

COLORLESS, ATONAL: ON MONOCHROME PAINTING AND NOISE

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Introduction

As its title suggests, this book has to do with the relation of painting and music, two separate tracks of aesthetic production that are closely aligned within the history of modernism. Walter Pater's oft-quoted statement, "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music," is axiomatic in this regard. Delivered in his study of Renaissance art, it points to the long process of interaction between these separate realms, visual and aural. Yet Pater's insight is one that is obviously gained retrospectively, in the light of the art on view at the time of his book's publication, 1873. The idea that art and artists might want to be released from the task of reproducing the given forms of the world as it is, and moreover that this might be art's highest aspiration from the very start, must first be observed in works—like those of the Impressionists, for instance—that have actively begun dissolve those forms. From this point of fulfillment, we retrace our steps backward to the origin. What is it that allowed this visual medium to become detached from what is actually seen? One answer is sought in the non-visual arts, in music.

Music guides painting in the process of abstraction because, we assume, it is not beholden to a representational logic. Music does not derive its formal properties from the facts on the ground, so to speak, and neither does it merely relay their effects. Whatever it is that we experience when listening to music, whatever thoughts, feelings or impressions it summons, cannot be readily traced to a preexisting reality. Musical forms are in this sense primary; they are causal in relation to the inner experience of the listener. If the aim of abstraction in painting can be understood as a means of elevating the medium from the secondary stage of mimesis, from merely reflecting what already exists, then music provides an auspicious model. And from the period of the Renaissance well into the twentieth century, and perhaps beyond, this model was in fact closely followed by painters intent on probing a world of sensation, of spirit, of intuition or thought—a non-representational, wholly created world.

The advantage of music is that it is inherently abstract, but this still means that it is abstracted from something. The etymology of abstraction is salient in this regard, for it indicates a drawing away from reality that nevertheless draws on reality. Just as painting contends with the way the world appears, so too does music contend with the way the world sounds. Natural phenomena such as distant thunder, the crack of lightning, falling rain and wind blowing through trees have all been subjected to musical imitation, and the same is true of other cultural phenomena. The cries of animals and the voices of men are equally grist for the mill. And if we agree that the voice is the most elemental musical instrument, it then follows that music is always also in some sense tied to expression and communication, to words and ideas, neither of which belong to it alone. Certainly, most music cannot be reduced to a linguistic sign system—a system that is already constituted and complete before music comes to it—but it is precisely in the various ruptures that it effects between signifiers and signifieds that its *mimetic* aspect is most directly asserted. Music sounds like words sound; it is elaborated on the order of sentences; it follows the course of talk, of conversations and arguments. This is something that music does even in the absence of lyrical content, and when this component is introduced, it only does so more obviously. The sounds of music support the meanings of words or else they rebuff them, but either way, the words and their meanings comprise a basis from which the abstractions of music depart.

Of course, one can point to many other pre-existing sources that have shaped particular configurations of music—numbers, for instance. From the time of Pythagoras, at least, mathematical calculation has also ordered the relations of musical sounds. And in the modern period, this numerical element within music would extend its reach toward all of the things that numbers produce in science, engineering and technology. The sounds of the city, machinery, and music itself as a technological artifact, all feed back into music as crucial points of reference—at once fixed objects of representation and vehicles of abstraction.

Much the same can be said in regard to painting, which, from the Impressionist period at least, turns its attention to the experience of everyday life in urban-

industrial centers. The gaining influence of numbers is reflected in scenes of the street with their teeming, anonymous, atomized masses, which are further subdivided, compositionally, into a “raster” of colored spots. The impact of emerging information technologies—print media, photography, cinema—is also insistently registered in paint at every step of the abstracting process as we progress from Impressionism toward Futurism, Cubism, and so on. This will remain a crucial point of reference even in works that advance toward a condition of absolute non-representation. Further, one could say that, at the height of painting’s aspiration to autonomy, when what we are given is painting *qua* painting, concretized form is re-circulated as content through the channels of its own mediation. This general observation gains a particular resolution in light of a comparative study of music and painting. Their individual aspiration to a condition of self-reflexivity and self-sufficiency via abstraction is mutually reinforced, and by the same token, mutually undermined. Words and numbers pass between them—an alphanumeric code—and more than anything else, it is this element, seemingly extraneous to both mediums, that links their destinies.

The effect of one medium on the other is always somehow reciprocated. Music long served painting as a guide in the abstracting process, while painting allowed music to break from the strictures of classical composition. Under the banners of syncretism and synesthesia, all sorts of equations were drawn between tone-colors and color-tones that irreversibly altered the natures of both painting and music. The sorts of elaborately cross-referencing charts produced on the one side by painters like Wassily Kandinsky, and on the other side by composers like Arnold Schoenberg, have served as a systematic means of translation between two distinct languages. These charts, which enabled the passage of formal and ostensibly non-signifying elements from one discipline into the other, also served to itemize and quantify those elements. The visual and aural material of painting and music is, in each case, imagined in its entirety, as a continuous spectrum, but one that is nevertheless striated and segmented into succession of units, identified by numbers, letters and names.

At every cut in these respective totalities, points are plotted, and along these points, two systems are coordinated, mapped onto each other. Two registers of sensory experience are cross-wired in this way, but what is allowed in at every point will exceed the strictly formal parameters of tone-colors and color-tones. Within the modernist regime of medium-specificity, where the borders between mediums are assiduously patrolled, this process of interaction constitutes a disruption from the outset. From this perspective, music is extraneous to painting, and vice-versa; each invades the internal core of other as a foreign agency, and in this sense might be said to constitute a kind of noise. In communications theory, noise always constitutes an interruption between transmitters and receivers. Noise intrudes to corrupt communicating signals, and when it overtakes information, it points to a gross technical malfunction in need of repair. But art, as we know, is not (or is not only) information, and here instead noise often finds a more welcome home. Noise, in art, might be defined as that which does not belong to any particular medium, but rather passes between them. In regard to painting and music, noise operates as both an interrupter and, to borrow a term from linguistics, a “shifter.” It is that volatile element that is communicated from one medium to another, assimilating to its new context, while in the process transforming it.

A painting that is based on a musical composition can be said to represent it, to copy it even more laboriously and literally than the visual data formerly derived from the world. And the same is true of the musical composition that is based on a painting, and that conserves this painting at its core as a referential object. In both cases, however, this commanding play of mutual influence finally produces something absolutely unprecedented and, in a sense, free. At one extreme, this is the colorless, black or white monochrome, and at the other, atonality. Admittedly, the relation between these two forms of production is not immediately evident; at the extreme, they would seem to cut their ties. Monochrome painting indicates a radical reduction of pictorial resources; it is this and only this object, a finalized, self-same object that admits no further development and can only be remade more or less the same

way. Conversely, atonal music insistently opens onto the “music of all sounds,” to cite John Cage, and accordingly inclines toward heterogeneous excess and heterogeneity. However, if we consult the historical record of artist’s statements and writings on the subject, we find that the “nothing” (the nothing) of wholly non-objective painting is consistently characterized in terms of an “everything” that exceeds even painting as such. And from the opposite musical perspective, the “everything” of sound considered in its totality can reciprocally be described as “nothing,” for music as a distinct and privileged category of sound is precisely what it annuls.

If we accept the technical definition of noise as that which impedes the delivery of a message between communicating parties, then the monochrome’s silence would have to be filled with noise. We can be more specific on this point, for what the monochrome makes apparent is that this is a *background* noise, and as such one that is not expressly produced by the artist so much as pointed out, framed, brought to our attention—a noise that is always already there. In place of a composed picture, the monochrome gives us the ground, the foundational surface upon which pictures appear. Here, then, we are left to observe the tooth of the canvas, the coating of primer, the style of brushwork, the materiality of the paint. Normally receding past the threshold of our perception, these objective facts are offered in lieu of the painter’s impressions and/or expressions, and moreover, they are declared superior. Accordingly, the artist locates painting’s most essential properties in all that was previously suppressed, buried, glossed-over for the sake of communicating. By withholding any message, he amplifies what might be termed the element of *interference* inherent in the medium.

In the realm of sonic media, noise as interference constitutes a quantifiable fact. In painting, of course, the matter of resolution cannot be approached quite so empirically, and this is especially true in regard to abstract painting, which qualifies from the first moment as *distortion* of visible form, even as it is proposed as a higher, more accurate reality. However, inasmuch as the act

of abstracting nevertheless involves a process of mediation between subjects and the object world, the aural analogy is worth pursuing. With respect to monochrome painting, it might serve to once more de-familiarize a type of object that is now perhaps too readily canonized. Arguably the first painting of this kind, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) demands our respect, yet to raptly gaze at it with connoisseurial admiration is in the end no less inappropriate than dismissing it out of hand, for the strength of this work is entirely bound up with its most problematic and challenging aspects. To describe its content in terms of noise is perhaps to demean it, but also to reassert its power to disturb. Let's not forget that in the great arc of art history, *Black Square* constituted a rude disruption. Something was expected and something else was delivered, and it is precisely as something else that it continues to capture our attention.

The development of painterly technique over the centuries had mainly served to overcome, to silence or at least abate, the inherent materiality of the medium, but here instead it is stressed. Malevich's monochrome inaugurated the first stage in this process of revealing the thing in itself that is painting through the wholesale negation of any other thing that could be depicted upon it. "Painted masses" is how he identified the forms that arose under Suprematism, as if organically cultivated, directly from their ground of canvas. To grant to these forms "the right to individual existence," as the artist put it in his manifesto of 1916, is implicitly to turn painting over to things that don't see. All that we once desired to see through, in order to access as immediately as possible what the painter saw, now presses forward, asserting its blind presence.

In the realm of sonic production—be this music, instrumental or sung, or simply the spoken word—noise might likewise be said to disrupt and intrude on our experience as unprocessed, "dumb" sound. The obvious fact that sounds, as such, cannot hear is what we try to correct by way of our listening. To listen is typically not listen to this aspect of sound, but to draw from the totality of all that can be heard only the sounds that make sense to us, and

to filter out the rest. This process is automatic, and yet it involves rigorous discernment; our ears will tend to receive only those sounds that conform to their expectations, and that have, in a sense, already been approved by listening. The sounds of music are exemplary in that they audibly bear the sign of an arduous preparation, having been selected, isolated, distilled and refined in direct answer to listening. What is accessed in any piece of music is a yield of listening, and the sounds it promotes are those most deserving to be listened to. Of course, an infinitely greater range of other sounds will be there as well—the sounds produced by musicians and their instruments in the course of playing, or by the audience in the course of listening; the sounds inside and outside the space of performance and audition, or those that inhere to technologies of recording and playback—but these are generally cancelled. Occasionally, however, an unwanted sound will slip through the cracks, offending the ear, and when this occurs we are in the presence of noise. Noise, in this sense, must always exceed the sphere of our intentions: it is what happens to us, as if by accident. It is what we hear as opposed to what we listen to—over and above it, threatening it from without—but implicitly it is also what we hear *in* what we are listening to. Here too we can think in terms of background and foreground relations, for noise is precisely what passes between them. Unsolicited, it rises to our attention as an excessive “other” to the sounds we are prepared to hear, a disruption or interference with our pleasure in listening, yet one that counts precisely because it asserts itself as the ground of all acoustic experience.

“Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise,” John Cage would assert in 1937 in a text titled “The Future of Music: Credo.” His words serve as a reminder of the relatively narrow sonic bandwidth on which music is, or was, founded, while also preparing the way to the coming “music of all sounds.” This “New Music,” as it comes to be designated, is inherently one that also precedes music in that it is comprised of the sounds that were there before music, the entire range of sounds that subtend the curated order of sounds that we identify as musical. In this sense, nothing new needs to be composed;

rather music is decomposed into its constituent particles, dissolved into its background of “mostly noise.” Cage’s ambition, continually rearticulated within his writings, was to surrender the commanding role of the classical composer in order to “let sounds be themselves.” Certainly, this approach can be traced back to modernist precedents, and appears to align with the foundational doctrine of “truth to materials,” but it also signals an acute diversion in regard to how materials are to be understood. Material truth relates to the idea of autonomy, which is perhaps the central guiding principle of modernity in both the aesthetic and political spheres, but this is a principle that has always been staunchly delimited. The freedom that is exercised by the modern artist, and that is transferred to the artwork and thereafter the audience, is not as a rule extended to the materials as such, which remain compositionally tied to the communicative process—that is, they continue to exist only for us. To grant these materials the right to “be themselves” amounts to a breach in the contract of aesthetic exchange, and signals the onset of a regime of decomposition carried out on their behalf.