

## The Loss of the Sublime: Encounters and Experiences

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In the book, *The Music of Our Lives*, Kathleen Marie Higgins makes the statement that “our everyday encounters with music are neither ‘encounters’ nor ‘experience’ in any meaningful sense.” (1991:2) I found it ironic that she uses the two terms “encounter” and “experience” to “lament” about the nature of musical involvement - two somewhat synonymous terms with fairly different spiritual and structural ramifications. It is the difference between a transverse section and a longitudinal slice; one absolute, the other diachronic. One stands still while the other pursues. One brushes the skin, the other encompasses being. It is the same as if they were lovers, as are architecture and music, entangled in a rhythmic dance of adoration and betrayal, the simple art of breathing.

As outliers, we should be moved by these rhythms of the heart, but they come to us as dreams, for, our higher selves, the structures of our moral intellect, collapsed under the weight of Kant’s formalistic aesthetics (Higgins, 1991:4). Judgments of taste became more important than underlying metaphysical or geometric organization. What became the surface of form no longer needed internal structure as long as it carried with it a universal call to the subjective senses, and diffusion into the sublime. Matteo Melioli shows us how architecture and music, geometric compositions in space and time, were once inextricably woven as one fabric, the structure of one embedded in the aesthetics of the other. (Melioli, 2007) What were once synchronous, a *mathematique* based on harmonic proportion and scale, are now unshakable residues of one another, perhaps victims of the nepotism of pop culture.

This victimization leads to a renunciation of sensitivity, and as Higgins goes on to say, “our loss of sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of music coincides with a cultural tendency to treat music as a ‘background’ phenomenon”. (Higgins, 1990: 4) It is as if we have become preoccupied, whether by stimuli in the outer world or by some inner alteration, slipping into what William James calls a “hypnotic trance”, suggesting that, “the eyes are fixed on vacancy, the sounds of the world melt into confused unity, the attention is dispersed so that the whole body is felt, as it were, at once, and the foreground of consciousness is filled, if by anything, by a sort of solemn sense of surrender to the empty passing of time”. (James, 1890: 404) This sentiment is true in architecture too, for the grand masterpieces, the monuments of our age, become fewer and

farther between. It seems the higher intellectual propensity of mankind, the moral search, has been abandoned for less ethical pursuits, and we have fallen in love with form, mistaking it for beauty.

This is obviously indicative of a larger endemic crisis; one that is pervasive in our culture in general, and specifically in our modern psyche. Higgin's theory rests on the notion that "the extreme expression of this development can be found among the philosophical proponents of musical 'Platonism', who contend that music is an ideal entity, only imperfectly embodied in this world". (Higgins, 1990:4) If this is the case, then we truly are engaged in a struggle for a more meaningful description of form, and we should lament for these lost lovers. We, the faceless masses, have few cultural "experiences" outside of our work-a-day lives, and yet we hold fast to irony and to an amorphous array of inanities, as if these clichés *were* the higher form of experience. The shadows we perceive as reality become faint reflections of our projected desire. Plato himself might agree, that there appears a dichotomy between what is encountered and what we actually pursue as a way of life, which is symptomatic of a much more profound calamity, developing as a form of narcissistic self-indulgence.

However, a real experience may demand too much of us, may touch us too deeply. A real experience may dredge up lost emotions, primitive feelings that have become inert, antiquated, and forgotten. They have become laughing, taunting ghosts dwelling deep in our collective subconscious, mocking our every move, questioning our every decision, exaggerating our every fear. We were once integrated sensory beings, but these coincidences with nature were displaced by pure intellect and reason. We thought we could roam amongst the gods, but in the end our narcissism blossomed, and the glass that became the emblem of modernism, reflected to us the structure of our impoverished spirit.

Moreover, our encounters are now reduced to brief flings, distractions from our smart phones and text messaging "friends", diversions from our already over-stressed multi-tasked lifestyles. Actual encounters are seldom real-time anymore, and rarely have "meaning". They are now "on-my-own-time", custom-made; downloaded sound tracks, online simulated dating, and uploaded video hubris. Perhaps virtual reality has replaced our minds with virtual consciousness, reflecting a simulated psychic inner world. Perhaps real-life encounters, those that effect us on a deeper emotional or higher intellectual level, have become too terrifying, even petrifying, for a

pop culture that has been desensitized to deeper psychological mysteries. Perhaps we no longer need meaning, or beauty for that matter.

On-the-other-hand, having a real-life encounter may be prerequisite to more authentic experience, a first step towards fulfillment of a “real” experience, one that has the potential of being “phenomenologically complete”. Complete in the sense of being immediate and ideographic; simultaneously engaged with our environment in a holistic undifferentiated pre-verbal way. In Gibson’s terms, it means to be overtly attentive to our environment (Gibson, 1986,: 244) in an active, systematic fashion. This direct attention is an intersection with memory and corresponds to the convergence of inner and outer worlds. It represents an immersive quality of being in the world, and is antithetical to popular Cartesian duality, and suggests the possibility of a higher synesthetic perceptual system. It is a state of sublimity arising as a correspondence with our environment. To touch is to feel, and as Goethe suggests, to see is to caress.

But we must take this one step further, not to rest here on platitudes, for to be phenomenologically complete is to regard ourselves first as damaged fallen beings. To consider ourselves phenomenologically complete is to demean the struggle to become whole, and what we seek is to dissolve form into a reflection of the sublime. It is the struggle that makes us human. From Kant, we again learn that beauty, as it relates to understanding, "is connected with the form of the object", having "boundaries", while the sublime "is to be found in a formless object", represented by a "boundlessness" (§ 23). Again from Melioli, the sublime, though “initially depressing”, “becomes exaltation, and our anguish turns into an active enthusiasm, able to project us beyond the immediacy of the phenomenon, beyond the confines of the built geometry, and into the experience of pure space”. (Melioli, 2007: 54)

END

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