. Even if one were to seriously consider the Pythagorean doctrine of natural tones and natural consonances, it is ultimately a matter of tones remaining in specific reciprocal relations. Tone itself is not exhaustively determined by tuning. A sound of a certain frequency only becomes a tone as part of a system — in tonal harmony: octaves divided into unequal intervals. The note thus constitutes a “normative ideality”²⁷.

How to understand the note as a norm? First, it can be pointed out that the note determines what one hears. In classical music, one does not hear a sound as a sound, but a sound in a certain relation: melodic and harmonic to others. A sound becomes a tone as part of the system. The ability to distinguish sounds, even given absolute hearing, is limited. One would not notice a significant difference between the same note played in a slightly shifted tuning. By contrast, the same sound played as a different note will be heard as dramatically different. The moral of this is that it is the ideal system, superimposed on the matter of sounds and thus selecting tones and establishing tensions between them, that determines what one hears²⁸.

A note, however, is a norm in yet another sense. As Benoist notes, audible consonance is not the same as physical consonance. He argues that the note is the norm of the identity of sound. He recalls the very process of tuning instruments, which was originally — without modern measuring tools — based not on physical but perceived consonance. The tone identity constitutes a spectrum of sounds which will henceforth be treated as a single note. It is therefore not a physical characteristic of the sound, but a pragmatically accepted, ideal criterion²⁹. After all, it is impossible to tune real instruments perfectly, just as there are no perfect chords between them in practice.

This analysis of the meaning of tone allows Benoist to see that, in contrast to original intuitions, Kantian tone and noise are not concepts in the same category³⁰. Their difference is not a qualitative one (good vs. bad noise, sound), but they correspond to two distinct ontological categories:

27 J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 324.

28 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 328.

29 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 324.

30 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 325.

the form (norm) and the matter of sound. The former is ideal, while the latter is located on the side of sensuality. They are therefore not two types of sound, but rather two dimensions of sound. Tone is a possible determination of noise, but contrary to modern purists, it is impossible to make music without noise. Music, as a sensual being, cannot exist without its material substrate. On the one hand, the real sound is not reducible to tone. On the other, musical sound is not the mere matter of noise, but normalised noise.

Benoist notes that “beyond or rather below the silence of meaning (which is always the result), and encompassed by it, one must re-learn to hear the noise of the sensual. What is needed is a philosophy of noise”³¹. The hitherto formal aesthetics should be complemented by a poetics of materiality. A phenomenology focused on intentionality and the world of meanings (*logoi*) should be complemented by a phenomenology that focuses on the phenomenon considered in its sensual materiality.

In this project, Benoist is inspired by Lévinas's lecture *Parole et silence* delivered at the Collège philosophique on 4–5 February 1948. He finds in it a crossing of that boundary that Merleau-Ponty shied away from. For the latter, the sensual always remains at most suggested in perception. In this sense, perception always remains intentional. With Lévinas, on the other hand, sensuality “is heard outside perception, in its categorical alienation from all intentionality”³². In this sense, in Lévinas's lectures, the consistent phenomenological study leads to an anti-phenomenology — beyond the limits of *logos*. Towards the stranger, the Other.

As Benoist notes, it is no coincidence that Lévinas refers to the sense of hearing, breaking the sight-centred tradition of philosophy of perception which stretches back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*³³. Unlike visual impressions, auditory ones do not contain a perceived object³⁴. In the case of visual perception, impressions are related to their object, which leads

31 J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 189.

32 J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 190.

33 It is symptomatic indeed how, in the Western tradition, the very nomenclature, the metaphors, the illustrations, the models reveal that to know is actually to see.

34 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 192.

traditionally to the problem of the duality of reality. One asks whether a thing is its own appearance or a causally related but metaphysically separate reality. In the case of sound, there is no such problem. The sound impression is not its own object (source). It gains autonomy and so it can be considered in itself — as a matter of sensuality.

Further, noise introduces a rupture and, in this sense, opposes the dialectic of intentionality. It refers to a reality that is incomprehensible and perhaps ultimately inconceivable. In this sense, it has a purely negative meaning. It does not reveal something to come, because it does not refer to anything. It breaks, but establishes nothing in return³⁵. It is pure presence. For, there is nothing absent to which noise could refer. This theme has already appeared in the criticism of Kant's formal aesthetics: sound ultimately cannot be all formalised. For it is a matter. Hence, Benoist generalises Lévinas's idea, claiming that noise is "a dimension of the sensual that does not refer to the manifestation and is therefore not part of its — intentional — form"³⁶.

In *L'adresse du réel*, Benoist proposes to link these themes to the question of truth — in polemic against Kant's and Meier's aesthetic truth. The proper role of the sensuality is not a manifestation of truth, but the experience of reality itself. The truth of art is not a truth in the logical sense, but performative truth — the truth of fulfilment³⁷. It is a revealed truth, not a manifested truth. In this sense it coincides with Heideggerian *aletheia* and Michel Henry's concept of self-manifestation. It is a truth given directly, one which is non-relational and, in particular, non-correspondent. In order to discover sensuality itself, it is necessary to stop treating it as manifesting something else. But how is it to be done? According to Benoist, the answer must be sought not so much from philosophers — whose predilection for the word has made them deaf to the noise of the sensual — but from artists — especially the representatives of avant-garde music.

35 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 193.

36 J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 194.

37 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 307.

Atonality, microtonality, concrete music — towards a material phenomenology

Benoist does not see art and philosophy as competing projects but rather regards the former as a very important source of inspiration, especially contemporary art. He puts this understanding of art and its importance for philosophy most accurately in a footnote in *L'adresse du réel*:

It is not clear to me why art and philosophy should compete with each other. They are obviously different activities, even if they may concern the same things. One can benefit the other and vice versa. Contemporary art, in particular, can bring a better theoretical grasp of the concept of reality to philosophy, simply because it does something about that reality as such, and so puts us in a position where we cannot ignore it³⁸.

Art, therefore, does not imitate reality. Nor does it constitute its falsification or negation. It corresponds more to perception than to imagination. Contemporary art liberates philosophers from the “Hegelian paradigm,” in which the vocation of sensuality is to manifest meaning³⁹. In a broader sense, therefore, it would be about breaking away from a tradition dating back to Plato, in which the sensual is at most a sign of intelligible reality. In this tradition, sensuality was only real to the extent that it referred to an ideal reality. In the modern account: the sensual meant something, *nomen omen*, only to the extent that it was given a certain meaning. In phenomenology, the given was relativised by the intentionality imposed upon it. Against this, however, sensuality taken by itself is not the embodiment of any norm. Contemporary art allows us to see this by revealing sensuality as such.

An example of such a rethinking of the relationship between form and matter in a work of art, so as to make materiality itself the subject of the artist's investigation, is Arnold Schönberg's work on the colour of sound.

38 J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 309, fn. 1.

39 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 309.

The shift from formalism to materialism in music will first be accomplished by relativising form itself. Such a basic norm in music has hitherto been a pitch. In the final section of his *Theory of harmony*, Schönberg questions the privileging of pitch over other qualities of sound, including colour:

The distinction between tone colour and pitch, as it is usually expressed, I cannot accept without reservations. I think the tone becomes perceptible by virtue of tone colour, of which one dimension is a pitch. Tone colour is, thus, the main topic, pitch a subdivision. Pitch is nothing else but tone colour measured in one direction⁴⁰.

As Benoist notes, colour here ceases to be what remains of a sound when we abstract from pitch, “the sonic sediment inevitably resulting from the fact that this pitch is played by this or that instrument”⁴¹. Schönberg reverses the hierarchy between colour and pitch. It is a colour that is fundamental, and the pitch is merely one of its dimensions. And since this is the case, it is not the norm (note) that is the measure of reality. Reality is on the side of the materiality of sound — its colour, to which various alternative norms can be applied.

Benoist points to two illustrations of how to dethrone the formal determination of music⁴². The first example is provided by Schönberg himself, for whom, the compositional reference point is not a pitch but colour. Such an attempt is made in his piece “Farben” Op. 16 No. 3. The second example shows how to replace the pitch norm with an alternative norm — rhythm. The idea is to compose in such a way that rhythm gains autonomy. Consequently, the pitch norm as a means of identifying sound loses its significance. The example cited by Benoist is Steve Reich’s “Clapping Music”. Both illustrations show that classical, formal thinking about music in terms of tones and harmonic tensions is not necessary at all. Moreover, if one abandons this category, hitherto ignored because non-formalised

40 A. Schönberg, *Theory of harmony*, transl. R.E. Carter, Berkeley 1978, p. 421.

41 J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 328.

42 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 330.

aspects of sense matter can be recovered. Is it possible to go a step further and not only unlock the hitherto negated dimensions of sound, but also reveal its very materiality without further specification?

The observations from Schönberg's work on colour have important implications for Lévinas's phenomenology (anti-phenomenology?). Sound escapes full formalisation and therefore idealisation. As such, it constitutes a certain sense of externality. Consequently, one can treat music as an art of externality. Music does not represent anything⁴³. As Benoist notes, this can be understood in two ways. For Rousseau, and after him for Romantic aesthetics, music does not represent its objects directly, but awakes the same feelings in the soul that are experienced in seeing them⁴⁴. Music can therefore be said to constitute still a representation (albeit mediated by the inner life of the artist)⁴⁵. For Lévinas, on the other hand, music is nonrepresentational in the absolute sense. It does not refer to anything. It is its own presence. At the same time, its self-centredness, and non-referentiality make sound elude all attempts to be assimilated by the agents. It cannot be domesticated, it cannot be assimilated. It always remains stranger. It resists all attempts at idealisation⁴⁶. "Sound is the element of being as being other and yet unconvertible into the identity of the self that grasps the enlightened world as its own"⁴⁷. It remains above the meaning that the agent tries to impose on it.

It is this characteristic of sound that is exploited by avant-garde music, which seeks to go beyond formal constraints to reveal what escapes the norms of tone and melody. Sound does not reveal the truth, it is not intentional, but reveals itself as reality. In this sense, it exemplifies the anti-epistemological turn in the understanding of perception that was our starting point. If philosophy is to make room for a full-blown realism, it should conceive of perception not in an instrumental sense — relativised

43 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 195.

44 Cf. J. J. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, in: J. J. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, transl. J. T. Scott, Hanover 1998, p. 327.

45 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 195.

46 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 196.

47 E. Lévinas, *Paroles et silence*, in: E. Lévinas, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, Paris 2009, p. 90.

to the communicated truth about its intentional object — but metaphysically — as the presence of sensual reality: full-fledged and autonomous⁴⁸. For this to happen, music, as the art of composition, must itself valorise those elements that have hitherto remained outside the formal repertoire, and thus in a sense become a-musical. Following Lévinas: to privilege non-musical moments in which “the function of flare and rupture can nevertheless prevail over aesthetics and quality”⁴⁹. How can it be accomplished?

In *L'adresse du réel*, Benoist develops the theme suggested in *Le bruit du sensible*, giving two further examples of how avant-garde music gives the proper place to sensuality. Giacomo Scelsi's programme of microtonal music intended to explore the non-musicality. In his view, classical music “created thousands of magnificent but often empty frames, for they were the result of constructive imagination, which is very different from creative imagination”⁵⁰. Scelsi's own project represents a reversal of Kant's aesthetics by liberation of sound matter from the primacy of form and immersion in this sensuality. According to Benoist, on the philosophical side, this corresponds to privileging of ontology: to give priority to being over norms, to sound over musicality⁵¹.

Scelsi's compositional programme stems from the contemplation of sound matter. Sound — as physical, experienced — becomes the centre that organises the musical work, rather than being organised by the norm of one tonality or another. The use of repetition serves to achieve this effect. The repetition of the same sound, bordering on obsession, makes it possible to perceive the inexhaustible richness of the sound material, which has hitherto been reduced by the norm of tonal relations⁵². Listening to sound, contemplating it as such, opens the listener up to new dimensions. Alongside pitch and duration, its depth comes:

48 Cf. J. Benoist, *Le bruit du sensible*, p. 203.

49 E. Lévinas, *Paroles et Silence*, p. 93.

50 G. Scelsi, *Son et Musique*, in: G. Scelsi, *Les anges sont ailleurs*, Arles 2006, p. 131, quoted in J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 331.

51 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 331.

52 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 333.

You have no idea what is hidden in a single sound! There are even counterpoints, if you like, different shifts of timbre. There are even harmonic elements that produce completely different effects, that do not just come out of the sound, but go into the middle of it⁵³.

Liberating oneself from the norm makes it possible to perceive an imperceptible multiplicity in a sound that has hitherto been considered in the unity given by its form. This is illustrated by *Quattro pezzi su una nota sola* (1959) — four pieces, true to their name, built in microtonal shifts around a single note.

In Benoist's view, Scelsi did not so much propose a new musical language as taught us a different approach to the matter of sound⁵⁴. By going beyond previous norms, he broadened the understanding of what is possible in music. In fact, he gave a new experience of sound sensuality. In this sense, Scelsi's poetics takes place in two movements: (1) the demusicalization of musical sound (notes), which allows us to hear in sound all that the norm has hitherto ignored (thus made it inaudible), (2) the establishment of a new code (microtonality) as a new norm that founds a new dimension of musical experience⁵⁵.

Scelsi's research, which can be seen as a phenomenology of sound sensuality in practice (poetics), leads to concrete music as the final step in the rejection of the Kantian formalism⁵⁶. In Benoist's interpretation, it is only this step that gives experience of the materiality of the sensual. The composer's matter is not even distinguished sounds, but the noise itself. The sound object becomes present as such. It is not something that one subjects to any conceptualisation. It is pure presence. Concrete music exhibits the reality of sensuality itself. It reveals sensuality itself, which is not mediated by anything and does not refer to anything.

53 Quoted in J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 334.

54 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 336.

55 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 336.

56 Cf. J. Benoist, *L'adresse du réel*, p. 338.

Conclusion

In conclusion, according to Benoist, despite the revived interest in perception in both contemporary analytic philosophy and classical phenomenology, from an epistemological perspective perception has thus far been considered in a reductive way. It is necessary to balance this approach with an ontology of perception itself. To this end, Benoist argues for according a central place to the phenomenon as such and recognising its unmediated and non-derivative reality. The shift from intentional (formal) to material phenomenology corresponds to the shift from aesthetics to poetics. Its specialists are not philosophers, but artists who, free from the constraints of language, can reveal the non-conceptualizable dimensions of sensual reality. Schönberg, Reich, Scelsi, and representatives of concrete music allow us to contemplate the sensuality irreducible to any norm. This turn to the materiality of sense experience is for Benoist a warranty for realism and defends phenomenology itself from falling into idealism, according to which, it is the norm (intention) that makes the real. In this sense, Benoist's proposed corrective, inspired by the insufficiently consistent Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenology of the Other in Lévinas, is an important addition to phenomenology itself.

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Abstract

Back to sensuality itself. Jocelyn Benoist's anti-phenomenological turn?

The article presents Jocelyn Benoist's criticism of phenomenology as an epistemological project that reduces sensuality to a tool of reference to meaning, and his proposal to supplement phenomenology with an ontology of perception that does justice to sensuality itself. Following the philosopher, the parallels between formal and material phenomenology and modern aesthetics and poetics as a practice that reveals sensuality are drawn. The phenomenology of sound and the discussion of the avant-garde revolution in music (atonality, microtonality, concrete music) point to the limitations of modern aesthetics and illustrate possible directions for the development of a phenomenology of sensuality.

Keywords: phenomenology, Jocelyn Benoist, aesthetics, poetics, sensuality

Abstrakt

Z powrotem do zmysłowości samej. Anty-fenomenologiczny zwrot Jocelyna Benoista?

Artykuł prezentuje sformułowaną przez Jocelyna Benoista krytykę fenomenologii jako projektu epistemologicznego, redukującego zmysłowość do narzędzia odsyłającego do sensu, a także proponowane przezeń uzupełnienie fenomenologii o ontologię percepcji, która pozwala oddać sprawiedliwość zmysłowości samej. Wskazuje, za filozofem, na paralele między fenomenologią formalną i materialną a estetyką nowożytną i poetyką jako praktyką odsłaniającą zmysłowość.

Fenomenologia dźwięku oraz omówienie rewolucji awangardowej w muzyce (atonalność, mikrotonalność, muzyka konkretna) wskazują na ograniczenia estetyki nowożytnej oraz ilustrują możliwe kierunki rozwoju fenomenologii zmysłowości.

Słowa kluczowe: fenomenologia, Jocelyn Benoist, estetyka, poetyka, zmysłowość