De Assis, Paulo. 2018. *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance Through Artistic Research*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

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Pianist, composer, and author, Paulo de Assis's recent monograph *Logic of Experimentation* is the theoretical component of a five-year artistic research program undertaken at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent with his ensemble MusicExperiment21. A crucial contribution to artistic research in music – a field predominantly found in Europe, the U.K. and Australia (sometimes called composition-as-research, practice-based research, or practice-lead research) where the artistic process of composers, performers and sound artists is considered a form of academic enquiry[1] – Assis's book argues for a Western art music performance-practice that occupies a "space of problematisation, not of representation," a realm of experimentation that moves beyond mere interpretation (19). *Logic of Experimentation* consists of eight chapters, each intended as a sort of prolegomenon for a future book. These chapters deal with a variety of topics and they are heavily indebted to philosophical and transdisciplinary thought.

The first part of *Logic of Experimentation* provides a new ontology of the musical work, which is perhaps the most salient contribution to the field of music studies found in this book. Assis's unique understanding of the so-called "work concept" was developed while working on an unorthodox performance project *Rasch*^{x}: a series of performances built around Robert Schumann's *Krieleriana* in which numerous alterations or additions were made to Schumann's work (including recitations of Roland Barthes's essays on Schumann, the slowing down and rearranging of Schumann's score, electronic accompaniment, musical recordings or film, and the insertion of other historically related piano pieces into the performance). Assis criticises previous ontologies of the musical work found in analytical philosophy – particularly those with a Platonic or Aristotelian grounding – before constructing his own (which is largely based on the ideas of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and other post-Deleuzian thinkers). Assis argues that a work is not a single, static entity, but rather an assemblage. These assemblages are made up of "actual things," which fall into different strata. Assis provides a taxonomy of these strata which include (as select examples) substrata –

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"materials that already existed in the world before the first traits of instantiation of a new piece" – and epistrata – "the first materials that defined the piece and evolve from them in ever-growing circles" (65). The "actual things" that make up these strata conjoin in different ways according to "virtual structures": diagrams of a work's possibilities, that outline what it does and what it might become (67).

When a musical work is comprehended by an individual or group – as an assemblage arranged in accordance with a certain diagram of possibilities – a particular "image" of the work results. These images are potentially infinite, each making up only one way in which the work can be understood, prioritizing certain strata over others. Since this goes against regular orthodoxies of the work concept, Assis replaces the term work with ~~work~~ – the latter intended as a verb rather than as a noun. For Assis, the ~~work~~ is always a multiplicity, a becoming, or an event, and is in constant flux – it is never a unity, essence, or being.

In his second chapter, Assis examines how a ~~work~~ can be studied "through concrete performative operations that (re)construct [~~works~~] anew every single time one is confronted with them" (72); in other words, through the artistic research of performers. This chapter follows the first in focusing primarily on ideas Deleuze developed with philosopher Felix Guattari, as well as the ideas of their influences and followers. Assis explains that strata are heavily coded and territorialized – containing things that are already materially formed and with established traditions of thought through with they are understood – while diagrams are relatively decoded and deterritorialized, for they map the potentials of change in an assemblage and allow ever-new images of a ~~work~~ to emerge.

If the book's first part provides an ontology, its second aims towards an epistemology. Assis draws from the ideas of science historian Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, particularly his claim that scientific research should implement "experimental systems." In Rheinberger's view, scientific research does not merely prove or disprove a hypothesis, but actively creates knowledge through experimentation. The idea of the experimental system allows Assis to justify his own approach to artistic research, where the strata of musical works are rearranged into novel orders, leading to the construction of new "things" (such as recordings, performances, essays). These things then become new strata for the work in question, which can be used for future rearrangements and the production of even more "things" (and so on *ad infinitum*). In this way, Assis is concerned with a musical work's epistemic complexity (a term borrowed from the work of biologist Ladislav Kováč and philosopher Subrata Dasgupta) – that is, how strata might enable the future becoming of new things. Epistemic

complexity stands in contrast to systemic complexity – which involves enquiry into the truth or nature of strata and things (128). In other words, Assis wants to know – in typically Deleuzian fashion – what a work can do, rather than what it is.

Part three of Assis's book turns towards the performing body and the act of performance itself. Assis adopts philosopher Gilbert Simondon's term transduction, which Assis defines as the process of "changing one type of energy into another, critically leading to the formation of new and unexpected individuations, which contain emergent properties that were not predetermined in advance" (63). Assis uses Simondon's theories to account for how "everything a musician knows and feels about a given musical work" becomes actualized during performance (138).

Assis follows this with an exploration of Roland Barthes's writing on piano playing and his concept of the *somatheme*: a distinctly musical mode of signification that expresses corporeal desire at a level below (or above) that of directly communicative language (in his description of different *somathemes* Barthes uses gesturally evocative terms like stretching, erect, or beating to categorize musical phrases). Assis explicitly links Barthes's idea to its intellectual lineage in the work of Julia Kristeva (a student of Barthes, whose own thought would greatly influence her teacher) and Jacques Lacan. He organizes concepts developed by these three thinkers into a polarity that effectively has propositional meaning on one side, and what negates or comes before such meaning on the other (symbolic against semiotic, representation against affect, signifier against *jouissance*). The pre-linguistic meaning of Barthes's *somatheme* in turn traverses these two realms. Assis's thinking on the *somatheme* was developed while he was working on *Rasch*^{x}, showing how Assis's theoretical considerations are intertwined with his musical practice.[2] (Assis came across the concept in Barthes's essay on Schumann, exploring it further in a book chapter – this research then fed back into his performance project).

Framed as an ethics, the final part concentrates on the institutional repression and control of Western classical musicians. According to Assis, classical musicians still tend to be forced into a slave-like position of interpretation – against which Assis calls for their emancipation as critical and creative agents. The final chapter provides an understanding of the term "contemporary music," using Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the "untimely" along with other related concepts from continental philosophy. According to Nietzsche, the untimely "act[s] counter to our time and thereby act[s] on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come" (204). Assis uses this idea

to argue for a contemporary music that not only exists in the present but can also offer us a critical evaluation of our own time, looking towards the future.

Logic of Experimentation also includes two interesting appendixes – earlier publications that are included to show the development of Assis's ideas. The first is an argument for moving beyond the idea of the "Urtext" edition, in favor of seeing scores as dynamic and ever-changing objects. The second compares the philosophy of Deleuze with the compositional aesthetics of Helmut Lachenmann, noting similarities in their approaches towards the specificity (or "haecceity") of materials.

Assis's book is pivotal for the field of artistic research in music, containing an in-depth transdisciplinary exploration of numerous complex concepts, avoiding the auto-ethnographic solipsism that artistic research studies risk falling into (given that the artist can be both the subject and object of their own research). It is also a well-informed and productive use of Deleuze's ideas and those of other thinkers, some of whom are (to my knowledge) introduced to music studies here for the first time. My sole critique of *Logic of Experimentation* is a peripheral one, but it applies to a thread that is woven throughout Assis's book. My main issue lies with the dichotomy Assis sets up between artistic research and the disciplines of "music history, music analysis, music theory, historical organology, music philology, and biographical studies," or in short, musicology (132).

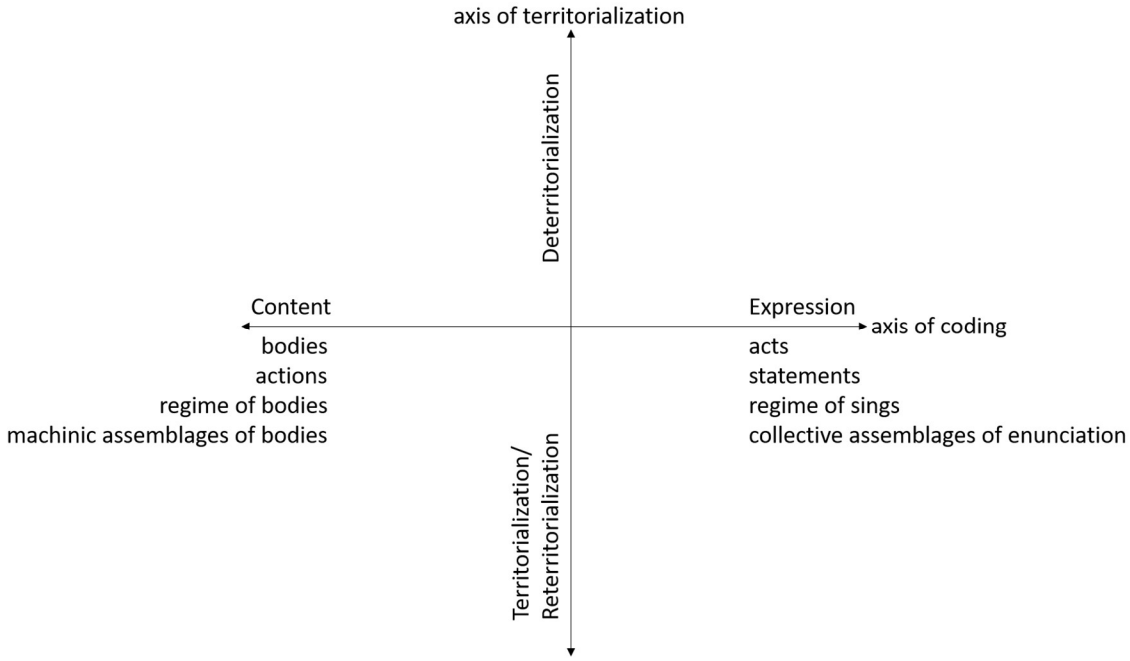
Assis positions musicology against his brand of artistic research, placing them in a convenient binary opposition, so as to privilege the latter as a more progressive option (a maneuver commonly employed by ethnomusicologists, though recently and thoroughly criticized by Stephen Amico [2020]). For Assis, musicology is conservative, "interpretative," an ivory tower discipline, interested only in representation and truth; meanwhile, artistic research is progressive, experimental, and absorbed in creating the new (14, 100, 115, 132, 139, 168, 184). Assis goes so far as to turn this dichotomy into a master-slave relationship, insinuating that the fixation on interpretation (rather than creation) in musical institutions is the result of certain work "images" being forced onto performers by music critics and historians (190). This is an odd assertion: musicologists often break assumptions about how musical works are supposed to be performed, while pedagogical lineages of performers uphold them.[3] Assis's false depiction of musicology may be objectionable on a number of grounds, but more importantly it undermines many of his own key arguments. I will work through these contradictions, deconstructing Assis's text to show that his dismissal of musicology leads him into crucial disagreements with himself.

Assis's foremost self-contradiction arises through his use of assemblage theory – which implies a flat ontology where (quoting Assis himself) "the actual world is the world of actual things, and all these things have the same ontological status—thus, no hierarchies" (56). Despite this assertion (given early on in the book), Assis proceeds to regularly privilege performers over musicologists – or, for that matter, over any other actor who might contribute to a ~~work~~ assemblage. Although Assis may be trying to rectify an imbalance he perceives between musicologists and performers, no real support for the idea that musicologists are currently privileged over performers is given, and at any rate, the rectification of one imbalance by creating another seems counterintuitive.[4]

Indeed, a reverse hierarchy played itself out very clearly in the recent development of a new conservatorium building at a prestigious "research" university in Melbourne. Partly funded by private sponsors (despite the university's status as "publicly funded"), and using (rare) funds from a deceased donor's trust initially intended for musicological research, the new seven story building contains performance spaces, yet no lecture halls; spacious offices for performance and composition staff while musicology professors occupy converted practice rooms in an old, poorly sound-proofed two story building across campus (in a corridor still primarily filled with practice rooms, and the resultant noise). In yet another prestigious "research" university in Melbourne, the musicology department has very recently been eradicated altogether. In environments like this, musicology becomes something of a handmaiden to performance (that is, when it manages to survive at all): musicologists are only considered valuable for the expertise they can impart to performers in performance-dominated conservatoriums, and pedagogical methods are often developed with this in mind.

Assis holds performers up as those who can "emancipate" themselves from their interpretive shackles to become the creative heroes of artistic research. Musicologists, meanwhile, are implicitly considered undevelopable – doomed to non-creative lives where they merely "interpret" and "represent." Yet, as Assis well knows, Deleuzian assemblages contain two axes, each with two poles (81–84). The horizontal axis has content and expression poles – or, the "machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another" and the "collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 88). Meanwhile, the vertical axis contains (re)territorialization and deterritorialization poles: the former of stasis,

interpretation, representation and capture, and the latter of movement, experimentation, creativity, and openness (see Example 1).



Example 1: The tetravalence of the assemblage after Deleuze and Guattari, adapted from Assis (82).

There is a good argument that musicologists occupy a space closer to the pole of expression than to that of content in comparison to performers, given that musicologists work primarily with ideas and language while performers use their bodies to create material sounds, but their position on one axis does not determine their position on the other. Assis allows performers to be either territorializing agents of interpretation or deterritorializing agents of experimentation (that is, they can move about on the axes). Or, put more practically, they can either "faithfully" reiterate a score in a conservative manner, or experiment in the way Assis encourages, engendering the new – but he does not appear to allow the same versatility for musicologists. There is no clear reason, however, for Assis's *tout court* dismissal of a musicologist's potentially deterritorializing force. There is no clear explanation as to why essays, articles or books could not form new images of a ~~work~~, as experimental performances do. It would seem to me that musicology has every potential to play a "diagrammatic" function: mapping the flow of changes in a musical assemblage, predicting – or even instantiating – its future states.[5]

In his insistence on distinguishing artistic researchers from musicologists, Assis goes so far as to blatantly contradict his own ontology. When applying Rheinberger's "experimental systems" to music and art, Assis stresses that:

> Those operating the [experimental] system must be music practitioners, that is to say, not music historians, music sociologists, or music theoreticians. Such musicologists can analyze a posteriori what the practitioners did, but the doing itself, the making of artistic research, remains in the first instance in the hands of those doing music not in those observing music from outside. (113)

Assis argues that experimental systems cannot be practiced by musicologists because they are only "outside observers" of music; in doing so, he implies an ontology that totally contradicts his own assemblage theory. If a musical ~~work~~ is made up of dispersed strata that include musicological discourses (as Assis claims), how can musicologists be "outside" the very assemblage they contribute to? In the above quote, Assis unintentionally implies an ontology where musical ~~works~~ are primarily the product of a performer: a series of physical sounds that leave a trace that is only "observable" by others (in other words, Assis here implies a "work" not a ~~work~~; that is, something that is pre-determined, static and concrete, rather than something which is flexible and open to change). But, if musical ~~works~~ are dispersed assemblages that contain many actual things (as Assis otherwise maintains), then musicologists, by contributing to these assemblages (by writing about them in various ways) are "doing" music and not just observing it.

Neither physical sound nor subjective experience should have ontological priority in an assemblage theory of music. Music generally entails a listener, and in being heard it becomes something other than what it was prior to its hearing (see Bonnet 2016). A listener's "observance" of a musical ~~work~~ consists of, to borrow Simondon's phrase, a transduction of physical sounds into phenomenological data, affects, associations, concepts, etc. – and this transduction may be highly creative. With this said, the listener's transduction of sound is also often explicitly or implicitly informed by learnt modes of comprehension, and these modes are often sourced (knowingly or not) from musicologists. Once the experience of a listener is taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that musicologists contribute to ~~works~~, just like performers, and that the act of "observation" is itself a type of contribution to the musical assemblage. Furthermore, if the listener in question is a musicologist themselves, then the act of listening might transduce itself through yet another creative act – that of writing. This writing might then impact the transductions of other listeners, and so on à la Rheinberger's experimental systems or Deleuze and Guattari's desiring machines (processes that are occupied not with the production of some single predetermined thing, but rather "with the production of production itself" [80]).

The contradictions described above highlight a certain performer-centricity in Assis's thought – one that down-plays the creative potentialities of other actors involved with musical assemblages, like musicologists or listeners. When using philosopher Jacques Rancière's idea of the "emancipated spectator" (see Rancière 2011), for instance, Assis claims that an emancipated spectator "obviously first requires an emancipated performer" (197). But, if the listener can only engage with music in an emancipated manner when it is performed by an emancipated performer, does that not make the listener enchained to the performer's nature and so not actually emancipated? Why does the listener need to worry about the performer's methods in order to creatively engage with what they are hearing? Despite Assis's sophisticated use of assemblage theory, he still at times holds onto the tired notion that music is first and foremost physical sound produced by a performer, failing to give equal priority to the further developments that a ~~work~~ undergoes in a listener's mind or through a musicologist's pen. In doing so, Assis sustains the very dichotomy between research and artistic practice that he is otherwise trying to dissolve. Assis claims to seek:

> an approach that does not oppose 'scholarly research' (of the type presented in the present essay) to 'artistic work' (which leads to concrete performances). In place of a dualistic opposition, I see 'research' and 'artistry' as two parameters, which can have different settings in different moments of the research procedure. (183)

Assis tries to break down the dichotomy between research and artistic practice, but he inadvertently creates a new dichotomy: between artistic researchers (who are first-and-foremost performers, able to dissolve the distinction between research and art) and musicologists (who are apparently unable to dissolve this distinction).

There is an assumption here that writing equals research and that performance equals art, but a true disbanding of the oppositions that Assis problematizes would show that the four terms can be configured any-which-way. Assis synthesizes a binary structure while privileging one of its parts: research is to be incorporated into artistic practice, but the practitioner must hold their artistry in the form of a musical instrument. While Guattari did indeed note that "we make our interpretations with words, whereas we do our experimenting with signs, machinic functions, and engagements of things and people," he went on to qualify that it is "vital to prevent [words and machinic functions] crystallizing into completely separate strata" (Guattari 1984, 87). Assis takes heed of this insofar as he incorporates musicological research into artistic research, but he

makes his discipline the domain of the performer and not the musicologist. Assis fairly bemoans that "performers risk being marginalized and degraded to the role of simple reproducers, losing any creative or intellectual power altogether," but he does the same thing to musicologists in pigeon-holing them as conservative, uncreative, authoritative seekers of "truth" (192).

This is all particularly strange given that Assis's borrows many theoretical concepts from disciplines where the chief mode of expression is writing. This is the case with Deleuze who, as Assis rightly claims, moved away from "interpretation" towards "experimentation" in his 1969 book *Logic of Sense* (15). But Deleuze did so while remaining within the confines of philosophy and its traditional medium, the written book or essay. Similarly, Rheinberger developed his "experimental systems" for scientific research and its written mode of expression. To quote Rheinberger (as Assis himself does): "Writing is an experimental system in its own right" (113). Given that neither Deleuze nor Rheinberger were required to take up musical instruments or some other artistic tool (besides, of course, the pen) for their experimental research, it is unclear why Assis does not afford the same potential to musicologists.

However, I should clarify that my gripe with Assis is that he does not look past musicology as the "actual thing" it currently is (or at least, tends to be), to see its "virtual" potentialities. I would like to now reverse my allegiance, and point out that Assis's view of musicology as overly rigid, even conservative, is in many ways warranted, and his wish to distance himself from musicology – given his prioritization of experimentation and creativity – is justifiable. Assis's project importantly disavows "truth," something that still reigns, explicitly or implicitly, over musicology (24): our discipline poses questions about music, seeking answers, but when these answers are given, they risk imposing themselves onto the music, restraining what it might otherwise do or become. Assis no doubt wishes to distinguish his artistic research from musicology due to this restrictive tendency.

Additionally – despite Assis's exaggeration regarding the lack of impact musicology has had on actual "sonic events" – musicologists do have the propensity to reterritorialize their own deterritorializing actions, quickly turning critical notions developed by, or introduced to their discipline into regulative orthodoxies (Richard Taruskin [1995] made this point regarding historically informed performance and the concept of authenticity).[6] Part of the reason for this "reterritorialization" is the musicologist's tendency to want to know what music is or has been, rather than what might be done with it or what it might become. Assis notes that musical ~~works~~, as assemblages, are divided in two: one

half considers their past, the other their future, and musicology is indeed infatuated with the former rather than the latter (129). This is apparent in the common conflation of musicology with historical musicology in the United States: history happens and the historian tries to recover what happened (or, to interpret what remains), and this approach has infiltrated music studies even when history is not the prime focus. As such, music becomes something that needs to be recovered or uncovered, illuminated or interpreted. There is an assumption that musicology explains what music is, or how it came to be, or what is has done, but rarely does it take music as a catalyst for a free, creative exploration in words. My point is not that certain musicological subdisciplines or methodologies need to be abandoned – historical methods and others besides have their own purposes and values that are not to the point of creativity and experimentation – but, ideally, they would be used as tools for extending musical assemblages, and not as prisons that try (but ultimately fail) to capture them.

Assis's criticisms should hence be heeded by musicologists: where Assis argues for "practice *as* research" (118, italics in original), we might also consider how musicology can become research as an artistic practice, with musicology itself emerging as a creative field. If performers can become artistic researchers, then musicologists can (and perhaps should) do likewise. And since we presumably already have the research part covered, it remains for us to develop our artistic side, perhaps by applying greater creativity and experimentation to the ways we write and think about music.

Examples of this ideal do exist: the writings of the "Occulture" group (2017); of those who emerged from the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Kodwo [1998], Fisher [2014], Goodman, Heys and Ikoniadou [2019]); the recent "prose poems" of David Grubbs (2018); the plays and dialogues of Andreas Dorschel (2018); and the kinds of absolutism found in avant-garde and modernist manifestos, as well as early "gonzo" style rock journalism. We may also go back to Roland Barthes, who as Assis mentions, "did not trust the search for structural codes (analysis), nor all those interminable accounts and commentaries so characteristic of musicological studies" (160). In writings like these, there is a sense of novelty and experimentation; reflection but not the search for "truth"; and often an admirable attempt at *ekphrasis* – the conversion or extension of music or the act of listening into a piece of (artistic) literature. All this entails a move away from the alter of truth towards one of creativity, where music has always sat enthroned. Assis's categorization of musicologists as conservative, interpretative truth-seekers who do nothing but interpret music – although exaggerated in and of itself – forces us to confront the fact that our

discipline "can be much more interesting if it does not focus on 'how things really were' or 'how things really are' but, rather, on 'what things can become'" (184).

Notes

[1] For more on artistic research see Danny Butt's *Artistic Research in the Future Academy* (2017).

[2] For more on Assis's project and how Barthes's ideas influenced it see Assis (2014).

[3] Musicologists like Lydia Goehr, Nicholas Cook, Richard Taruskin and Carolyn Abbate have made important critiques of regulative performance practices; Assis does acknowledge these writers (13), though he differentiates his project from theirs by emphasising the fact that he creates new "sonic events." The idea that musicology does not have direct sonic consequences, however, is something I go on to dispute.

[4] At least in Australia (the place from which I am writing) the opposite is the case, and this is largely due to the inclusion of musicology as a department in conservatoriums, rather than in schools of the arts or humanities (Russia is another place where the situation is allegedly similar: see Marina Frolova-Walker [2017]), as well as a turn towards private donorship due to cuts in state sponsorship. While the performing arts doubtless suffer in comparison to many other "industries" here, the entertainment value they provide still attracts some level of private support: to put it rather cynically, the rich get something for the money they invest in orchestras or conservatoriums (free tickets, special seating, perhaps even an aristocratic delusion that they own part of an orchestra or are personally responsible for an up-and-coming virtuoso), while there is no tangible return to be had from investing in musicological research (beyond perhaps your name in a book's acknowledgments or on a library door). This means that when financial support is given to music, it predominantly favours practice over theory, creating a hierarchy that is the inverse to that which Assis claims. The idea that someone might enter a university wishing to specifically study musicology is barely even considered, and those who become musicologists normally do so through a performance degree (one only has to look at art history or literary theory to see the strangeness of this situation: rarely are scholars from these disciplines expected to have been painters or novelists at any point in their life). I am aware of the particularity of the examples used here, but it makes Assis's claim that musicologists are hierarchically privileged seem rather unfounded (at least when read outside the European context from which he writes).

[5] It is tempting to give as examples musicologists involved with historically informed performance-practice (HIP), given the obvious impact they have had on stylistic developments in performance over the last few decades (Phillip Gossett's close interaction with opera singers, conductors and stage directors is a notable example). However, Assis fairly distinguishes his experimental interests from those of HIP, claiming the latter condemns performers "to historicism, to the cultivation of relics and fetishes from other epochs" (66). As I go on to argue, even though musicologists can act "diagrammatically," they rarely do. The advent of "new musicology" could be considered an exception, given the flood of new perspectives it brought into the study of music (though many of these were then "reterritorialized" – see the next footnote), though the ideas of philosophers come more readily to mind: like Jacques Attali (whose book *Noise* [1985] is sometimes considered to

prophesise the noise music movement of the 1990s), the late Bernard Stiegler (who was actively involved with IRCAM as its general director between 2002-2005), or the Frankfurt School (who Assis himself notes influenced Helmut Lachenmann's compositional approach, and have impacted numerous other musicians since then).

[6] Any argument made for a certain performance practice runs this risk: simply arguing for the "correctness" of one way brings into doubt the validity of others. The "reterritorialization" of musicological concepts has repercussions not only for music performance but also for musicology itself. Many ideas in the discipline, while initially breaking preconceived notions and opening new pathways, become stumbling blocks for certain trajectories of study. For instance, Lydia Goehr's claim that the work concept has "imperialistic" tendencies – although showing that there are many other ways to comprehend music – sometimes creates a blockade for studies where the work concept is in fact applicable to the composition under consideration. Similarly, the postmodern taboo against "progress" or "teleology" – while encouraging a healthy pluralism, where more than a single line of musical development is considered worthy of study – can get in the way of scholars who want to actively support avant-garde trends (this is not the case in music criticism, and I believe this is partly why a more original and experimental writing style is often found there: since the writer is subjectively arguing for, and in a way through, the music they write about). I have even heard of an article that focused on the human perception of sound being rejected because it did not engage with recent arguments made against anthropocentrism. In these cases, concepts act like Marcel Duchamp's *porte*: the door opens up on one room, but as a result closes on another.

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