

Gustavo Dessal interview with Scott Wilson*, author of *Stop Making Sense: Music from the Perspective of the Real* (Karnac Books, London, 2015).

When I read Scott's book, I said to myself: "This guy has a knack for speaking about psychoanalysis in a different way".

G.D.

GUSTAVO DESSAL:

Stop Making Sense introduces a special way of conceiving the relationship between psychoanalysis and art. There's a long tradition of psychoanalysis applied to different cultural fields. In some cases the results have been fruitful, opening original perspectives and casting unexpected light on many subjects. But at the same time applied psychoanalysis runs the risk of becoming a sort of meta-language. You are very careful about this, and I

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appreciate the effort you make to prove that music can help psychoanalysts to go deeper in the comprehension of subjectivity, just as literature was indispensable for Freud to forge some of his concepts. How do you approach this exciting if delicate bond between psychoanalysis and cultural phenomena?

SCOTT WILSON: Thank you very much for your questions, and for addressing me in English. It is very generous of you, and I apologize for not being able to exchange with you in Spanish. I did not want to employ psychoanalytic discourse to discuss music without it in some small way contributing to the modification of that discourse. So while I do think it is possible and valuable to think about cultural phenomena from a psychoanalytic perspective – which is of course not the only perspective one can take – my initial impulse was in the other direction, to approach psychoanalysis from the perspective of music, or sound. As you suggest, there is a long tradition of psychoanalysis applied to culture, particularly literature, art and film. The very best of this from Freud onwards has had a profound effect on psychoanalysis itself. What would psychoanalysis look like if Hamlet had not confirmed for Freud the Oedipus complex? More recently, the clinic of the *parlêtre* and the *sinthome* was established by Lacan in relation to James Joyce. What is interesting about this long tradition, however, is the relative poverty of interventions on

music. This flows directly from Freud himself of course, who disliked music and claimed to be stone deaf. Actually Freud gives a very specific reason for his dislike of music – which when viewed retrospectively, from the perspective of the late Lacan we can see is very significant. Freud says that his interest in art and literature is entirely bound to the intellectual challenge of interpretation that it poses, and he says that he dislikes music because he cannot interpret it. For Freud music is both beyond interpretation *and* experienced as something unpleasant, even painful. I would suggest then that music was something real for Freud, in Lacan's sense of the term. As we know, the contemporary Lacanian clinic is oriented precisely around the point where interpretation fails, thereby shifting our attention away from the unconscious structured like a language to *lalangue* or the real unconscious. This shift Jacques-Alain Miller actually describes as the 'root chord' of the late Lacan. By the way, when you start to look for musical metaphors in Lacan you suddenly find they are everywhere. Indeed, you do it yourself in your novel *Surviving Anne*. In the words of your analyst, 'there is something that is always repeated, a tonal base that allows variations in every human being'. (89) Your character goes on to say of his patients that this tone also lies at the basis of 'the feeling that the world is not made for them' and that 'living can only be withstood if we admit the incurable discord within us'. (*Surviving Anne*: 89) You connect the individual's

discordance with him or herself, and with the world in sonic terms. Is this tone another 'name' for the 'signifier' of '*Y a d'l'un*'? Is this tone something of the One-all-alone, the sound of the singular consistency of an individual's mode of jouissance outside sense, experienced as a body event: a feeling of discord or dissonance? I don't know whether you, or your character, intended this dimension of sound to be metaphorical, but I think we should take it quite literally, as a tone or *a*-tone that denotes the atonality of the One. That is why I appropriated the term '*amusia*' where, to quote my book, 'the "a" denotes the point of intimate exteriority of dissonance to the repetition that articulates music. The "a" denotes the noise not just left over from the cut in sound produced by music, but the point of singular enunciation and discordance with one's own sonic reality'. (*Stop Making Sense*: xxviii)

GD: When we read further in your book, we find that you make a turn and we are suddenly led to a 'higher' level: music is also a path to think about the contemporary social and economical paradigm. You don't seem to be interested in Brian Eno and Yoko Ono (funny homophonies!) themselves, but as symptoms of the globalized discourse. This means going beyond their qualities as artists, but taking them as a way of dealing with the real. Anyway, it is not easy to understand whether you consider them as dystonic or syntonic symptoms of the capitalist discourse. For example, you

state that Yoko Ono implies a rupture with the established conception of art, and nevertheless you admit her web site is just a merchandising store ...

SW: The idea that one can perceive a homology between music and a 'social and economic paradigm' was first suggested many years ago by Jacques Attali who argued that music, as a particular organization of noise, does not represent but provides a structure for future social order. This was what interested me about Brian Eno, Yoko Ono and Merzbow all of whom produce music suggestive of future social order emerging from a present characterized by general (or 'ordinary') psychosis. One cultural symptom of this might be the dissolution of any clear boundary between noise and music that is heard in the 'generative' music composed by Eno's computers, the John Cage-inspired silent national anthem of Ono's 'Nutopia', and Merzbow's noise-music of humanimality. At the same time, contemporary art has to operate within capitalism. Indeed, Eno and Ono readily adopt capitalist roles and forms. Eno is essentially an entrepreneur, a curator, and it was his role as cultural consultant to corporations like Microsoft that resulted in the production of 'the Microsoft Sound' in 1995 that was memorably described as 'what Bill Gates wants the future to sound like'. Pat Kane called it 'the waking murmur of an unimaginable machine intelligence: bloodless, precise yet

discordant, menacing, scary and inhuman'. (*SMS*, 79) Even before she adopted commercial popular music as a form of art in her work with her husband, Yoko Ono was developing the genre of Advertising Art in the 1950s and 60s, work that became the basis of the 'War is Over! (If You Want It)' billboard campaign. I'm interested in how many people have over the years found their work annoying or impossible to listen to – Merzbow's goal, for example, was for a long time to produce music that was literally unlistenable. It is my contention that these artists amplify the *amusical* discontents of contemporary culture. In that sense, Yoko Ono is very much the patron saint of this book. I like those stories about how The Beatles' recording engineers would routinely walk out of the studio the moment she began to sing. And yet, as a solitary voice said at the time, 'Yoko takes music beyond its extremes ... Yoko breaks through more barriers with one scream than most musicians do in a lifetime'. (*SMS*, 155) Would it be totally outrageous to suggest that one would swap the entire Beatles *oeuvre* for one operatic Yoko Ono scream? In his own terrifying exchange, this was the sacrifice that Mark Chapman effectively made. But Ono did not scream the night he killed her Beatle.

GD: I found this concept of '*amusia*' particularly interesting, because it has a 'resonance' (let's keep the musical language) with

the idea that writing springs somewhat from the impossible, from that which is impossible to write. This impossibility, as you say, is not what is left over, but the very cause of writing. Going back to music, I guess there must be a difference between this 'a' in the case of the subject who produces music, and the one that just enjoys (or not) music created by other. Is it so?

SW: One would assume there would be a different relation to music depending on whether one is a maker of music or an auditor, but I don't think so. Music is always primarily about listening, and listening for that which escapes the grasp of hearing and of knowledge. One could say that one only hears what one already knows, one always hears an echo, but at the same time the music that animates and disturbs us always hints at something else, something strange and unknown. That is the same for the writer, the player and the listener. Referring to his own music that he develops as part of a semi-mechanical process, Steve Reich says: 'listening to an extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear'. (*SMS*, 43) This is a great description of a kind of *wo es war* of music, the effect of an audio unconscious. There are different types of knowledge and enjoyment related to music. On the one hand, there is the *savoir-faire* or technique of the musicians who know how to play. And there is unquestionably a specific pleasure related to playing

music. But on the other hand, there is a knowledge associated with music that seems to be unrelated to this technical facility. How is it possible for an untutored listener to enjoy with great intensity music that he or she knows nothing about? Why isn't music for that person just a jumble of sounds? Clearly we must suppose that someone or something somewhere knows something about it. I would suggest that for musical beings, just like for speaking beings, enjoyment is related to knowledge, but that often we don't know that we know. For example, it is a commonplace for musicians – even or perhaps especially great musicians – to have no idea where their inspiration comes from. Paul McCartney, famously, claims to have dreamt the melody to 'Yesterday', assuming that it had already been written by someone else. So we can then surmise that there is an Other, a locus of sound, of dissonance and repetition, that resonates through us and makes us musical whether we like it or not, whether we know anything about it or not. And that sound might be beautiful or it might not, but whatever it is, it is fundamentally related to the singular sound or noise that I am without meaning.

GD: Well, I'm not an expert on this matter, but as you say, it was a solitary voice who considered Yoko as someone who 'breaks through more barriers with one scream than most musicians do in a lifetime'. Will history remember her in anyway, apart from being

Lennon's wife? Couldn't we think that her screams wouldn't have been so operatic if she hadn't been who she was? In brief, can we in this case separate the scream from the screamer? In contrast, we don't need Eno as a character to judge what he was able to do with those computers that make the music for him. In this context of , let us say, the social dimension of 'ordinary psychosis', how can we distinguish music (and art in general) from fraud?

SW: In this book I'm not really interested in whether the music I discuss is conventionally regarded as good or bad. I am not concerned to contribute to the canons of taste. The 20thC avant-garde has taught us not only that any sound can be music, but that music is an open system that can be defined by the most minimal principle of organization that need be only the distance between time t and time t' , as with Cage's seminal piece '4.33' where music is whatever sounds occur during the period of 4 minutes, thirty three seconds that the performance lasts. At the same time, I would say in Yoko Ono's defense that it is perfectly possible to demonstrate great skill, technique and *savoir-faire* in the art of screaming. She is an expert, but so was John Lennon, from 'Twist and Shout' to 'Cold Turkey'. I find it slightly odd and interesting that you would refer to the possibility of 'fraudulent' music. That's not the same thing as saying something is good or bad. It implies that there is some sort of theft going on. Fraud in art generally

refers to someone faking the work of a famous painter, of course. But I don't think that is what you mean. Certainly it is true that this term 'fraud' came up regularly with regard to Yoko Ono, and for two reasons. First, because ordinary art lovers used to regard all conceptual art as a fraud, particularly in the UK. Second, this dimension of theft speaks directly to the sense that Yoko Ono 'stole' a Beatle, a 'theft' that led to the break-up of the group, thereby destroying all our Beatle pleasures. She attracted a great deal of hatred for that, and her work was described as 'avant-garde crap', 'mumbo-jumbo' and so on. Following the success of the YBAs (Damian Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas et al) in the 1990s, the British people these days love conceptual art; it is their favourite kind. And Ono's influence on all this is now both recognized and respected. I have no idea what art or music will 'stand the test of time'. It would no doubt depend on which history one read and who wrote it. If it was a history that valued the 20thC avant-garde, particularly Fluxus and the circle around John Cage to which Ono was a major contributor, then The Beatles would be a mere footnote to her esteem.

GD: Your answer clarifies a lot, and helps me to understand a little bit more about your concept of '*amusia*'. Beyond the specific jouissance a music maker can get from his or her capacity to play,

you stress that we are all subjects of the audio unconscious. In other words, first of all we are listeners. I wonder if being listeners is comparable to being readers, or spectators. Does music involve the body like no other artistic expression? I don't mean just the emotional response to art, but the way our body is summoned by music. In your book, you try to prove that nobody can get rid of the grasp of music, no matter if the subject loves it or hates it, because music seems to have a special connection to the mechanic of the drives.

SW: Yet again this is a very interesting and difficult question, the answer to which can only be speculative. In my book I suggest that it is always sound that 'heralds the real' and precipitates the 'automaton', as Lacan says. In Freud, as is well known, it is the trauma of 'shell shock' that provides the impetus for his reflections on repetition compulsion and the death drive. In Seminar XI Lacan uses the example of some mysterious 'knocking' that kicks off and forms the representational basis of one of his own dreams that was attempting to keep him asleep, poised between perception and consciousness. But this kind of sound is always an echo of the traumatic encounter of the real that is missed, an echo poised between this encounter and the automaton. And we know from countless cultural examples how ominous can be those sounds in the dead of night that creak or bump without apparent reason.

These are related to the *unheimliche* – there’s an excellent book on the uncanniness of sound by David Toop called *Sinister Resonance* that explores the way that sound, as Lacan says, ‘models the locus of our anxiety’. (Seminar X, 277) Indeed, I would also point to Lacan’s Seminar X on anxiety, particularly the section on ‘What Comes Through the Ear’. It has been noted more than once that the ears – unlike the eyes – are always open and receptive to intrusions that directly shape and affect the body. I do not want to speculate here about the effects of foetal audition, the idea that the foetus’s first intimations of an outside or an Other are heralded by sound, but Jacques-Alain Miller thinks it worth considering in his commentary on Lacan’s seminar. He suggests that the ‘anxiety of birth’ may be related to the ‘intrusion of the Other in the corporeal space of the subject’. (*Lacanian Ink* 27, 35) And while he attributes this to the ‘intrusion of air into the aquatic space of the womb’ at the moment of birth, the violence of this intrusion has already been intimated by exterior noises, the bangs and crashes of everyday life, the mother’s voice of course, and her music. But above all, when looking briefly at Lacan’s seminar again, I was struck by the idea that sound shapes the body in the first instance in the form of the ear’s apparatus, in the very process of its audition. ‘The apparatus is what resonates and it doesn’t resonate at just anything ... it only resonates at its own note, its own frequency’ (274). Before it speaks, then, the *parlêtre* has a singular tonality that

echoes around, even as it shapes, the ear's cavity whose organic form Lacan suggests 'bears a resemblance' to the void hollowed out by the Other of speech. This a-tonality then subsequently haunts the speech of the *parlêtre* such that 'our voice appears to us with a foreign sound'. (276)

I want to ask you a question about the music of the analytic situation. I want to leave aside the specific question about music therapy, perhaps for another time. Rather, I want to return your previous question about the production and enjoyment of music to you in reverse form. To do this, I will ask you to consider the traditional analytic situation as a form of avant-garde music in the sense that it is *an intense experience of listening*. It has a definite time period, normally about 50 minutes – but as we know that can be curtailed if appropriate. It is an improvisation by two people for two people, but like all improvisations there is a framework, a set of conventions and expectations. One of which is that anything can be said. While the term 'performance' does not do it justice, there is no doubt an element of performance. The main sound is speech, of course, but a very special kind of speech that is divorced from all other conventional forms of phatic or instrumental kinds of communication. You are not passing the time of day discussing football, ordering a coffee or explaining the theory of general relativity to a science class. Or indeed if any of these speech acts

do arise, they instantly take on quite a different significance. And of course there is not just speech. There is silence. There are the noises of the body and its movement. There are the sounds of breathing. A sigh. Shuffling. The twisting of a chair or the creaking of a couch. There might be birdsong outside, or traffic noise. The ping of a mobile phone. Every sound may have a potential significance or indeed constitute a specific mode of jouissance. In the dialectic of this little duet-in-ambience, who is producing the music and who is enjoying it?

GD: You're right. The analytic session is an 'intense experience of listening', for both the analysand and the analyst. And I agree with you that a session entails speech, silence, and all kinds of phonic and sonic phenomena. When speaking, the subject enjoys and doesn't want to know anything. He enjoys hearing the repetition of his same old story, or his same old chorus. The analytic experience should lead him away from hearing the bla bla bla of sense, to listening to 'the sound of the singular consistency of an individual's mode of jouissance outside sense', as you say. The analyst, instead, is trained -or is supposed to be trained- not to enjoy while he performs his role. He must be a '*saint homme*', who's given up all jouissance.

SW: It was this idea about the priority of sound as bodily event that

prompted me to ask the question concerning the analytic session that organizes sound into its own kind of music. In this music the (a)tonality of the body accompanies and renders strange the locus of speech along with all the other sonic contingencies that might interrupt it and set it off on another improvisation. I raised the matter of the location of enjoyment in an echo of your own question, and of course I know how essential it is that the analyst renounces all *jouissance* – in the same way that we would be appalled at the idea that a medical practitioner might get off on the bodies of his patients. However, I don't see how it is possible for the analyst to engage his critical faculties through listening without the *jouissance* that underpins knowledge being somewhere on the horizon. Otherwise, we'd be computers. Is it the destiny of the analyst to be a robot fitted with a sophisticated listening device and interpretation software? It would have to be a quantum computer, of course, because ordinary digital computers can't cope with the polyphony of signifiers.

GD: The concept of an 'audio unconscious' is quite challenging and not easy to understand. There is a tendency to conceive of the voice as object '*petit a*' as soundless, with the exception of the psychotic verbal hallucinations. What do you mean by 'audio unconscious'? Is it universal? Do all *parlêtres* have an audio unconscious? And if it were the case, do we have then two

different unconscious, the audio and the other one ‘structured as a language’? Is your audio unconscious related to the Lacanian hint of a ‘real unconscious’?

SW: I coined the phrase ‘audio unconscious’ because I wanted to emphasize the sonic register of the unconscious not only in the sense of the ‘*lalangue*’ or ‘real’ unconscious, but also to see if we could think, in a way analogous to the unconscious structured like a language, an unconscious structured ‘musically’ in which sound is organized in a way homologous to social order. Silence is a crucial element in music, by the way, not just in the sense of its pauses and punctuation, but as its impossible yet logically necessary condition; the point around which the musical drive circulates. As I understand it, ‘*lalangue*’ is a site of pure difference that while it might be predicated on the mother’s tongue (or the mother tongue) is the basis not only subsequently of speech, but also music – and indeed in slightly different ways writing and other forms of mark making such as art and so on.

GD: Let’s move to another point in conclusion. You are in charge of a new Masters degree in Psychoanalysis in the UK. That’s great, psychoanalysis has had a long and successful existence in Britain, is that still the case in its universities? How about the Lacanian orientation? How did your project for a Master’s degree start?

SW: Thank you for this question! I am delighted to talk about this Masters course and the Graduate programme of which it is a part. The project had a rather glamorous start in the Eden Rock Hotel in Miami Beach (frequented by Hemingway, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in the 1950s) at a conference on ‘What Lacan Knew About Women’. I was there to help Marie-Hélène Brousse, Maire Jaanus, Véronique Voruz and Russell Grigg introduce the new journal *Culture / Clinic*. The impetus for that journal has now morphed into *The Lacanian Review* and *The Lacanian Review Online*. At this conference, Véronique and Natalie Wülfing suggested to me that they would like to set up a Masters and Graduate Programme in a British University taught with the support of psychoanalysts from the New Lacanian School in connection with the Department of Psychoanalysis at Paris-8 University. This Department was founded by Lacan himself, and the idea is to try and teach psychoanalysis along the lines set out by Lacan. Since the Philosophy Department at Kingston University already has a close relation with Paris-8 and colleagues with a strong interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis, I was confident that Kingston would be enthusiastic about setting up this programme. This proved to be the case and I validated it within a year. Véronique and Natalie offer the core courses and there are a range of options offered by myself and colleagues from Philosophy and

other departments. It is by no means the first nor the only Masters in Psychoanalysis offered in London – there are others at Middlesex and Birkbeck College, London, for example – but it is the only one that is closely focused on the contemporary clinic of the Lacanian orientation. The Masters is now in its second year, and we already have a small number reading for PhDs. Our students are fantastic, very committed, a significant number of whom have a keen interest in becoming theorists and clinicians. However, psychoanalysis has indeed a very marginal place in British Universities these days. This new course is a rare and beautiful thing.