



## Music, desire and affective community organizing for repair: Note for the piece ‘Le désir est un exil, le désir est un désert...’

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For L. & M.  
Desire is an exile, desire is a desert ...

Never an individual exile, never a personal desert,  
but a collective exile and a collective desert.  
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972: 452)

This note is part of an assemblage of which the main part is musical. If, as Nietzsche (2003: §6) puts it, music doesn't need any extra-musical material to acquire meaning, this text aims nevertheless to enunciate the philosophical approach underlining the piece ‘Le désir est un exil, le désir est un désert...’, and to offer few reflective elements not to explain, to define, but to go-with, to extend the piece and the meaning it opens.

### Music as organizing for repair: an approach

Our epoch is overpopulated with political distress: the deep pain which echoes some striking political events, the resentment surrounding unrealized political potentials, the exhaustion provoked by the intensity of political action, and so on. A dominant approach only names the disquiet through a pathologization – ‘depression’, ‘trauma’, ‘anxiety’, ‘neurosis’, ‘psychosis’, ‘schizophrenia’... The purpose here is not to dwell on the pathology itself but to ask what kinds of affects move through the dis-ease, what kinds of symptoms can be felt, and how these phenomena share a common affective tonality. Following Peter Pal Pelbart

(2013: 54-59), a psychotherapist and philosopher who addresses transversally issues of ‘mental health’, art and power, we might describe political distress as ‘a particular vertigo swirling negation and passivity’: there is a breakdown, something doesn’t operate properly, and this sagging comes down in various states of being, from isolation/exclusion to acute spleen, from various self-destructive practices to harmful conflicts. These kinds of states can be understood by those who have been profoundly deceived by a political context, experimenting moments of backlash, ‘failure’, or inertia, like this comrade in the context of the divisions within the Russian and Ukrainian activist milieus following the end of the Maidan occupation in Kiev: ‘We no longer know what common ground can establish connections between our movements, especially at the moment we need it most’ (Liaisons, 2018: 43). This is the kind of tonality that this contribution attempts to unfold.

This political affect is socially produced, even if some social climates are more prone to generate these catatonic states, which transversally affect mind and body. The social production effectuated by what Guattari (1989: 70) calls the Integrated Global Capitalism<sup>1</sup> – particularly in its current reactionary state –, manufactures the ‘sick individual’ through diverse operations of subjective production, but also through operations of repression and integration. This double movement concerns every level of subjectivity, including feelings, perceptions, schemes of action, affects, thinking: it determines the modes of relation with the world until the unconscious (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007: 56-61). A perspective that slightly – but crucially – shifts the issue of political distress, which first appears as the production of a subjectivity detached from its capacity to feel-act, to intervene sensibly in the world in a way that couldn’t be reduced to the recognizable and valorizable individual. For Bernard Aspe (2006: 190-191), following Gilbert Simondon, this link between action and emotion is exactly what has to be *repaired*. Yet emotion, for Simondon (1989: 110), has to be understood as a relation to the pre-individual, and the pre-individual makes us enter in the field of affect<sup>2</sup>.

Beside the production of a detached subjectivity, the repressive-integrative dimension of capitalism implies a forced interruption of a movement of desire, the constraint stop of a process of singularization, or its continuation towards a

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1 For Guattari, far more than an economic system, capitalism is a gigantic machine of production of culture, science and subjectivity that tolerates only the modes of expression and valorisation that it can normalize and integrate.

2 Affect moves through, it groups into tendential relation not individual feelings but pre-individual ones, tendencies (Manning, 2013). In that sense, political distress, as a rupture of the link between emotion (relation to the pre-individual) and action, is really an affective problem.

void, its capture to an imposed *telos* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 103-105). Maintenance, in that sense, could be understood as the re-enactment of a process of desire, the care for that capacity to affirm a singular becoming not limited to the existential options proposed by the capitalist social production.

Because if political distress is produced socially, the process of restarting the decoded flows of desire doesn't imply any return to an individualized self to take care of, as promoted by liberal therapeutics, but must pass through a new form of collectivity. Since political distress is an affective problem, the processes of repair it calls for must also be conceived on the affective level. And since affect is essentially collective – it tunes to a multiplicity of forces, connects to an ecology before it crystallizes into an individual (Manning, 2013: 27) – the affective process of repair calls for an *affective community*. This mode of community is perpetually in movement, not necessarily based on identity or shared interests, but on the density of what circulates between the beings that compose it<sup>3</sup>. Such a collective continually tries to maintain 'a different interaction between the singular<sup>4</sup> and the common' (Pelbart, 2013:14):

The community would have a function of relief, a balm, almost as a protection against unbearable solitude, while at the same time, solitude as a protection against the unbearable weight of the collective. Perhaps what is most difficult is to think about escape and the collective together, the collective itself as a line of flight, the line of flight as a collective. (Pelbart, 2013: 21)

This movement between community and singularity appears to be a complex game, which needs to find its own rhythm. This rhythm shouldn't be confused with a back-and-forth between the individual and the society: it is rather a durational modulation among different layers of experience, the taking-form of a movement, and its variation between different degrees of speed, of proximity and distance, of contrast.

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3 These communities are as intensive as they are evanescent, without pre-established belonging. In this sense, there is never *a* community; *there is* community. That community in movement always has a strong political dimension, even when it doesn't occur in a political event or group *per se*. On the other side, all the political communities are not affective in themselves, even if affect plays a crucial role in the formation of every community. Nonetheless, there could be moments of affective community circulating in every political community, even the more reactionary ones (cf. Gendron-Blais, 2016).

4 'Singular' is understood here as a process of singularization, which implies the articulation and the agglomeration of connections at the infra-individual (systems of perception, affect, desire, ideation) and the extra-individual (economic, social, ecological systems) levels to elaborate a (singular) way of living (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007).

In that sense, if, following Ultra-red<sup>5</sup>, we understand organizing as ‘the formal practices that build relationships out of which people compose an analysis and strategic actions’ (Ultra-red, 2000), out of which they take on their common condition, then organization is deeply affective and experiential (Manning, 2013: 6). Organization as an active substantive – a ‘it’s organizing’ – concerns the elaboration of the assemblages producing subjectivities able to feel-act in the world. In that sense, the process of organizing implies to share a common perception, at any level, and act from it (Invisible Committee, 2014: 11). But this processual ability to make-consist and share a common perception of the situation, which is crucial for creation and autonomy, is often contented and even attacked by the productive-repressive apparatuses of capitalism (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007: 66). And that’s why it has to be repaired and sustained through various singular and collective processes. This mode of organization places the issue of maintenance on the micro-political field, blurring the limits between political economy and desire (libidinal) economy: because the economics of maintenance of the moving process of unconscious desires is the site of a crossing of social, technical, existential, machinic issues (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 456-467). Maintenance as the preservation of the means to share a collective power able to dissolve the feeling of fighting against the world alone, a set of techniques to sustain the living force of affirmation amongst the ruins, and to restart it together when halted by capital.

Music is one these set of techniques. Since political distress is one of these charged troubles exceeding the sayable, and since it is often lived as something barely palpable through any discursive practice, music could play a crucial role to sustain the process movement of desire through its capacity to render perceptions that language is unable to carry. Music, here understood as a manner to draw attention and to organize the sound bodies<sup>6</sup> emerging from the surroundings, is a way to access the ineffable dimensions of intensity affecting beings and their environment. Through these extra-linguistic capacities, music could then reinforce life movement, exercising, as Nietzsche (2003: §21) affirmed, a true healing function.

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5 The Ultra-red collective, founded in 1994 in the context of the AIDS activism, uses sound-based research that engages the organizing and analysis of political struggles through the acoustic mapping of contested spaces and histories (Ultra-red, 2000).

6 The concept of sound body is first used to avoid the more standard term of ‘sound object’, which implies an objectifying relation to sound, occulting its operative, active dimension: the actualized sound is not only the result of a production, it is productive, it *makes* something. The ‘bodying’ of sound also underlines its materiality and its deep relation to perception.

But this ‘healing’ shouldn’t be associated with the utilitarian use of therapeutic practices who seek to reinstate the unity of the Self and that reduces the difficulties experienced to the psychological problems of an individual. Some approaches of music therapy for instance mobilize a whole lexicon of personal goals and functional individuals that seems to exclude the importance of the relational field and the environmental context, producing a depoliticization of the issue of political distress<sup>7</sup>. One of the main problems with this approach is that it considers that the constitutive heterogeneity of every living being is something that has to be *fixed*, corrected, rather than something that have to be sustained, taken care of :

neither men nor women are clearly defined personalities, but rather vibrations, flows, schizzes, and ‘knots’. ... For everyone is a little group (*un groupuscule*) and must live as such—or rather, like the Zen tea box broken in a hundred places, whose every crack is repaired with cement made of gold .... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972 : 434-435)

The multiplicity that inhabit each one of us knows subtle changes, different connections with the multiplicities of the outside, and the mobility between all these parts, the consistency required for the parts to hold together, is a subtle game that needs full attention, and sometimes repair.

In some extent, however, the process of repair is paradoxically related to a gesture of cutting, a breaking. What has to be broken is of course not the singular being experiencing political distress, but the so-called ‘normal me’ and the personal coordinates from which it results. Because such a cut opens a breach, through which pre-personal singularities are liberated and desire could flows since these are precisely what is contained by the capitalist axiomatic and its various mechanisms of repression of desire (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 434-435, 458).

Music can actively participate to that breaching of the capitalistic production of subjectivity, by provoking an intensification of the drives that generates a divestment of the self: ‘Only with reference to the spirit of music do we understand a joy in the destruction of the individual’ (Nietzsche, 2003: §2, §16). What remains from that destruction are singularities and collectivities: singularities, since the transindividual character of music creation accentuates in a creative and affirmative way the differentialization of the becomings that characterizes the process of singularization refusing the capitalist subjectivization (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007 : 67). Collectivities, since the affects

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7 ‘Music Therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish *individualized goals* within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional’ (American Music Therapy Association, 2018; author’s emphasis).

produced by music have a transductive<sup>8</sup> potential that cuts the bodying towards the collective agitation of its pre-individual potential: affects are true force of attunement to the multiplicities living in, around and through us (Manning, 2013 : 28).

Yet the ‘destructive’ operations of depersonalization and the operations of care for the emerging multiplicities are in fact two sides of the same movement. And this movement is deeply productive, but its productivity is a desiring one, producing different subjectivities that are not limited to the capitalist axiomatic: this process follows its lines of flight – which leaks both the personal *and* the social – that come to crack the capitalistic social production. Music, as well as other modes of artistic expression, could play a crucial role in this productivity since it opens the way, through experimentation, to more and more decoded flows of desire passing through the *socius* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 451, 454-455, 458).

Of course, this productivity of music can also be captured in the globalized circuits of consumption and recognition: its lines of flight could for instance be restrained in an exotic or spiritual escapism, and its power to switch the ambiances could be canalized to reinforce the Spectacle (as exemplified by the continuous use of Muzak in public spaces). Furthermore, music can also be operational in a majoritarian, identitarian perspective: its instrumentalization as a tool for national or even military cohesion is well known. These two limited but very actual outputs have to be considered in every reflection about the political force of music. Yet this note is not about all the things music can do, but is only an occasion to reflect on some of its very singular contributions to a peculiar process of repair.

In that sense, music can play an essential role in a process of organizing against political distress: it trains our capacity to listen to the intensive differences that vibrates in each one of us, and to listen to the surroundings; it refines our capacity to perceive, study and analyse the socio-political conditions that make themselves heard through acoustic ecologies – ‘listening is a site for the organization of politics’ (Ultra-red, 2008: n.p.) – it helps us to learn how to play with the different rhythmic oscillations between moments of community and moments of solitude. Like psychotherapist and art critic Suely Rolnik states reflecting on the work of Lygia Clark, art is an ecological stock of the invisible species that inhabit each one of us, and this ‘generous germinative life [is a] source of oxygen for the confrontation with the tragic dimensions of existence’

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8 The transductive character of affect refers to its capacity to cut through individuality, but in an inventive way, creating new processes for life (Manning, 2013).

(Rolnik, 2007: 2; author's translation). Music, the art of time playing with the invisible, is well positioned to contribute to that living task. When combined with other revolutionary practices (political, analytical, etc.), it becomes a wheel to desiring machines, giving motion to the unconscious process (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 161-162), and connecting it with the multiple forces phasing in the surroundings. And that's what the piece 'Le désir est un exil, le désir est un désert...' modestly aims to do.

### **The piece: 'Le désir est un exil, le désir est un désert...'**

The musical piece 'Le désir est un exil...' answers a double call: it was first composed as a gift for a friend experiencing a deep moment of political distress, taken by the disappointment and frustration to note the incapacity, for a community of struggle, to provide a support network in moments of crisis. This kind of resentment could be particularly harmful, since it affects both the singular being and the collective in a spiral of negative reactions. In the organization of the maintenance and repair of an affective community, the elaboration of a new solidarity is needed in the contemporary biopolitical context (Pelbart, 2013: 22). But this solidary resonance is far from being an easy task. A task of reparation of the capacity to feel-act singularly and collectively that the affective community is sometimes unable to sustain, and that's where trust can be hurt, where an inclination towards the others and the world can take a twisted angle.

Then, the piece answered the call of another friend who approached me to participate in a unique handicraft book made by people in Montreal to be sent overseas to that friend experiencing a difficult time. That collective gift in parcels is in itself an operation of affective community: we all shared a will to experiment around political distress that we all know, in different ways, to make that distant friend feel like she's not alone, in spite of the distance. All the contributions carried this force of affective encountering, even if some of the people participating to the project didn't know each other (and even if some even didn't know 'personally' the friend experiencing political distress at this time).

My contribution to that project found its true inspirational impulse when, during a short meeting with the concerned friend, the discussion slipped toward the force of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in relation to issues of political distress. I then returned to the book, and was suddenly struck by that sentence:

Desire is an exile, desire is a desert that traverses the body without organs and makes us pass from one of its faces to the other. Never an individual exile, never a

personal desert, but a collective exile and a collective desert. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 452)

If desire is productive, it is also what urges us to follow a creative line of flight, which implies a departure from belongings: class, family, nation, statuses, etc. But that exile necessarily passes through the desert, the body without organs (BwO) and its two faces. On one side, it is the limit of the *socius*, the end of civilized world, but that's also the place where molar organizations re-consolidate social production through the conquest of a new legitimacy (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 121, 155). On the other side, the desert is the plane of composition, of consistency, 'liberating movements, extracting particles and affects' (Pelbart, 2013: 91), where desiring machine produce a perpetual flow of actives forces. But this side is also a place of arid hardships, of great sufferings. Thus, through that movement of desertion through the BwO, desiring production has to keep moving, not stop in the desert, where a terrible distress could blow (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 155-161, 207, 228). Ambivalence of the desert.

However, that quote is also the moment of a important shift in the book: the desert, associated with the BwO, here *becomes desire* itself: not only the place where the process movement is effectuated, but the machine that allows us to traverse the desert, like if it was taking a bit of it for the road. And that's also the moment where that desertion – the 'desert-desire', which is the productive investment of revolutionary desire – appears to be deeply collective: the movement through which molecular multiplicities of desiring production are forming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 454, 456). And that is the ambivalence which the piece 'Le désir est un exil...' wants to unfold, to play with: desert as the harsh site of passage, of danger and potential death of desire, but also the force of desire, full of life, even if it is often a creeping one, between the cracks.

Through delicate operations, the machinic assemblage formed by the music piece tends to let us hear the relations between things, the becoming-molecular that goes through all the aspects of reality. 'Music has this capacity to amplify the coming-to-expression of a whole ecology, to make feel the ontogenetic force of emergence of the event's qualities that is perception at its most creative and indeterminate' (Manning, 2013: 174). When bringing to perception the molecular multiplicity of material life, music becomes a technique for micro-political interventions in favour of 'a radical depersonalization for a different conjugation with the flows of the world' (Pelbart, 2013: 14). An opening to the deserts that we are:

We are deserts, but populated by tribes, flora and fauna. [...] they inhabit it, they pass through it, over it... [they designate] an event before a subject, more a collective assemblage than an individual, an intensity before a form. In short, the

most singular point; an opening for the biggest multiplicity. (Deleuze and Parnet, 1996: 11)

And that's where, through a becoming-molecular, new and deep encounters could happen: that's where affective communities could emerge<sup>9</sup>.

Of course, a three minutes musical piece is only a tiny block of sensation to share such concerns. But like the desert, which is the site of important rites of passage in many cultures, we should not underestimate the power of small encounters: that is often where a new process of subjectivization is produced, one

having more to do with surroundings and resonances, or distances and encounters... A subjective ecology [that] sustain the disparity of worlds, forms of life, ... rhythms, gestures, intonations, sensations, and encourage its proliferation ..., such that each singularity preserves, not its identity, but its power of affectation and envelopment in the immense [polyphonic] game of the world. Without that, every being sinks into the black hole of its solitude, deprived of its connections and the sympathy that makes it live. (Pelbart, 2013: 22)

Music could help to bring the unheard trembling in the folds of the world to those who need to hear it<sup>10</sup>, when they are struck in the arid desert on their way to exile, calling for a community to come, but that seems absent.

Good listening.

<https://soundcloud.com/hubertgendron-blais/le-desir-est-un-exil-le-desir-est-un-desert>

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9 A community that doesn't necessarily accomplish itself in the actual gathering, but that takes place in the speculative presence of an ecology of practices, in the brief and fragile coming-together – physical and potential – that could reorient the fields of living. A community that implies an attention to the micro-politics of life, and which is sustained by a belief in the ineffable, and its power of resistance (Manning, 2016).

10 The complex issues of the potential audiences and the conditions of reception for music to exercise its repair function overpass the purpose of this essay. These conditions have to be thought and elaborated differently for each situation, in a way to care for the singularity of the event.

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