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## **CIPHERS OF CHANGE: MUSIC AND APOCALYPSE**

*Cifra para transformação: música e apocalipse*

Sander van Maas \*

**ABSTRACT:** Focusing on the question of the metaphysical possibility of change, the article explores a particular musical instance of change: the loss of world. Starting from the general observation that music plays a special role when it comes to the collapse of worlds, it studies two philosophical scenes (from Plato and Schopenhauer) in which music is thought as opening the possibility of change. In Plato, music occurs as an educational facilitator of (individual, personal) change that is ambiguously described in terms of sovereignty and groundlessness. In Schopenhauer, music is thought as the very edge of the world, where the loss of world (and the transition to religious renunciation) is a structural aspect of music's very concept. This notion of music as being somehow outside, or on the margin of the world, but in a hyperbolic and almost redemptive sense, is then taken into a discussion of the Hollywood blockbuster *The Big Short* (2015), in which the (historical) 2007 collapse of Wall Street is prophesized by a number of marginal figures, one of whom entertains a special relation to music. Again, music appears as a figure (a cipher) of the change that these characters feel coming, and a shift near the end of the movie suggests a loss that not only affects the world, but this time also music. While music has historically been regarded as an agent of change (of feeling, concept, or sociality), here it would seem that it is music itself that is affected by the possibility of change beyond recognition, and perhaps beyond its own concept. The idea of music would then suggest a logic of change reminding on one hand of the eminent hyperboles of ancient music theologies (Augustine), and on the other hand the more recent accounts of change, apocalypse and miracles in such diverse thinkers as Derrida and Meillassoux, and in contemporary 'apocalyptic' novels such as David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988). Does the loss of music in these works suggest a possibility of new worlds?

**KEYWORDS:** Change. Metaphysics. Music. Hyperbole. Apocalypse.

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**RESUMO:** Centrando-se na questão da possibilidade metafísica de mudança, o artigo aborda uma particular instância musical de transformação: a perda do próprio mundo. A partir da observação de que a música desempenha papel especial quando se trata do colapso de mundos, o artigo analisa duas cenas filosóficas (em Platão e Schopenhauer) nas quais a música é pensada como geradora da possibilidade de mudança. Em Platão, a música ocorre como facilitadora educacional para a mudança (tanto individual como pessoal), e vem descrita ambigualmente em termos tanto de soberania como de ausência de fundamentação. Em Schopenhauer, a música é pensada como fronteira do mundo, onde a perda do próprio mundo (e uma transformação mediante renúncia religiosa) é aspecto estrutural do próprio conceito de música. Essa noção da música como que fora ou à margem do mundo, em sentido hiperbólico e quase redentor, é então trazida para a discussão do filme *The Big Short* (sucesso de bilheteria de Hollywood em 2015), no qual o histórico colapso de Wall Street em 2007-2008 vem profetizado por uma série de personagens marginais, um dos quais tem relação especial com a música. Mais uma vez a música aparece como figura (uma cifra) para a transformação que esses personagens sentem vir, mudança que, perto do final do filme, sugere uma perda que afeta não só o mundo, mas a própria música. Embora a música tenha sido historicamente considerada como agente de mudança (de sentimentos, conceitos ou sociedades), aqui a própria música é que vem afetada por uma transformação que está além de sua capacidade de percepção e, talvez, além de seu próprio conceito. A ideia de música sugere então uma lógica de mudança que evoca, por um lado, conhecidas hipérboles de antigas reflexões teológicas sobre a música (Agostinho) e, por outro lado, relatos mais recentes de transformações, acontecimentos apocalípticos e milagres em pensadores tão diversos como Derrida e Meillassoux, e em romances ‘apocalípticos’ contemporâneos como *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988) de David Markson. Será que a perda da música nessas obras sugeriria a possibilidade de novos mundos?

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Transformação. Metafísica. Música. Hipérbole. Apocalipse.

## *Beginnings*

“At the very moment when Rome was aflame, he had mounted his private stage, and [...] had sung the destruction of Troy” (TACITUS)

“Everyone, deep in their hearts, is waiting for the end of the world to come” (MURAKAMI, 2012, p. 165, quoted in McKAY, 2015).

Whenever there is apocalypse, there is music. Or so it seems, judging by the proximity of the motifs of music and apocalypse in classical and popular sources. The trumpets in the prophetic book of Ezekiel or those in the Apocalypse of John seem enough to draw a familiar pattern, and contemporary novels and movies only seem to confirm it. Whenever there is apocalypse, there is music. In fact, it would seem less a law than a pattern, a rule, or even just a familiar hint - a habit. But what might music have to do with the end of the world?

How does music relate to the world in the first place? Does music belong to the world? Or is it somehow outside the world? And is there exceptionality in this relation?

Such questions are difficult to answer in a general let alone universally. In ancient heritage we find a tendency to relate music and world according to the account of *kosmos* as order - a tendency that carries well into medieval and modern philosophies. According to this account, music is a concept that comes to explain the regularity and constancy of pattern in what is, or what is - the very being of what is - *as* such regularity and constancy. In *Timaeus*, for example, Plato makes a distinction between *mousikè* and *harmonia* that conceptualizes the distance between music as vocal and audible on one hand, and the notion of harmony as a cosmic and ontological principle (PLATO, 1989, 47c). Music would then need to be understood as participating (*methexis*) in a structure governed by eternal self-sameness and identity (*eidos*). This speculative view of music as reflecting a harmonic principle, however, is not Plato's last word about the subject, as I shall discuss below.

While Plato's account of music is largely framed by questions concerning the genesis and ordering of the cosmos, my concern is rather with the end of the cosmos and the presence of music in this context. Both aspects of cosmos - its genesis, its destruction - may be seen as species of change. The account of genesis in *Timaeus* is full of dynamism, of beings shifting and moving. The cosmos itself is one such entity, as its stars and planets orbit incessantly in accordance with harmony. Music is another such entity, described as it is in terms of measured and unmeasured movement. The visible cosmos and the audible music serve the same purpose according to Plato, that is, to stabilize the variable revolutions in the soul. There is a motif of perpetual loss in this account of music and cosmos acting to restore the soul to its concord with itself. And there is a motif of a perpetual regain of concord. What allows for these changes to happen? What is the nature of the change, conceived as a general possibility, that appears to allow for the loss of world? And how does music relate to this general possibility of change? Would this change entail a change in the very laws of harmony? Who would still dare to speak of music in such an event?

My aim in this essay is to look into the role of (specific and general) change in the hyperbolic accounts of music by Plato and Schopenhauer. In Plato I will look into the construal of concord as an event rather than as an effect of structural conditions such as likeness of origin. The hyperbolic aspect refers to a rhetorical and conceptual scene in Plato through which music acquires its special status as an agent of change in the inner realm of the psyche, restoring it through a restoration of its attunement with the (ideational ground of the) world. This return (*epistrophè*) turns out to be mediated by the figure of a *fall*. In Schopenhauer, another such

hyperbolic scene operates through a metaphysical *cut* between music and world which comes to account for music's special power to express the universal and inner essence of the world. The cut metaphysically figures a perpetual loss of the world that affirms music's exceptional status as being independent of any existing (phenomenal, visible) world. The cut binds apocalypse and music - worlds lost and (essentially) regained - together. For Schopenhauer, whenever there is music, there needs to be apocalypse.

In the second section, I will look into a 2015 Hollywood movie to evaluate the proximity of the motifs of apocalypse and music as found in Plato and Schopenhauer, in order to think through and to start hearing their implications. In *The Big Short*, directed by Adam McKay and based on a book by Michael Lewis, we witness the 2007-2008 collapse of the Wall Street financial markets through the eyes and ears of a number of hedge fund managers. One of these protagonists prophesies the collapse of the housing market on the basis of a meticulous analysis of mortgage bonds while constantly listening to and playing music in and around his office. As I will discuss, the layering of music and stock market collapse through this character tells a story about music as a concept that ultimately confronts us with its emptiness and brokenness, indeed with music's own relation to change.

In the final section and into the conclusion, I will reconsider the loss of music - at least as we know it, and as a general possibility - briefly through David Markson's 1988 experimental novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the commitment to the idea of change in the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux.

## *1 Two Hyperbolic Scenes: Plato and Schopenhauer*

Throughout its history, philosophy has struggled with the conceptualization of music. As Marie-Louise Mallet recounts in *La musique en respect*, there are various reasons for this, including the oft-mentioned privilege of sight in relation to philosophical thinking. «Would *music* be *the night of the philosopher*? Music does not give anything to see, it does not say anything, it does not allow itself to be constituted as *ob-ject*. Music eludes the 'grasp' of the concept, it does not allow itself to be rationalized. For philosophy, it might well be a 'secret obstacle,' nocturnal, to its unfolding in the light which, at least since Plato, is [philosophy's] element» (MALLET, 2002, p. 11, my translation). In his 2003 response to Mallet's book, Jacques Derrida takes up this point, and expands the issue, suggesting that he is no longer sure that music is "sensible, in the empirical or transcendental sense of a region of sensation (hearing, for example)" (DERRIDA, 2003, p. 122, my translation). Indeed, there would be a point where the light of reason (*logos*) is no longer able to illuminate the concept of music.



“On the one hand, there is the night ‘that is irreducible to all objectivation,’ in fact to all visibility. Even though this night recalls music, as Marie-Louise says, it is *first of all* for the canonical philosopher, a threat and a fascinating threat because it remains an invisible source of visibility” (DERRIDA, 2003, p. 120, my translation).

According to this first notion of night, music is that which resists the philosophical program of elucidation but is not foreign to it. Music fascinates philosophy precisely as a thing to be clarified. This notion of night, however, envelopes a second night. “Second, music itself, which this night recalls, is yet another night, another experience of the night, of an absolute invisibility which no longer promises a spatializable object and which therefore is essentially foreign both to the threat and the fascination” (DERRIDA, 2003, p. 120, my translation). Music in this sense would remain exterior to the world of visibility and conceptual understanding, and therefore remain extra-philosophical by principle.

But if the night precisely reveals the starry heavens as an eternal display of music, how is it that music may still be said - with Mallet and Derrida - to elude this very spectacle, as well as philosophy’s accounts of it? As I will attempt to show in the remainder of this section, a brief analysis of the remarkable construal of music in the philosophies of Plato and Schopenhauer may help to start seeing the ways in which music challenges philosophy’s account of the world and how philosophy attempts to come to terms with music’s exteriority to the structural force of the concept, hinting at music’s pre-eminent (even sovereign) role as a cipher of change that itself would seem to remain exterior to the world’s constitution (in terms of causality, sufficient reason).

The *entrée* of music in Plato’s thought is marked by a certain *exceptionalism*. Whereas his later dialogue *Timaeus*, as mentioned above, ventures to present the starry heavens and the sound of music as having a regular and regulative function (end, purpose) with regard to the concord of the soul, the earlier dialogue *Politeia* introduces the theme of music’s being exceptional. Music, Socrates starts out by saying (PLATO, 1991, 401d), is exceptional for the way it is sovereign (*kuriotate*) in the education of the soul. How is this sovereignty accounted for? Socrates creates a hyperbolic scene for this purpose, which allows music to enter his philosophy, in a sense, without entering. First, he splits music in two separate but related vehicles: rhythm and harmony. Then he claims that rhythm and harmony enter the soul in a hyperbolic sense: they enter the *inmost* (the inner-inner) soul in the manner of a falling into (*kataduetai*). This falling into, which suggests an absence of ground, of support, then becomes the sovereign enabler of form - even of good form (*euschema*) - where previously there had only been discord. In *Timeaus*, as we have seen, this turning into good form is redescribed as attunement, as spinning (*periodos*) into concord on the basis of a kinship with (and in) harmony.

The important point here is that, in Socrates' account of sovereignty, that is, his account of the musical contribution toward realized being (*epistrophè*), there is moment in which there is no longer a cause-effect relationship. The leap toward good form in the soul has no other 'cause' than a *fall*, that is, a non-ground that nonetheless brings what music is believed to bring: a miraculously powerful (*erromenestata*) intervention in a process of growth (*trophè*) toward the highest philosophical insight. The hyperbole appears as a hint, saying that there is exception here: exception from the laws that normally govern the state of the psyche. In reaction to this perceived moment of fall, of sovereignty, Socrates warns that growth - that is, change - can only happen in a beneficial way if rhythm and harmony (ie., music's structural coherence split asunder) are applied properly (*orthos*). The sovereign fall of *mousikè* requires a strict context of moral control in order to lead it in the direction of the Good. If not, the opposite, as Socrates warns. It would seem, then, that the sovereign power of exception attributed to music allows form to change, regardless of the moral direction of this change. This is where music disrupts form while being disrupted itself (in terms of its structural and even conceptual integrity as *mousikè*, as a positive being).<sup>1</sup> In other words, Plato would seem to construe music as a name for a (sovereign) moment of groundlessness (which, as I will argue below, is not reducible to chance) that would seem to allow for the coming into being of the soul's and the world's essence.

The second example likewise draws picture of music's relation to change, albeit hardly more explicitly than Plato. In Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, music again figures under the aegis of exception. Music, he claims at the end of the third book ("The World as Idea") right before unfolding his theory of religion ("The World as Will"), is exceptional in at least two ways. First, music is exceptional for being an art form unlike all other forms of art (architecture, sculpture, painting, literature). Whereas these arts depend on the visible appearance of the world for their representation of it, music does not depend on such representation.

"[Music] stands completely apart from all the others. What we recognize in it is not an imitation or repetition of some Idea of the essence of the world: nonetheless, it is such a great and magisterial art, it exercises so powerful an effect within us, is understood so deeply and entirely by us as a wholly universal language whose clarity exceeds even that of the intuitive world itself; - that we can certainly look to it for more than an 'unconscious exercise in arithmetic

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<sup>1</sup> This self-disruption of music appears to have been noted by Schopenhauer, as when writes that "completely correct music cannot even be conceived, much less performed; and this is why every possible piece of music deviates from complete purity" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 294).

in which the mind does not know that it is counting', which is what Leibniz took it to be" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283).

The arithmetical aspect of music - the one recognized and made important by *Timaeus* and later accounts in the Pythagorean tradition - only touches on the exterior aspect of music, "its immediate and external significance, its outer shell (*ihre Schale*)" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283). The power of music, Schopenhauer claims, is experienced on a deeper level which is to say - in his topological distribution of space - intimately and inwardly (*innig, inner*). The heritage of Socrates' account of music in the *Politeia* is palpable in these words and it is even more apparent in Schopenhauer's own version of what I call the hyperbolic scene. "[M]usic must in some sense relate to the world as presentation to presented, as copy to original, since all of the other arts share this distinctive feature, and music has an effect on us that is, on the whole, similar to theirs, but stronger, quicker, more necessary (*notwendiger*) and more unerring" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283).

Despite being framed by comparison and analogy, these latter words hint at an epistemic event that Schopenhauer finds hard to accommodate in this system. "[T]he point of comparison between music and the world, the respect in which the former acts as an imitation or repetition of the latter, is very deeply hidden (*sehr tief verborgen*)" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283). From the standpoint of mimesis, music would seem to be something like a miracle: a representation of an original that itself can never be re-presented ("the copy of an original [*Nachbild eines Vorbildes*] that cannot itself ever be directly presented") but which can nevertheless be identified as a representation (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283).

Schopenhauer hypothesizes that the relation between music and world must be one of parallelism. Each expresses the ultimate ground (the Will) but they do so in ways that differ and that connect only on the inside. Music expresses the Will on the same level as the Platonic Ideas, which provide the (inner) originals the visible (outer) world is a copy of. Both music and the Ideas express the essence (the Will) rather than the shadows. For Schopenhauer this also means that music expresses universals before the things of the world (*ante rem*) rather than after these things (*post rem*). When music touches us deeply - *inmost* - it does so in a temporality that pre-exists the time of the world. It stimulates inwardness, creates a sense of hallucinated, unreal and immediate feeling, by speaking in a language of universals of a perpetual, unchanging reality.

"The inexpressible intimacy of all music (*das unaussprechlich Innige aller Musik*), which allows it to pass before us like a paradise that is so utterly familiar and yet eternally foreign, so entirely comprehensible and yet so inexplicable, rests on the fact that it renders all the impulses of our innermost essence but without any reality and removed from their pain" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 292).



So what, in the end, is music for Schopenhauer? Music appears to be a word for an *event* in which the Will exercises itself but without concept (*Begriff*). The concept is what determines the borderline or *cut* between the two parallel alternatives of world and music. On one hand, there is the principle of sufficient reason in power to produce the reality of the world. On the other hand, there is the (other- or non-)world-like experience that occurs when the principle of sufficient reason is suspended. Music is a name for the emergence of this parallelism, for the possibility of suspension and de-suspension to occur, that is, a name for an event in which it no longer seems possible to determine, as by a clear-cut decision, what is real (what is *inmost*, real-real) and what is mimesis (mere image, less-than-real). As Schopenhauer writes, “[Music’s] imitative relation to the world must also be very intimate, infinitely true and strikingly apt, because it is instantaneously comprehensible to everyone [...]” (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 283) There can be no (pure) concept for this understanding, but there can be a kind of *doing* that nevertheless responds to the experience. This doing is two-way: it is the exercise in which a certain theoretical insight is exerted as power, and a practice in which theory is given back across the parallelism. Schopenhauer’s insistence on the notion of exercise - precisely and perhaps necessarily under the cover of parody - is what should orient our thinking here.

“[A]nyone who has followed me and entered into my way of thinking will not think it so very paradoxical when I say that if we succeed in giving a perfectly correct, complete and detailed explanation of music, which is to say a thorough repetition, in concepts, of what it expresses, this would at the same time be a satisfactory repetition and explanation of the world in concepts, or something wholly in agreement with it, and thus would be the true philosophy; accordingly, we could parody that saying of Leibniz quoted above (which is quite right from an inferior perspective) in the sense of our superior insight into music as follows: ‘Music is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics, in which the mind does not know that it is philosophizing [*Musica est exercitium metaphysices occultum nescientis se philosophari animi*]’” (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 284).

Music would then be an account of the world without account, that is, the world in a state of lostness (to its own concept).

## 2 The Big Short: *Playing Through the End of the World*

What might such a musical account-without-account look like? Certainly it will be difficult to ask philosophy for an answer to this question, if philosophy is precisely about conceptual thought, about - as Gilles Deleuze said - the creation of concepts (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1994, p. 8). In

order to find alternative mediations of the idea of music in relation to the loss of world, I will turn toward two contemporary expressions in which such an idea seems to become manifest. The first of these is a Hollywood movie that is set in the international credit crisis of 2007-2008 and seems to turn the notion of world into an event beyond recognition. The title of this film is *The Big Short* (2015, directed by Adam McKay, script based on 2010 a true-story novel by Michael Lewis).

The story unfolds as the narrative of a number of hedge fund managers, some of whom work in large Wall Street banking corporations, some for smaller independent funds, and some are young aspiring investors attempting to get access to the upper echelon of the investment market. The film sketches how insight into the vulnerability of the markets gradually broke with these protagonists, against the prevailing belief that the world of investment had a firm, indubitable ground in the mortgage system. The world of stability, of big-name corporate banking firms whose brands were identified with the financial bedrock of the capital system, and whose functioning was monitored and certified by public and commercial institutions such as the Federal Bank of America and rating agencies Standard & Poor and Moody's was, according to these (relatively) outsider voices, not what it seemed.

The film is the story of their seeing what no-one seemed yet to see - the collapse of a world believed to be too self-evidently solid to collapse - and their struggle with the consequences of their own (subsequent) role in the coming down of the world they saw. The importance of seeing is underscored in an opening quotation attributed to Mark Twain, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so" (00:00:57). This notion of knowing is then connected to the idea of seeing. As the voice-over, one of the protagonists Jared Vennett (played by Ryan Gosling) narrates right before the movie's title shot, "These outsiders saw the giant lie at the heart of the economy, and they saw it by doing none of the rest of the suckers thought to do: *they looked.*" The very next scene, however, starting the diegesis, shows someone playing a rhythm with drumsticks on their short-panted legs.

The legs belong to Michael Burry (played by Christian Bale), who is the medical doctor-turned-manager of hedge fund Scion Capital and the film's "weirdo" and first seer. He dresses in oversize t-shirts (to which I will return below) and walks barefooted in office. When he talks, he tends to look down or away, which is at first explained by the loss of one of his eyes in childhood. Symbolically, he becomes the half-blind seer among the seeing who see nothing at all, such as the representative from Standard & Poor credit rating agency who says she (literally) "can't see a thing" (01:01:47). But more importantly, this visual behavior would seem to emphasize the aural dimension in these characters. Burry discovered the bad

quality of mortgages underlying major trading products (bonds, CDO's) and foresaw the collapse of the system. He went to the great corporate banks to make them sell him credit default swaps which become profitable once the bank can no longer fulfill its financial obligations. The banking world responds to his request with laughter and disbelief, thinking that is he speculating on an event that will just not happen, but proceeds to create and sell them these swaps anyway. Burry spends almost the entire hedge fund capital on these swaps, risking the assets of his clients on a single giant bet. The wager seems to be between analytic reason (on which the entire world of Wall Street would seem to be founded) and pure gambling, but for Burry there appears to be a third way. This logical position turns him into a practitioner of a 'wild mysticism' (HULIN, 1993, p. 19-20) of sorts, a John the Baptist, a *vox clamans in deserto*.

Music develops as a chiffre, a figure of this third way, if that is what it is. What starts as a remarkable layering of office life and musical practice that seems out-of-place in this setting of hard business as defining reality, expands into a complex figure that prepares, accompanies and in some way survives the advent of the impossible implosion of the system. Music appears in the film in various guises, many of which refer to conventional uses of (popular) music in film (HELDT, 2013, p. 129; CHION, 2021, p. 262). Music in *The Big Short* is, first, instrumental as a diegetic and nondiegetic means to comment and frame actions and situations. When Burry is confronted by two senior investors in his hedge fund for what looks like his wild, 1.3 billion gamble on a very improbable event, the music that plays very loud in his office is Metallica's "Master of Puppets" from *Master of Puppets* (1986) - and it is promptly turned off by the seniors. Likewise, the music video of "Lithium" by The Polyphonic Spree, a Nirvana cover, from *The Fragile Army* (2007), is edited into the film to develop the motif of (market) mania and anti-mania, introduced in conversation by Burke early on in the film (lithium is used as in medication against mania). Music is also represented as cathartic on a personal level and as belonging to the character's milieu (Chion), such as when Burke, at the high point of tension, plays out his anger at the ruling market powers who attempt to delay the truth coming out, on a basement drum kit, playing along with Pantera's "By Demons Be Driven" from *Vulgar Display of Power* (1992).

Whereas such uses of music would reduce it to a functional role, a presentist and objectifying ontology, and a codified signification (as in the use of heavy metal's genre connotations of distortion, transgression, and dystopia) Burry's references to music are more complex, subtle and ultimately more important. What struck me the first time I saw the movie in 2015 is the initial out-of-placeness of music in Scion Capital's office which becomes a mark of both impossibility and possibility. First, it would seem a mark of impossibility on the basis of a belief that none of what music is believed to be in contemporary culture can be reconciled with the pro-

duction of added value (productivity, purpose, ends). The relations here are complex, for the presence of music in the realm of productivity is not uncommon, and not exclusively antagonistic, and this is also true for Burry. The role of music in his case, however, does seem exceptional, for it is actually blended into conversations between employer and employee, as for instance when Burry keeps listening to music through earphones while talking to a job candidate, or when he keeps playing a virtual drumkit while being on the phone with clients. Both Lewis' novel and McKay's movie emphasize this aspect which can be understood in the context of Asperger's (as suggested by the historical person the character is modelled on) but which in this case seems more than a story of introverted behavior in (or against) an extraverted world of capital investment (LEWIS, 2015, p. 224). The juxtaposition of music and the business office regime worked for me as a reminder of the conflicted construal of world (as based on sufficient reason, as Schopenhauer would say) on one hand, and music's own claim to (non-)world on the basis of an obscure, indeed perhaps 'nocturnal' principle (but avoiding the opposition between reason and gambling or chance).

The sense of impossibility would seem to be born from this incongruence. What might a world of high risk rationalist speculation have to do with music? What is Burry insistence of music doing here, if much of the film is pitting reason against gambling? Might the extreme events of the credit meltdown create some, unknown, obscure connection between the two? The confluence of "manic," run-out-of-hand number-based speculation practices and equally number-based liberal art of music would seem evocative. Here, the motif of a certain possibility seems to arise from Burry's impossible, heavy-metalized business head quarters. But this possibility would - just like in Schopenhauer - rely on a certain parallelism, on the possibility of a double vision, a double truth (reason, a-reason) that the experience of music comes to embody. Where the truth of logic reveals the impossibility and untruth of the current financial assumptions, music provides a parallel, alternative whole, a parallel consistency that is logical but without the account(ing). Music would again become a chiffré, a cipher, of change - a change *in(to) any form or direction* (for better, for worse).

Against such a commitment to (a-)reason we find in the movie the character of Mark Baum, whose role is precisely to combat the moral outcome of logical faults. As the narrator explains, Baum already looked for logical faults in the Torah when he was a child (00:15:32). For Baum, it is inexcusable that big corporations allow immoral situations to come about by default of logic. With his personnel he travels to Florida, not only to check where the housing market has become a bubble, but also to witness the moral scandal of immigrant and socially marginal house buyers being seduced to buy irresponsible financial products. At the boiling point, Baum after talking to a demonic exponent of the ruling system, walks



off saying to his companions, "I am going to find moral redemption at the roulette table" (01:25:00). While Baum is at a loss when he beholds the lack of logical and moral rightfulness of the world he sees tumbling down and finds no way forward for himself that would spare him from compromising himself (in the film, he ends as a less righteous person, no longer insisting on a Socratic *orthos* in the manner he did before), Burry is no less perplexed but in a very different way. Baum is in the (financial, Wall Street) world, inquiring about its morality. Burry is in a sense this world but not of this world.<sup>2</sup>

Music is what allows him to be in this position, and to live through the loss of the world, "seeing" its truth and "hearing" his way through this change. But ultimately music will be a broken thing for him, and he keeps looking for it. Throughout the film, Burry wears a t-shirt from Thorn custom guitar builders from Glendale, CA. "Play the tone!" it says on the chest pocket and it has a large image of an electric guitar across the back. Burry prominently shows this guitar image on his back to the camera when his co-worker asks him what will happen to the Scion Capital, the fund and firm, now that the market does not appear to give way to the expected default (starting 01:14:25). It is the darkest moment before what will eventually become the collapse of the market, when both the correctness of his prediction and the logical coherence of market response seem to have eclipsed. The world is still there, and yet it has already internally collapsed. Music is there - represented by a symbol, hinted at, a lost promise - but there is no more playing or listening. At this point in the film, to speak with Derrida, there is night, but no-one can see it or hear it, it is a night darker than the night, the night of night. The name for this point, where it seems that anything might happen, or nothing at all, might still be music, if music (or *mousikè*) is a relation to change in general. As Plato suggested, music broken into its constituent parts (rhythm, harmony), may come as a *fall* that might or might not give birth to (good) form. On the condition that something about music, perhaps its familiar sounds and instruments, be broken - that they have always already been broken. I will return to this in the next section.

The word 'thorn' on the shirt may be either be interpreted as a Biblical reference to thorns in eyes or sides (book of Numbers, Joshua), or to the 2 Corinthians 7, where the thorn in the side according to Paul keeps him from elevating himself (NEW JERUSALEM BIBLE). The latter interpretation connects to the way Lewis describes the outcome of the market crash for Burry in his novel. "If you start with a person who has tremendous difficulty integrating himself into the social workings of

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<sup>2</sup> In the movie, there is only the juxtaposition of the moral quest of Baum and the musical insistence of Burry. There is no direct confrontation between Baum's moralism and music.



society, and often feels misunderstood, slighted, and lonely as a result, you will see where an intense interest can be something that builds up the ego in the classical sense. [...] As long as the interest provides that reinforcement, there is little danger of change. But when [...] the person experiences failure in the interest, the negativity can be felt very intensely, especially when it comes from other people. The interest in such a case can simply start to mimic all that the Asperger's person was trying to escape" (LEWIS, 2015, p. 224). The key word for my purposes here is change, and this connects to the chiffre of change that we call music. Burry keeps looking for it after he lost it, perhaps in order to understand (without concept, without account) that he lost it. As he wrote in an email to Lewis, "This business kills a part of life that is pretty essential. The thing is, I haven't identified what it kills. But it is something vital that is dead inside of me. I can feel it." Lewis: "As his interest in the financial markets seeped out of him, he bought his first guitar. It was strange: He couldn't play guitar and he had no talent for it. He didn't even *want* to play the guitar. He just needed to learn all about the sorts of wood used to make guitars, and to buy guitars and tubes and amps. He just needed to... know everything there was to know about guitars" (LEWIS, 2015, p. 225). Burry takes this step after losing the music that was connected, for him, with the world as real, alive, and that nevertheless, had always already been shot through with a sense of death (a key motif in heavy metal).

## *Endings*

At the end of Book 3 of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer refers to Raphael's Saint Cecilia altarpiece. In it, we see broken and unstringed musical instruments lie on the ground at the feet of the saint, who is the patron saint of musicians and of Church music. For Schopenhauer, the image of Raphael symbolizes the transition between cognizing the "essence of the world" (that is, the objectivation of the will) and the religious resignation from the will:

"For [the artist] that pure, true and profound cognition of the essence of the world becomes a goal in itself: he comes to a stop there. Hence, this cognition does not become a tranquillizer of the will for him, as we will see in the next Book with the saints who have achieved resignation; for him, it redeems him from life, not forever but rather only momentarily, and it is not yet his way out of life, but only an occasional source of comfort within life itself, until this intensifies his powers to the point where he finally grows tired of the game and seizes upon serious things. We can think of Raphael's St Cecilia as a symbol of this transition" (SCHOPENHAUER, 2010, p. 294).

The interesting thing about the appearance of this particular saint in the image, and not any other who might care little about music (as there have been many), is that Cecilia in fact finds music important enough to in a sense *maintain* it as a reference, as a collection or archive of objects and traces, while looking (and perhaps also listening) heaven-ward. Music will be for it *has been* (she has lost it, and in losing it, she hears/sees its eternal nature and its promise in her future life). And so for the world that - for her - *has been*.

For the saint, the future of music is its return to the creator, to its original image in the voice of the divine. If it changes, it changes for the better, just as for Socrates whoever is transformed by music will be more elegant, and will clearly recognize well-formed (that is, truthful) music. Theology, however, has had - and still has - mixed feelings about music, for it is well aware of the possibility of music to become an agent of change in any direction, including for the worse. For instance, by using its power to charm the soul into the belief that music is a good for itself (as a form of musical idolatry), hence competing with ways that, according to theology, more reliably lead to moral orthodoxy and redemption. In the works of Augustine, who in the altarpiece is right behind the left of Cecilia, we read not only those famous lines of belief in the beneficial powers of music, but also the struggle with aspects of music that seem to lead the soul on a very different, opposite journey.

“I vacillate between the peril of pleasure and the value of experience, and I am led more - while advocating no irrevocable position - to endorse the custom of singing in church so that by the pleasure of hearing the weaker soul might be elevated to an attitude of devotion. Yet when it happens to me that the song moves me more than the thing which is sung, I confess that I have sinned blamefully and then prefer not to hear the singer. Look at my condition! [...]” (Augustine, excerpted in McKinnon, 1993, p. 155).

What interests me in the position of Augustine behind the back of Cecilia is the suggestion of the unforeseeable in the relation to music. Whereas a frontal reading of the image - one that would seem to inform Schopenhauer - suggests a (vertical) distribution of worldly and heavenly voices, the dorsal distribution of voices in the space represented by the painting allows for an element of surprise to enter the picture.<sup>3</sup> As Augustine writes in these lines, the judgment with regard to music’s beneficial and demonic sides cannot be an irrevocable judgment. There is no once-and-for-all in these matters, and Augustine would seem to propose a language of prayer

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<sup>3</sup> On the left, the back of Saint Paul is prominent, suggesting a space of unforeseeableness that resonates with the dorsal position of the left-most angel above him. A similar dorsal space is created on the left, where Mary Magdalene twists her torso showing her back. I am using dorsality here in the sense developed by David Wills (WILLS, 2008).

to come to terms with the undecidable nature of the good in relation to music. That is, he seems to want to redeem music's relation to change (that is, in his words, its intense but obscure relation to "the affectations of the soul") from the violence of an imposed, once-and-for-all moral judgment, even one that would affirm music as being beneficial, as being a good thing, in principle (Augustine, excerpted in McKINNON, 1993, p. 154).

If there is no pre-given *orthos* to keep music from connecting with a sense that anything is possible, the Socratic insistence, in the *Republic*, on the importance of - even the very possibility of - an orthodoxy in the realm of musical change cannot be upheld. This would lead to a recognition that music, as far as its affective relations are concerned, can take us in any direction, and that it can do so at any time. For better or for worse, without *orthos*, that is, without any set concept or practice that would come to provide us with a moral guarantee or filter, saving us from music's default, from it departing from our sides as a companion, an ancilla or redeemer, leaving us to our worlds and mortality. The dorsal suggestion of Raphael's image here reminds us of a lack of ascertainment in the gaze (and ear) that Cecilia turns, not knowing, not owning by concept, a fate that would give us this heavenly origin or destiny of what we heard in the broken music that delighted us, albeit in a frightening manner. There is something rudimentary or minimalistic here that reminds me of the scene in *The Big Short* where Burry sits in the office playing his loud heavy metal songs and the two senior investors break into his office to call him to take account for his risky investing behavior. When the music is turned off by them (in a gesture of anger) and the seniors start to legally oppose Burry, he turns his chair around, drumsticks in hand, and plays three short, wooden sounds. Is it a gesture of defiance (like clicking one's tongue), or is it a version of the apocalyptic trumpet call? Is it music, or *will it be* music because it *has been* music? Might it be that we need to prepare ourselves for a change that will include music, in the sense of music changing beyond recognition - even beyond its own concept? Music would not only change in what it means to us, its importance to use Wittgenstein's term, but also its consistency, its measure, its form (WITTGENSTEIN, 2009, section 118).

Such radical thinking of the night (and, perhaps, new "day") of music, of its concept and possible experience, beyond the restricted bandwidth determined by some (moral) *orthos* or metaphysical essentialism as in Schopenhauer's sketch of what it is that we understand to be forever the same (the Will's objectivation) each time we listen to music. In the absence of such invocations of essence and ground, we may consider how Quentin Meillassoux' challenge to metaphysics (understood by him as the philosophical presentation of metaphysical entities, such as orthodoxies and foundations) might allow us to introduce a more radical motif of change in our consideration of music - and in particular of music that professes

to be “spiritual” or “religious,” that is, music situating itself in relation to the question of existence as a whole. In his philosophy, Meillassoux returns to Hume’s comments in section IV of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* on the nature of induction, discussing the concept of causality through the example of one billiard ball hitting another billiard ball (MEILLASSOUX, 2008, p. 88; MEILLASSOUX, 2015, p. 8). Hume famously concludes that we cannot infer a law of causality from the observation of the event of balls impacting, however lawlike such repeated occurrences might seem. For Meillassoux, the doubt that Hume casts over the givenness and self-sameness of (inductive) natural laws inspires him to posit a principle of change that underlies events, entities and ultimately also the laws they seem to obey.

“[T]he question that arises is knowing whether our certainty about a stable nature is justified and - failing that - understanding where this subjective assurance comes from that allows us to be so perfectly confident, on a daily basis, of the future constancy of the real. As we know, Hume believed that only the *habit* of past empirical constancies can persuade us that the future will resemble the past, without there being anything rational at the foundation of this judgment” (MEILLASSOUX, 2015, p. 10-11).

His philosophical account of this openness for change - if account is still the right word here - moves in the direction of a deep contingency that goes beyond change as we normally conceive it (change as change-of) and beyond the idea of chance. Indeed, rationally, Meillassoux contends, there is no reason to believe that billiard balls might unexpectedly move upwards, to follow any of an infinite number of possible trajectories - or change into something else entirely (MEILLASSOUX, 2008, p. 90-91).

On this terrain one might encounter someone like the Buddhist-inspired composer Jonathan Harvey, who felt that, in electronic music, “you can change anything into anything. A violin can become a volcano. The musical entity is constantly slipping and sliding, changing form and changing the mental illusion of what we are looking at or what we’re listening to, what objects are out there, where they’re placed in space; whether, indeed, they have any permanent identity at all” (HARVEY, 2007, p. 37). Following Meillassoux and to some extent Wittgenstein, one might add that the very concept of music too is exposed to the possibility of changing beyond recognition at any moment (DE VRIES, 2019, p. 347). Might music, according to this possibility, still be regarded as an *exercitium*, and if so, how could one conceive of the type of practice or practicing that this entails? Perhaps one would need to invent new forms of literature, such as the “extro-science fiction” (*sic*) Meillassoux proposes. Or one might read the coming down of the world or worlds, together with a certain coming down that music - as the night of the philosopher - has always already represented. One avenue seems to have been opened by David

Markson, whose controversial novel (if that is what it is) *Wittgenstein's Mistress* exposes the reader to a long set of individual sentences in which the world seems to have ended, and then not. The narrative voice speaks in statements none of which are held to be irrevocable, and any of them are retaken for the purpose of evaluation. Music is there too, in this world that perhaps is none, but in a novel way. All references to music have lost their habitual separateness from the world (referring to distinct entities in the world) and sit in the fabric of words like any other word. Any yet, in this world made up of Augustinian non-irrevocable statements, this world without ground or thesis, there is or was or will be music. As if speaking after the end of the world, the protagonist asks (herself), "[t]wo days ago, when I was hearing Kathleen Ferrier, what exactly was I hearing?" (MARKSON, 1988, p. 61).

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