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The Violence of Form

Philosophical Remarks on Mazen Kerbaj's Sound Piece *Starry Night*

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ABSTRACT: The article offers a philosophical reading of Mazen Kerbaj's sound piece *Starry Night*. Recorded in 2006 during the bombing of Beirut by the Israeli Air Force, the piece stages an acoustic encounter between the improvised sounds of the trumpet and live bomb explosions. Arguing for a formal examination of the ways in which Kerbaj stages the problem of the genesis of musical order in the exchange between trumpet and bombs, the article draws parallels with explorations of the problems of the State and of political contradiction in the Marxist tradition. Three common points are identified: the contingency of the appearance of order, its inseparability from an excess of violence, and its spatializing function. The last part delineates parallels between Kerbaj's subversive aesthetic strategies and Badiou's elaboration of the concept of the subject as the interruption of a repetitive logic of placement.

THE VIOLENCE OF FORM

Philosophical Remarks on
Mazen Kerbaj's Sound Piece *Starry Night**

Ozren Pupovac

Starry Night by Mazen Kerbaj¹ is a work of art that stages an impossible encounter. A sound piece recorded on the nights of 15 and 16 July 2006, during the first days of the armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah that was subsequently named the 'July War', *Starry Night* documents the exchange between the explosions of bombs ravaging the city of Beirut and the improvised sounds of a 'prepared' trumpet. It documents a musical encounter which borders upon the absurd: a duet between the trumpet and the bombs.

Two 'performers' meet in *Starry Night*: an improvising musician, utilizing a trumpet modified with a number of different extensions and objects,² and the Israeli Air Force, whose presence is registered *in situ* by the thunderous sounds of destruction caused by the bomb explosions. Standing on his balcony as the Israeli air strike over Beirut takes

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1 Mazen Kerbaj was born in Beirut in 1975. His work spans the fields of improvised music, painting, drawings and comics. He is one of the founders of the Lebanese festival of improvised music IRTIJAL, and one of the pioneers of improvised music in Lebanon. He has performed in solo and group settings in Lebanon, Syria, France, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, UK, and the USA. His visual work, collected in a number of publications, includes satirical commentaries on the political situation in the Middle East. Kerbaj runs a blog which displays some of his works at: www.kerbaj.com. The recording of *Starry Night* can be accessed online at <http://muniak.com/mazenkerbaj.html>.

2 The sounds that Kerbaj produces on the trumpet are made by using extended instrumental techniques and by the technical alterations of the instrument itself:

place, Kerbaj opposes the noises of the airplanes and the detonations of bombs over Beirut with the sounds of his trumpet. He unleashes a flurry of improvised tones and noises into the soundscape, entering into a tension with the dramatic political situation that he faces and transforming these immediate circumstances into another place: a musical universe, a universe of sounds clashing against each other.

At the beginning of the piece, we hear muffled, distant sounds of explosions coming out of the night, into which the trumpet blends with long droning and gurgling tones. As the air strike commences in the immediate vicinity, loud explosions cut and punctuate the soundscape. Their appearance is rhythmical, and it severs the acoustic landscape with its intensity. In the immediate aftermath of the explosions, a tension builds up around silence, only to be interrupted by security alarms and barking dogs. The trumpet engages in an acoustic exchange with the sounds of the explosions, providing contrapuntal movements to the brutal shifts of the dynamics from fortissimo to pianissimo that the bombs dictate: the trumpet crescendos and distorts its sound in anticipation of the bombs, it bursts into noise experiments in their aftermath, it cuts against the noise of descending jet planes with a humming drone, but also mimics this noise and blends into it. To the rhythmical pattern of the explosions, the trumpet counterposes its own erratic movement of heterogeneous sounds: hissing noises, airstream hums, high-pitched tones, zings, clangs, murmurs, and drones. Finally, it sinks into the silence of the night, creating suspense between the explosions.

By making music in an extreme context – the situation of violence and destruction emerging at that point where politics extends into war – and moreover by making the extremity of this situation itself an element of a musical piece, Kerbaj has created a work which is dramatic and shocking, but also remarkably subtle and complex. *Starry Night*, it seems obvious, is a political work of art. And yet its political nature does not reside in what might seem most obvious, in the dramatic impact of its gesture and its sensible contents. The themes of violence,

air sounds, fluttering noises, growling sounds, microtones, drone sounds, choking sounds. Kerbaj modifies the trumpet with different tubings which lengthen its shank and uses a saxophone mouthpiece, which allows for the production of a wide, legato sound, coming closer to woodwind than brass instruments. Furthermore, he alters the instrument by inserting different objects into its bore, by which the resonance of the air column extends to the body of the instrument, resulting in a muted and choked sound.

destruction and politics are certainly the most direct themes that *Starry Night* works on, and yet these themes do not simply unfold in an immediate manner here. Rather, they come about by a detour, in abstraction.

The analysis presented here is an attempt to follow this detour. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the true nature of Kerbaj's aesthetic strategy is revealed only when we take distance from what might seem immediate in it – the distance from its immediate, 'sensible' representation of a 'reality'. Kerbaj's aesthetic exploration is, in fact, anything but mimetic; it consists in a remarkable procedure of distancing and abstraction – an abstraction which not only disconnects the question of violence from what would appear as its immediate truth – obtained by a shock effect – but which forcefully involves us in an entirely formal investigation of the relationship between order and indeterminacy, between contingency and destruction with regard to musical forms. By following Kerbaj's detour, we furthermore discover that the 'impossible' duet staged here is far from a simple political provocation obtained by aesthetic means. Kerbaj's aesthetic gesture touches upon something essential in politics, as it probes nothing less than the unfolding of the revolutionary dialectic, framed as an interruption of the violent logic of social order and hierarchy.

Let us begin by exposing the falsity of the obvious.

Undoubtedly, what strikes one first about Kerbaj's work is the scene of violence that it evokes. The intensity of the explosions of bombs that are recorded *in situ* makes a dramatic mark on our listening and apprehension of the piece. And yet we should refrain from interpreting this work only from this sensible intensity, from the dramatic force of representation that it evokes, just as we should refrain from reducing the work to the intensity of the artistic performance which rises against extreme circumstances of violence. The bare sound of the bombs and the immediate image of horror that it brings to the fore is not all that *Starry Night* conveys to us. Reducing *Starry Night* to a simple representation of political violence – of its *brutality* – in the acoustic register seems to me as an indicator of a grave misunderstanding. Moreover, such a misunderstanding appears even greater if one tries to read this excessive sensible presence of the bombs – together with the terrifying image of destruction that they evoke – as an immediate moral meditation on violence. This is the first thing to dispel: interpreting Kerbaj through the Kantian sublime.

It is indeed tempting to claim that what we have here is a work of art engaged in a direct conversation with Kant. The title of *Starry Night* alone seems as an evocation of that famous phrase from one of the *Critiques*: ‘The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’.³ And its contents, in their sensible intensity, seem to cry out in an immediate manner for that specific meditation on morality that Kant develops in his aesthetic of the sublime. The recording of the bare sound of destruction can easily strike the listener with the power of what Kant had thought of as the ‘pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure’.⁴ Confronted with something that seems ungraspable or immeasurable, with something that overwhelms us with its magnitude and its might, we feel the utter inadequacy of our capacities for action and resistance. At the same time, in and through this feeling of limitation, we also take pleasure in sensing the unboundedness of our cognitive and moral self. The aesthetic sentiment that Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* had termed the ‘dynamical sublime’ involves an attraction by terrifying phenomena, an attraction by the sight of an overpowering force, in which we find pleasure as we discover an aspect of ourselves that cannot be dominated: the force of our reason and our moral person. By measuring ourselves against an immeasurable exterior force, while imagining a situation of sheer heteronomy, we find the irreducibility of our thinking mind as well as the irreducibility and autonomy of our moral freedom.

If one allows for this interpretation, the bombs in the Kerbaj piece, their shattering sound of violence and destruction – precisely because they evoke an image of an all-powerful force against which our mundane strategies seem futile – would come to represent a vehicle for the reassertion of the unlimitedness of our moral freedom. The representation of extreme circumstances of violence would become a eulogy of the independence of the subject, of the infinite freedom of our moral self, which does not succumb.

One needs to note a connection between such a moralism of the sublime and the procedure predominant in the public opinion today, by which violence – political violence especially – is overexposed, shown

3 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 133.

4 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 143.

in its immediacy and in its full graphic nature, so that we can condemn its brutality, so that we can become aware of the enormity of the suffering of the human subject. If sublime violence functions as a vehicle for the self-assertion of our morality, the strength of its graphic exposure lies in its capacity to provoke psychological empathy with human pain and suffering. The dramatic recording of the bombs could, in this sense, also be read as a form of protest against the mindlessness of violence and war, as a humanistic affirmation of life over death, of creativity and humanity over destruction and brutality.

The important thing to note is that this ideological construction of the human victim, erected on the grounds of a naïve pacifism, shares with the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime a very precise effect: it shifts attention to the moral capacity of the subject and renders the force of the object unrecognizable. Both forms of aestheticization seek to make the violence confronting the human subject a matter of cognitive indifference, for what is important is solely the subjective effect of moral superiority – whether in the feeling of freedom, or in that of empathy. In other words, it is not imperative to analyse objectively what is happening to us, but only to draw a subjective lesson from it. Such a displacement from the object to the subject, in fact, thrives on an obscuration of the question of the origin of violence itself. Violence is severed from its origins in human actions, and transubstantiated into an element of nature. If we can find Kant seeking the sources for his aesthetic of the sublime in natural phenomena and primarily in natural disasters (volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.), the humanistic depiction of political violence and war in contemporary media divorces these consequences of human actions from concrete political and subjective decisions, and makes them into nature's contingencies, as if they represented pure external catastrophes.

Even if it is highly probable that what inspired Kerbaj to make music in the extremity of this situation was a resolve to stage a protest of human freedom, will and creativity against the overwhelming power of violence, what he produced in this incredible examination of tension in the medium of sound was something else. What Kerbaj stages in *Starry Night* is not simply a sublime rendition of the violence of the bombs. He does not push the bombs into the region of the ungraspable in order to provoke a feeling of awe and moral self-confidence or a feeling of pity. Rather, he transforms this sensible material and weaves it into a particular aesthetic investigation, an investigation which enters

into a tension with the political situation that defines it, whilst producing a specific strategy of its thinkability.

In the first place, Kerbaj is not simply recording and exposing bare violence. He is playing over it, with it, against it; he is inscribing violence as an element into an improvised musical piece. The trumpet responds to the bombs. It submits them to a musical investigation. It counters the movement of the bombs with its own set of subtle and erratic movements, with its own fury of heterogeneous sounds. The sounds of the bombs and their movements are transposed into the structuring elements of a musical work. This transposition is crucial, as the explosion sounds now become something other than what they stand for in their representational immediacy: they become formal elements in the organization of a musical piece. When entering into the composition of a work of improvised music, violence – the violence of exploding bombs – is abstracted from its sensible intensity, from the terrifying image that it provokes, in order to become an element in the abstract universe of relationships among sounds.

The whole strength of Kerbaj's work, therefore, is that it does not simply take as given the sensible material that it works with; it abstracts from the givenness of this material in order to construct something else; it displaces the immediate encounter with its circumstances by creating a formal distance towards them. This is the first dimension of the intricate aesthetic strategy present in *Starry Night: abstraction-transposition*. The sensible intensity of the bombs is abstracted from its existential immediacy and is woven into formal relations between sounds. The sounds of destruction are severed from their direct signification and are reconfigured within the immanence of the medium of sound. What matters is not to experience the sublime violence of the bombs, but to 'read' the sounds of the bombs from within the relations that they entertain with other sounds. These relations, furthermore, are abstract in themselves, as they are composed out of the pure contingency of noises, out of chance sound occurrences that are abstracted from any sense of nature and any legislation by conventions of musical taste.

Starry Night therefore produces a formalistic treatment of violence. The point is not to amplify the dramatic political events around which the work is organized; rather, what matters is to transpose and reorganize these elements into another register, where a new investigation of their meanings can be made. Examining violence means examining the structure of sounds, examining the way in which sounds can be organ-

ized, and how a musical order is born out of a contingent encounter between heterogeneous elements.

ABSTRACTION, DESTRUCTION, FORM

Once we abstract from the immediacy of its representational nature, we find *Starry Night* to be a piece organized around a set of abstract acoustic tensions, around movements of intensity, suspense and anticipation in the element of live recorded sound and musical improvisation. The bombs have disappeared in their immediate presence, they have disappeared as a horrifying representation that haunts us; but at the same time, they reappear as sound elements which enter into a relation with other sounds and organize a musical universe. The universe of *Starry Night* is indeed an abstract universe: a universe made up of minimal acoustic elements, of rudimentary sonorities organized entirely around tensions of texture and timbre. A universe that is abstract because it is devoid of all the classical parameters by which we recognize and constitute musical motifs: melody, harmony, rhythm, tonality, measure, etc. By anchoring his work in the modernist, avant-gardist aesthetic strategies of free improvisation and post-serialism in contemporary music, Kerbaj explores the possibilities of non-conventional sonorities, appropriating aesthetically the acoustic horizon which would not usually be experienced as musical: noises, murmurs, silences, environmental and technological sounds, sounds defined by chance. In order to counter the movement of the bombs, Kerbaj does not play what would classically be recognized as notes; he unleashes noise, he experiments with sounds to the utmost, mimicking the environment, but also mimicking the sounds of the explosions in their loud, excessive, displeasing nature. He produces a set of contingent sounds: a wall of noise composed of heterogeneous elements clashing with each other.

The emphasis here is – as with the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century – on contingent encounters, on ‘found objects’, objects from the situational, everyday environment that are not by their own nature recognizable as art objects. Every aleatory sensible occurrence can potentially produce an effect of art. There are no predetermined norms or forms that the subject is supposed to follow. Rather, the subject is forced into an improvised reaction by the encounter with the very situation that he or she is thrown into. There is no pre-given reservoir

of aesthetic choices, no given set of rules for the ordering of musical elements that the artist might draw upon. The repertoire of sound is entirely contingent, experimental, improvised. Being drawn from the extension of the expression that the instrument and the artist are capable of producing, from experiments which push sound beyond the traditional confines of instrument design and usage. And more generally, being predicated upon an attitude of openness towards each singular acoustic occurrence, towards the potential appropriation of the totality of sounds, of all those tones, noises, frequencies, textures which are not limited by the confines of 'natural' melodic structures.⁵

This formula of abstraction and openness is, in reverse, also the formula of destruction. The avant-gardist strategy assumes that form, in this case musical form, is not something which is normatively given, or which can be normatively prescribed (following rules of harmony, beauty or pleasure). Form is precisely the radical questioning of such normativity. A form that is rooted in an encounter and born out of a precarious treatment of contingent situations presupposes the negation of received or established conventions. It presupposes the annulment of the existing consensus which would legislate the boundaries between art and non-art, which would provide a normative measure for the production and judgment of aesthetic objects. The recognizability and the judgment of musical sounds, the very boundary between sound and noise, between music and non-music, is precisely what is constantly called into question, what is incessantly subverted and breached. This is also what improvised music inherits from the avant-gardes: an aggressive stance towards each aesthetic convention, an ethics of novelty and invention which incessantly questions the givens of the present and the past, proclaiming the necessity to destroy all previous schemas and their mechanisms of evaluation, to put an end, in every form, to the repetition of form.⁶ Walter Benjamin would name such a stance the 'destruc-

5 As Cornelius Cardew once put it: 'We are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment'. Quoted from: Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook* (London: Edition Peters, 1971), p. xvii.

6 In the realm of improvised jazz, the Rimbaudian maxim '*Il faut être absolument moderne*' was perhaps most prominently embodied in Ornette Coleman's manifesto-works like *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, or the *Change of the Century* from the early 1960s. The European tradition of free jazz would go even further in the

tive character': 'The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room; only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred.'⁷

Already at this point we can see how Kerbaj approaches questions of violence and destruction in a manner irreducible to simple *mimesis*. Being transposed into the abstract medium of sound, the bombs make a different destructive gesture from the one that they perform in reality: they function as destroyers of musical conventions, as those chance sound elements that, once appropriated as music, shatter the conventions that legislate the boundaries between art and non-art. What they also shatter is any sense of the naturalness of sounds. Kerbaj's musical medium is noise in its purity, and what he enacts in *Starry Night* is a dialogue in and through noise, a dialogue between environmental and situational noises and the acoustic experiments of the trumpet – a dialogue that expands and explodes the sonic vocabulary, and transforms it into a medium of disturbance and provocation.

Despite this, the sonic experiments of *Starry Night* cannot simply be reduced to a breach of aesthetic traditions and a plea for a boundless search for sounds. There is a further element introduced here. Because what Kerbaj stages in his abstract treatment of the sounds of violence – and I believe this is where the extraordinary nature of *Starry Night* resides – is the very question of the *genesis of the musical form*: the question of how, starting from a specific coordination of contingent sound elements, a musical order can be said to emerge. By transposing bombs into abstract sound elements, *Starry Night* poses in a radical way the question of how a musical situation is constructed, how its order can be seen to arise in and out of chance encounters.

The important thing to perceive is that the configuration of sounds and noises that *Starry Night* brings forth is not random, the result of an essential situational disorder that could only be put together by the improvisational strategy of the artist who appropriates chance sounds. What *Starry Night* portrays is the existence of a specific order immanent to chance relations between sounds. The sounds that Kerbaj works with

militancy of the avant-gardist ethics, pronouncing openly in 1968, in works such as *Machine Gun* by the Peter Brötzman group, an all-out attack on aesthetic conventions of music.

7 Walter Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character', in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 157.

– whether by recording them or producing them – are *forced sounds*, and they are forced to the utmost degree as they are measured against the shattering sonic domination of the bomb explosions. There is, in other words, an essential asymmetry involved in the field of sonic contingency, as the improvising subject finds itself thrown into a situation which already crushes it by its forceful presence. It is the bombs that set the dominant sonic movements of the piece, and it is to their acoustic domination over the soundscape that we should look for the genesis of the organization of musical elements.

This is, in fact, the point where *Starry Night* introduces an incredible reversal. Structurally speaking, the bombs are not simply a force of destruction and violence. As sonic elements appearing in an abstract shape, they pass into their opposite: they are constructive. They do not simply destroy space; they constitute space, because they provide an ordering principle between the elements, the mediation for their arrangement. When entering into the composition of a musical work, the bombs come to represent the logic of its organization and ordering, they come to stand for the principles in which a piece of music organizes and positions its elements. The explosions of bombs unfold the ‘space’ of the musical piece precisely as an abstract system of relations.

In the first place, the bombs provide markers for a rudimentary physical orientation: while the presence of the trumpet is ethereal and immobile, coming from nowhere and everywhere, the bombs move in space, they establish the feeling of distance and they create a sense of location: far, near, at the very centre. In other words, we have a minimal physical sense of space. But the bombs also construct space *in abstracto* in Kerbaj’s work: they impose a system of locations and positions of its contingent elements, a system of relations between sounds. As the only recognizably repeating sounds, the bombs impose a sense of rhythm and repetitive movement. The explosions appear in irregular but repetitive instances, they create a set of punctual moments. In this sense they provide a specific rhythmic measure to which other sounds can be related, against which other elements can be sized and evaluated, precisely as variations or intensities of the rhythmic movement. The explosions of bombs also structure dynamics and dynamical shifts: they dictate the unfolding and the organization of the shifts from fortissimo to pianissimo, as well as other, more subtle dynamic textures that characterize *Starry Night*; they enforce indexes of dynamical value which arrange other acoustic elements, ordering them according to a specific scale. In

other words, the bombs do not only constitute a sense of physical space, but literally unfold the abstract space of the musical work: the form in which the work organizes its elements. In the absence of any conventional use of musical forms – such as the classical space of tonality or rhythm – the bombs provide a contingent form of musical organization. By following the rhythmical movement of the explosions and the shifts in the dynamics of sounds that they dictate, we obtain a sense of order being imposed on the contingency of environmental and improvised sounds – order *qua* an imprint of a hierarchy between different sound elements, order *qua* a fragile movement of sound relations. This also applies to the specific temporal arrangement of the piece: the bombs also structure the time of Kerbaj's work, establishing provisional time signatures. Appearing almost 'vertically' as loud and excessive interruptions, they encircle the piece and outline what can be taken as its parts.

This is, in short, the essence of the incredible reversal that Kerbaj installs: instead of appearing as forces of destruction and disorder, the bombs represent the force of order; they impose a set of coordinates around which all the heterogeneous and contingent acoustic elements can be measured, put in place and arranged.

Schematizing things, we can in fact say that *Starry Night* exposes three main formal moments: 1) musical order or form is contingent, 2) form is a violent imposition, 3) order functions by assigning points, by making a spatial arrangement.

- 1) Musical form proceeds from a contingent encounter. Sounds take place in a situation, and the rules of their connection are defined by the contingency of the situation itself. The very syntax of the recognition and judgment of sounds, together with the way in which we order and structure them into music, is something that arises out of the field of chance. It is not the general horizon of tonality, rhythm, or harmony which organizes musical discourse. It is the very gesture of the appropriation of a set of contingent sounds that prescribes what is musical and what is not. And in this, the determinant element is precisely the encounter with a specific situation, an encounter with a set of relational coordinates that we discover in the situation as it unfolds.
- 2) The emergence of order or form in and out of contingency is violent. It is violent because it is destructive towards all previous forms and schemas. But it is also violent because it is forced upon the subject by the encounter with the situation. There is an asymmetry

involved in a duet in which the trumpet confronts the live sound of the bombs; the explosions, in their intensity, are like the pillars of a structure which violently imposes itself out of contingency, they are those points at which chance passes into necessity, and where the improvising subject cannot simply follow the formula of openness and wandering but is forced to react to a situation which enforces its own logic.

- 3) Order is a spatial arrangement: it organizes and fixes points, it places things in their places. The bombs function as relational and organizational markers: they assign specific indexations to other acoustic elements, they provide a measure against which the entirety of the sonic material can be organized. It is through the bombs that the fluttering improvisational noises of the trumpet, the environmental sounds, and the silences acquire a sense of unity and hierarchy, a structure of oneness.

VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

These formal explorations that we discover in Kerbaj's work draw an immediate echo between the aesthetic and the political registers. Jacques Attali once wrote: 'With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion.'⁸ Kerbaj is here providing a corrective to Attali: noise, destruction and order are intimately intertwined, in the same manner in which the organization of political situations is irreplaceably infused with violence.

In *Starry Night* the sky over Beirut has been transformed into another place: an abstract world reduced to minimal elements, to tensions between sounds, to relationships of sound textures, which are essentially organized around themes of order and indeterminacy, contingency and violence. And yet this shift from an excessive political situation to an abstract acoustic register also involves a specific movement of return. The minimum of formal relations obtained via an aesthetic abstraction allows one to trace a new path through the political situation, rendering its complexities thinkable. From the first abstraction, the abstraction of sounds, we leap to a second one, a parallel abstraction

8 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 6.

in the political register, as the elements constituting the immediacy of the political situation in Beirut are reassembled and reassessed. Most importantly, it is the theme of political violence that appears in a new light here. Once a formal distance is taken from its crushing sensible presence, violence becomes thinkable, and it becomes thinkable precisely as a question tightly linked to the problem of order and its genesis, as a question of the relationship between order and contingency. Kerbaj's second movement of abstraction, running in parallel to the first one, abstracts from the particular predicates of the political situation in which his performance is enacted,⁹ in order to frame the problem of political violence in a new way – order, indeterminacy and violence now becoming the minimal yet essential markers of the structuring of a political situation.

From a philosophical standpoint, we can observe that Kerbaj is entering into a dialogue with Marx at this point: the formal structure of the musical piece, its own examination of form, its investigation of the relationship between order and indeterminacy, stretching between aesthetics and politics, structurally evokes the problem of the State and its treatment in the Marxist tradition. All of the three moments around which Kerbaj articulates the problem of the genesis of musical form – the aleatory emergence of order, the violence that resides at its base, and the spatializing function of order – reflect in a profound way the approach to the problem of the State in Marxist thought.

For Marx, as we know, the State as a historical form was in no way a natural or necessary phenomenon in human history. It is a contingent occurrence, something that arises in concrete historical circumstances, and therefore something that might perish in the future. 'The State has not always existed' as Lenin once asserted.¹⁰ There is a historical contingency to the birth of the State as the medium of the regulation and ordering of social relations. Order, the statist order, is not something which is natural and necessary, something which can be deduced from divine laws or the laws of human nature; rather, it is something which emerges in particular historical conditions, something which is born out

9 In his visual works, Kerbaj readily abstracts from the complexities of the political situation in the Middle East, satirizing the absurdity of ethno-religious predicates as markers of politics.

10 Cf. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *The State, A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University, July 11, 1919* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).

of concrete tensions and contradictions permeating the socio-historical realm. It is necessary to reject any anthropological ontology of politics, to reject any depiction of the absoluteness or the historical invariance of the State itself. The historical form of the State emerges out of precise conditions: from the necessity to regulate and pacify the gap between wealth and poverty. This is what Engels wrote in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*: '[The] state arose from the need to keep class antagonisms in check, but also arose in the thick of the fight between the classes'.¹¹

At the same time, the emergence of the State is not simply to be equated with the universality and the abstraction of the juridico-political order, with its formal power of regulation. The 'origin' of the State rests on violence. The State is not a product of a 'social contract' between the warring sides which would put an end to violence. It does not arise out of the sovereign will of the people, the will that gives itself laws in order to 'civilize' itself. Rather, it is a product of violence, a forced and parasitic imposition on the will of the social body, which is able to realize, by imposing a universal structure of regulation, the perpetuation of the violence of domination of one part of society over others. The criticism that Marx launched towards the bourgeois myth of industry, labour, thrift and generosity as the origin of capitalist economy applies to the 'origin' of the State as well. Just as the 'primitive accumulation of capital' is not a scene of individual economic enthusiasm, charity and mutuality, but a scene of pillage, theft, exaction and violent dispossession, so too is the 'primitive political accumulation' a scene not of the freedom of the individual and his subjective rights, but of conquest, domination, slavery and oppression.¹² The State is not a solution to violence as Hobbes and the theorists of Natural Law thought; it is violence in itself, an instrument for the perpetuation of violence. It is a profound lesson of Marxism to have revealed the necessary dialectic between Law and violence in history, the complementarity between legality and violence in historical situations. Violence is not opposed to the Law, but accompa-

11 Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works* (London and Moscow: Progress Publishers and Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 577.

12 The problem of 'primitive accumulation' is developed in Part VII of Volume One of *Das Kapital*. See also the remarks on Machiavelli in Louis Althusser, 'Machiavelli's Solitude', in *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 115-30.

nies the Law as both its precondition and necessary supplement. Every politico-juridical order bases itself not on the universality of its principles or norms, but on force, on the asymmetry of the conjunction of forces that it expresses. This is why Lenin insists that the State is necessarily ‘a power standing above the Law’: an absolute power, unlimited by any law, because it institutes and forces laws, because it transforms the excess of force and violence existing in the social terrain into legal norms and institutions, all the while sanctioning and legitimizing the social inequalities from which it is born. In addition to the monopoly of violence, which the Law retains in order to exercise functions of public government, administration and regulation, there is an excess of unregulated, unrestrained violence inscribed in the Law, an excess indifferent to the question of legitimacy, because it proceeds directly from historical relations of exploitation and oppression which it sanctions. As Balibar would argue:

*The State rests on a relation of forces between classes, and not on public interest and the general will. This relation is itself indeed violent in the sense that it is in effect unlimited by any law, since it is only on the basis of the relation of social forces, and in the course of its evolution, that laws and a system of legislation can come to exist – a form of legality which, far from calling this violent relation into question, only legitimates it.*¹³

This repressive essence of the statist order, the essential link between violence and universal legal norms, is also complemented by something else: a productive dimension of the State, expressed precisely in the spatializing operation that Kerbaj evokes in his piece – the assignment and reproduction of fixed points. The State is not simply a mechanism of repressive execution, operating by violence and coercion. There is another dimension inscribed in the State’s function of regulation and administration – it is that dimension which assigns places and roles, which divides society into parts and administers and manages these parts according to specific rules. The function of the juridico-political order is not only to legitimate the violence of class conflict by transposing it to a ‘neutral’ terrain of juridical relations and the putative freedom which they provide. Its function is also to reproduce these relations: to impose the myth of their normality and naturalness, to estab-

13 Étienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 71.

lish fixed points and clearly identifiable categories according to which societies are divided and according to which different parts of the social situation should relate to one another. The statist order is in the last instance a spatializing order: it provides fixed points and places in social space and it imposes the normality of such a division – the normality of the ‘social division of labour’, the normality of socio-economic inequalities, the normality of submission to the rules of the established order. It is this dimension of the State that Althusser attempted to theorize – coming in this sense also close to a certain Foucault – under the rubric of *reproduction*. The maintenance of the capitalist relations of production necessitates not only the maintenance of the conditions of production, but the reproduction of the very relations of production, the relations between exploiters and the exploited, between oppressors and the oppressed. In short, the State order makes sure that everybody is kept in his or her ‘place’:

Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society: the role of the exploited (with a ‘highly-developed’ ‘professional’, ‘ethical’, ‘civic’, ‘national’ and a-political consciousness); the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers orders and speak to them: ‘human relations’), of the agent of repression (ability to give orders and enforce obedience ‘without discussion’, or ability to manipulate the demagogy of a political leader’s rhetoric), or of the professional ideologist (ability to treat consciousnesses with the respect, i.e. with the contempt, blackmail, and demagogy they deserve, adapted to the accents of Morality, of Virtue, of ‘Transcendence’, of the Nation [...]).¹⁴

Returning to Kerbaj’s work let us recapitulate the second, political abstraction that one can see being produced in its formal explorations. By constructing a musical universe out of the extreme political situation of the bombing of Beirut, and moreover by reducing this universe to a set of minimal elements which revolve around themes of order, contingency and violence, Kerbaj translates the situational immediacy of his performance into a more abstract register: what is outlined in *Starry Night* is not simply the logic of pure violence and destruction unfolding in a situation of war; rather, what is outlined here is the silent ‘war’ immanent to the very constitution of the political order: the violent role

14 Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1971), p. 147.

of the State in its construction and reproduction of an abstract set of social roles and positions. This is how the formal aesthetic procedures of *Starry Night* resonate with the Marxist theory of the State and its treatment of the problem of violence as something inseparable from the very notion of order. But this is also how we can see Kerbaj employing aesthetical means in order to bring out the problem of political reorientation: in a situation of extreme violence, where political possibilities and paths seem to be radically absent, it seems imperative in the first place to assume distance: to abstract from the immediacy of the situation in order to examine the fault lines of its own constitution. To invert the problem of the bombs from one of destruction into one of construction.

THE DIALECTIC OF ORDER AND INDETERMINACY

Starry Night, however, poses another problem as corollary to the problem of the relationship between the State order and violence. The exchange between the trumpet and the bombs also presents us with the following question: what is a political relation? Or better, *what is politics* as a relation which is irreducible to the statist logic of administration of the conduct of men and things, and which can only be thought as a radical gesture, as a gesture that introduces a singular novelty into a situation?

This is palpable from the very nature of the duet that Kerbaj enacts: from the tension embodied in the exchange between the trumpet and the bombs. What we have here is not a tension that can be reconciled on a horizontal terrain, where the two ‘performers’ appear as equals. The two ‘performers’, instead, stand in a relation of tension that implies a qualitative difference, an absence of common ground.

The drone and the fluttering sounds of the trumpet, at times indistinguishable from the noise of explosions, introduce a new quality. They introduce a disjunction into the ordered, rhythmical structure imposed by the bombs. The trumpet releases a flurry of heterogeneous sounds – a set of acoustic contingencies – against the violent rhythmical patterns of the bombs. These sounds are also violent, for they seem to dissolve the consistency of the acoustic horizon dominated by the bombs: they cut into it, interrupt it, subvert it. The trumpet does not simply respond to the bomb explosions, it struggles against them: it subverts their rep-

etition. It introduces an aleatory set of sounds, forcing a singular excess into the spatial order being imposed.

From a conceptual perspective, and in another echo of Marxism, it seems to me that Kerbaj here touches upon the problem of the dialectic itself, framed as a relation between repetition and the emergence of the unrepeatable, as a relation between the State and its revolutionary dissolution. In the contrasts and heterogeneous movements of the trumpet and the bombs, we find a reverberation of the problem of the *asymmetry of the contradiction*.

Contradiction is asymmetrical: this is what Marx adds to Hegel against Hegel. When thinking about the contours of the politics of emancipation, of the political struggle against oppression and exploitation, we cannot simply think in terms of symmetry, in terms of two forces confronting each other on an equal terrain. There is always an essential asymmetry involved, an asymmetry both in terms of the contents and qualities of the terms and with regard to their specific relations. A symmetrical contradiction would imply the contradiction between two terms which confront each other on an equal basis, two subjects staging a fight in a horizontal space. An asymmetrical contradiction, by contrast, presupposes an essential structural inequality. There is no common space, there is no common measure of force, as the very terrain upon which the contradiction unfolds is already slanted in one direction. In the words of Althusser:

[C]ontradiction, as you find it in *Capital*, presents the surprising characteristic of being *uneven*, of bringing contrary terms into operation which you cannot obtain by giving the second a sign obtained by negating that of the first. This is because they are caught up in a *relation of unevenness* which continuously reproduces its conditions of existence just on account of this contradiction.¹⁵

Alain Badiou has formalized the problem of asymmetry with great rigour in his *Theory of the Subject*. For Badiou, contradiction is not a binary opposition between two discrete terms, A and B, which would be given in advance and where each would be a direct negation of the other. In fact, according to Badiou's conception, in contradiction there is never an A and a B properly speaking; there are never two clearly

15 Louis Althusser, 'Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?', in *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: Verso, 1976), p. 185.

distinct things. Rather, contradiction has to be thought starting from the relation between A as such, and this same A repeated by being assigned a specific place. So we have A and this same A at another place than itself, A plus a differential, spatial index:

A, we said, (and A, this is the thing) is at the same time A and A_p , where A_p is the generic term for any placement of A. Indeed, this can be A_{p_1} , A_{p_2} , A_{p_3} ... with all the p_1 , p_2 ..., p_n ... belonging, for example, to P. This is what we will see later on: there is an infinity of places. A_p is A in the general-singular of placement. Now, it is always in this way that A presents itself (it is always placed) and is refused (because, as placed, it is not only itself, A, but also its place, A_p).¹⁶

Badiou's reconceptualization of the notion of contradiction infuses the latter with the idea of tension. What we have as constituting elements of contradiction are not two simple poles, or two simple elements, discrete and identifiable in themselves prior to their relation. Contradiction is built upon an irreducible tension immanent to the relation between the two terms; or better, it is built on a tension immanent to the process of the (self-)differentiation of an element, inasmuch as the latter becomes engulfed by – and refuses – the logic which provides it with a place, or a differential index. This is why Badiou would insist that when speaking of contradiction we have to speak of an opposition between a pure being, A, and the infinite combination of its different indexed iterations: its placements. The set of placements, or the set of all the combinations and repetitions of A – all its possible differentiations and redoublings into A_{p_1} , A_{p_2} , A_{p_3} , etc. – is what, according to Badiou, can be thought of as a space, the space of placement, P. What P represents is not to be taken as a pure concept of physical space. In fact, P does not need to be a spatial idea at all, it can also be a temporal space, a movement of time ordered in a homogeneous and repetitive way. What is essential for Badiou's concept is the logic of spatiality taken abstractly, the logic of organization or positioning of elements, which arranges the latter in such a way so as to impose points and recognizable coordinates. P is, in short, that which places things in their places according to specific rules and norms, and in this sense engenders their ceaseless differentiation. With the proviso that the differences produced are not alterations but

16 Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* [Théorie du sujet] (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 6.

repetitions. In its redoubling through P, A is never transformed proper, but always returns to itself in a specific manner. Instead of the production of real qualitative difference – as in a temporal rupture – we have iteration, an automatic compulsion to repeat.

What is a contradiction, then? A contradiction is a relation between a pure element and a repetitive structure which orders, organizes and places elements: it is a movement of tension between a term and its indexation: '[The] true initial contradictory term of something, A, is not something else, not even the same A placed, A_p . No, the true camouflaged contradictory term of A is the space of placement P, it is that which *delegates the index*'.¹⁷

It is clear that the determining characteristic of contradiction conceived in this sense is its *asymmetry*: there is no symmetry between the two poles, A and P, because one of the poles determines the very terrain on which the contradiction unfolds. One pole holds the other in a relationship of inclusion, subjects it to itself. It is P, the space of placements, or, according to Badiou's neologism *esplace* (or *splace* in English) which is the dominant element in the contradiction, because it is P which always provides an index, a measure to A and not the reverse:

Any contradiction is fundamentally asymmetrical, in that one of the terms sustains a relation of inclusion to the other. The including term, which is to say the place, the space of placement, is named (particularly by Mao) the dominant term, or the principal aspect of the contradiction. The one that is included, for its part, is the subject of the contradiction. It is subjected to the other, and it is what receives the mark, the stamp, the index. It is A that is indexed into A_p according to P.¹⁸

Now, the entire question of politics, and of the revolutionary unfolding of the dialectic, is a question of the passage from structural asymmetry – from the logic of spatial indexation and repetition – to its revolutionary upturning, to what Badiou names *reversible asymmetry*. If the essence of contradiction is an asymmetry in which one of the terms is always the including and organizing principle, whilst the other is the 'passive', included, and dominated element, is it possible to put a stop to such a logic, to reverse it? Is it possible to subvert and overturn the system of places? Or better: how can we think of an element that would free itself

17 Ibid., p. 7.

18 Ibid., p. 15.

from this system and annul the logic of indexation and inclusion which keeps it in check?

Badiou schematizes two possible paths through which such an unfolding might proceed. A *quantitative* path of change implies the reversal of places, a combinatorial logic of displacement, reshuffling, and permutation. What was subordinated becomes dominant, what was dominant becomes subordinated. The terms of the contradiction reverse their places, they exchange quantities of force which are accorded to them by their structural locations in a situation. And yet this logic remains a purely 'reformist' logic, or a spatial logic according to Badiou's lexicon: what changes is the position of the elements, whilst the places and the functions remain the same. We have formal mutations and variations, but the essential content, the very structure of asymmetrical places, remains unaltered. In the end, such a logic of quantitative inversion changes nothing essential: it imposes variations on the same structure, variations on the place, whilst reproducing the asymmetry of the structure itself, whilst reproducing the contours of order which divides the terms unequally. The occupation of P by an element A simply reproduces P, the logic of spatial indexation, and its unequal distribution of terms.

By contrast, a *qualitative* path implies the transformation of the very system of places in which contradiction is entangled. What is introduced is a new quality, wherein the old place is subverted and overturned. The reversal of asymmetry here involves a breach in the oppressive logic which hierarchizes and structures the terms. Change is, in other words, conceived as the construction of an emancipatory novelty, and not as a simple change of hands or a change of places. Change is that point at which the system of places which divides and differentiates the elements is replaced with something else, a radically different configuration of terms in which the violent logic of placement is annulled.

A political example that Badiou draws from the syntax of class struggle can help clarify this. The proletarian struggle against capitalism is not a struggle against the capitalist class as a subject, nor is it simply a struggle for the occupation of the place that the capitalist class as a dominant class maintains. It is a struggle against a type of a relation, a structured totality, which is hierarchically and unequally divided into classes; it is a struggle against the system of places which makes a class society, a struggle for a situation in which the socio-economic divides between classes have been abolished. As Badiou writes:

The true contrary of the proletariat is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world, imperialist society, of which the proletariat, let this be noted, is a notorious element, as the principal productive force and as the antagonistic political pole [...]. The project of the proletariat, its internal being, is not to contradict the bourgeoisie, or to cut its feet from under it. This project is communism, and nothing else. That is, the abolition of any place in which something like a proletariat can be installed. The political project of the proletariat is the disappearance of the space of the placement of classes. It is the loss, for the historical something, of every index of class.¹⁹

According to the *Theory of the Subject*, such a global process of qualitative transformation already starts with the production of a minimal fissure, a punctual destructive gesture. In outlining the logic of this fissure, Badiou would coin another neologism, that of *horlieu*, the *outplace*. In order to grasp the cessation of indexation, we first need to start with something which escapes its sway, with something that frees itself from the determination by a structured system of places. Outplace is quite literally something which is out-of-place, something subtracted from the very logic of placement, a radical heterogeneity that does not allow itself to be indexed in any way. It is an element which is not placed, a heterogeneity that cannot be placed, measured, included in the repetitive sequence. This radically heterogeneous term is never an original potentiality for Badiou – there is never a pure identity of A existing as a virtuality beneath every structuration, or being alienated and lost in every placement. Rather, the outplace is an element which only exists in and through the dialectical process of subversion and destruction, through the movement of the cessation of the place. The outplace is the fragile emergence of an excess at that point at which the subject emerges by freeing itself from the resort of inert repetitive habits that were previously assigned to it. The subject produces an outplace (and produces itself) by applying force to the logic of placement that keeps it in check, when it forces into place a radically heterogeneous quality, an element whose only consistency is radical indeterminacy as such. In Badiou's words:

A subject is such that, subservient to the rule that determines a place, it nevertheless punctuates the latter with the interruption of its effect. Its subjectivizing essence lies in this very interruption, by which the place, where the rule is deregulated, consists in destruction.²⁰

19 Ibid., p. 7.

20 Ibid., p. 259.

What this means is that politics is always a matter of the concentration of the movement of interruption. A global upturning begins with the insertion of a cut into repetition, by the displacement of the automatism of the place and by the production of something unassignable, a qualitative heterogeneity to the logic of placements; and it expands further by the steadfast drawing of consequences of this heterogeneity, by an affirmation of a novelty that forces its way through the system of places and overturns its structure. A dialectical contradiction, schematized in terms of the confrontation of the logics of *esplace* and *horlieu*, is always torn between the movement of repetition and indexing, on the one hand, and the interruption and cessation of indexing induced by the emergence and the forcing of an unrepeatable term, on the other. Politics, revolutionary politics, is consubstantial with the question of novelty. It exists whenever we have the creation of a new point upsetting the rules of the old world, whenever we have something whose inclusion in the world necessitates the dissolution of this world.

C O D A

In its framing of the ‘impossible’ duet between the trumpet and the bombs, *Starry Night* can be read as an aesthetic rendition of the opposing movements of contradiction that the philosopher formalizes in the concept. As the night sky over Beirut becomes transposed into a war of sounds, the exchanges between the improvising musician and the war machinery exhibit a series of tensions between repetition and interruption, between placing and displacement, between homogenization and the heterogeneous. The vertical and rhythmical movements of the bombs, which seek to draw the entirety of the sonic material into their ordering apparatus, is countered by the errancy of the trumpet sounds, sounds which have been drawn out of their place – unassignable sounds, arrhythmical sounds, disordered sounds, coming from nowhere and everywhere, and being in the end indistinguishable from noise: and as such, sounds which are precisely bent on upsetting and destroying the consistency of the spatial order imposed – destroying its consistency by including themselves, as heterogeneous elements, within it.

But this incredible duet that Kerbaj stages remains, nevertheless, an impossible duet. The aesthetic strategy does not seek to impose itself as a substitute for politics and for concrete political strategies. It does

not seek to represent politics, or to serve as its immediate instrument. Rather what it does is to create a specific tension with politics, a tension which opens a gap in reality and places politics at a distance from itself. This is why the precise nature of Kerbaj's work is difficult to define: stranded between aesthetics and politics, *Starry Night* is at once a formal work, an abstract exploration in the medium of sound, and a performance, enacted in the concrete situation and organized around immediate events and elements that compose this situation. Through an aesthetic inscription of real political events that surround it, but also through their formal transposition, *Starry Night* takes something from politics in order to construct a fictive realm upon it: it abstracts from the immediate reality in order to propose a new world; it displaces things from the given situation and reorganizes them in another sense, in an abstract universe. But through this formal exploration, it also provides politics with a subjective paradigm. Staging the dialectic of order and indeterminacy, a dialectic of the place and its cessation, the constructed, abstract universe of *Starry Night*, paradoxically, appears more real than immediate reality as such. In the sheer impossibility of the political context into which he is thrown, Kerbaj uses aesthetic means in order to construct a path. A fictive path, a fragile path composed in and through abstraction, but still a path, a thinkable way, where the subject can learn how to find new means of orientation vis-à-vis the situation, and trace steps out of it.

Ozren Pupovac, 'The Violence of Form: Philosophical Remarks on Mazen Kerbaj's Sound Piece *Starry Night*', in *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 1 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 251–74 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01_13>

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