

Daniel Albright. 2014. *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

**Reviewed by Matthew Ricketts**

A ticklish question runs through Daniel Albright's *Panaesthetics*: what, or which, or whose Pan? The Greek god Pan is promiscuous, seductively musical, all-encompassing and self-fissioning; the camera pan shifts our gaze to refocus on new visual fields or subjects; pan- prefixes relatedly imply some fusion or bringing-together of various elements (pan-American—pansexual—pandemonium). To which Albright might answer: all of them, and none of them too. This maddening brand of dialectical thinking is a hallmark of *Panaesthetics*, which begins with grandiose statements about what art is but often gets sidestepped with some eccentric examples drawn from the fringes of the canon, tripped up trying to make use of its own clunky vocabulary and ends seemingly confused about its own status as art theory or art appreciation.

Much of Daniel Albright's work has been in the field of "comparative arts"—a broader, significantly newer off-branch from Comparative Literature, the department many aspiring students of letters come to after realizing they can no longer "just study English" at most advanced learning institutions. Following this, perhaps Comparative Arts may too replace close study of the individual arts entirely; a welcome development for Albright, who has consistently and often quite compellingly shown the interpretive advantage of unbinding artworks from their original mediums. His earlier *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Albright 2000) and more recent *Music Speaks* (Albright 2009) cover similar inter-arts territory, which is here significantly extended towards a broader history of the "unity and diversity" of the arts, from the crudely beautiful Lascaux paintings through to the crude beauty of Modernism and onwards. Along the way Albright's theory of comparative arts inevitably becomes one of comparative aesthetics too, panning across the work of Adorno, Heidegger and Greenberg back to Plato, the West's first aesthetic theorist. A latent question binds this broad excursus across theory and praxis (that is, from cavemen to de Man): are the arts many, or are they one?

Albright approaches an answer with the compelling suggestion that art's transmedial impulses are born of our own transmedial biases. Since any description of art must be mediated through the art of language, for

instance, it is possible through language (description, theory, ekphrasis) to join unlike arts across their various mediums. The synaesthetic feel of a given artwork is both a property of art and a property of perception. Albright's prose style consistently embodies this point: that all art (including its criticism) is bound to dream it were other arts, and thereby confuse mediums and sense modalities alike. "Every medium is the wrong medium," writes Albright (2014, 277), but the dizzying, slippery realm of synaesthetic analyses can be baffling: when he discusses the ontology of painting under such self-evidently inexplicable headings as *The Speech of Light* and *The Speech of Touch*, it is clear we are dealing with intricate metaphorical constructions at a rather profound level.

*Panaesthetics* opens with four theses: that artworks become meaningful through their perceived "constructedness"; that artworks exert emotional forces on our bodies by drawing us into a sympathetic, symbiotic space; that all art is already meta-art; and that art is a language. These theses are instantly negated (e.g. artworks needn't mean anything; art is a non-language), setting the stage for subsequent slips and slides across art's histories and medias. Albright navigates these dialectics with the childlike wonder of a Barthes, the original *amateur* of the arts, to whose style of gently inquisitive pondering and polymathic dilettantism Albright is indebted. Indeed it is that very lack of overt commitment to any one art form, thesis, or theory that gives Albright his mercurial gliding power. Of the four theses, the one concerning the role of [perceived] intentionality in an artwork is especially refreshing: Albright baldly states that "Anything is an artwork to the extent that it looks made" (2014, 4). This logic is generously extended to the realm of natural phenomena (mountains, trees) since even the most agnostic viewer still perceives some act of *having been created*, inscribed on or within these various "art-objects" like a maker's stamp. Since all that is has been created, anything can be viewed as art so long as there exists some discernible force of intention, be it faint, fanciful, or overt. This neatly circumnavigates the untrendy issue of authorial intent by repositioning the question of intentionality to the viewer's gaze. Albright readily argues that art must oblige its viewers' demands to mean what they demand it means; thus art appreciation and art theory are fused in a dizzying, interpretive dance of rhetoric. And indeed it is the realm of rhetoric (not biography, nor theory, nor history, nor technic, though he will readily draw on these) that the strength and persuasiveness of Albright's arguments dwell. When he writes "An artwork has little power of resistance to description or interpretation" (2014, 215) he might have considered that we too in reading *Panaesthetics* are powerless to resist these same beguiling descriptions and interpretations. The contrary dictum "We are also free, by

a focal adjustment of the mind's eye, to abandon the quest for meaning" (2014, 5), however, offers the chance to contrarily disregard his conclusions at every turn. This capriciousness lends the book a playful edge.

The bulk of *Panaesthetics* splits into two parts. "Part One: Individual Media" presents a nobly futile (though hardly fruitless) effort to examine the arts of literature, painting, and music in isolation, at least for the sake of establishing some basic defining features of these respective medias before things get truly messy in "Part Two: Art Rampant." This structure extends and embodies the Introduction's dialectical tone: Part One largely asserts the diversity of the individual arts only to be torn asunder in Part Two's exploration of transmedialization, "pseudomorphoses" (after Adorno), and the like. Yet even in isolation, Albright cannot help but discuss the tendency for each individual art media to aspire to the conditions of other medias. Ekphrasis, musical "word-painting" and allegorical painting are classic, if typical examples. Albright has more than just these in mind, but the breadth of this project combined with a thirst for (over-) classification often causes Part One to lose focus. Within Individual Media we find the chapter "What Is Painting?" Within that chapter we find the section "Ekphrasis." Under "Ekphrasis" Albright describes two "modes" at the extremes of objectivity and subjectivity, namely: 1) *poet as transcriber* (most objective); and 2) *poet as participant* (most subjective), which further split into several sub-modes, for example: "the poet's sensibility might be transformed as the image effects a kind of seizure." Finally, within each of these sub-sub-classifications Albright gives a number of contrasting examples. This not atypical splintering of definitions/modes into so many innumerable sub-species begins to feel like the catalogue is overtaking the totality, the map so detailed it swallows the very territory it describes. Albright's chapters in general tend to spin away from the topic at hand, including a bizarre, scrawny digression into cinema three-quarters through the painting discussion. Doesn't cinema warrant its own chapter? What ultimately sustains the line of thought is Albright's great charm and persuasion as a writer, though even these cannot carry the reader across some of the more wandering chasms.

A larger problem, however, is the lack of balance between Parts One and Two. The second half is strangely dwarfed by the first, even though the realm of "rampant art" should be where Albright shines and could thus benefit from more extensive treatment. The placement of the chapter "Nine Definitions" some 200 pages into the book is unaccountable. This chapter's propositions read like an introductory crash-course in the vocabulary Albright could have fruitfully employed in the *first* half of *Panaesthetics*. One of the sorry ill-effects of this ordering is that, coming so late in the

book, these definitions (*concinnity—idolon—pseudomorph*) are hardly put to productive use and remain in the reader's mind like foreign concepts without adequate demonstration—and terms such as *concinnity* and *abrasion* do not readily advertise their own usefulness, being conceptually indistinct from *consonance* and *dissonance*.

The realm of music, and music's relations with the other arts, is Albright's home medium. Not incidentally, music also proves most prone to panaesthetic fancies since the uncertainty of music's language (and indeed its questionable status as a language at all), its utter invisibility and maddening ineffability, coalesce in music's uncanny ability to mean everything, embody anything, oblige any interpretation or ultimately mean nothing, often seemingly at once. The slippery art par excellence, a selection of passages on music examined in greater detail will prove exemplary of Albright's various tactics and conclusions. Extending the argument "language understands everything as language" (8), Albright spends a great deal of time pondering music's quasi-linguistic character (the same topic has indeed been explored at length, from Adorno to Deryck Cooke to Lerdaahl and Jackendoff). Albright welcomes the music-as-language conceptualization but pays keen attention to the paradoxes which inevitably emerge: "One axiom of musical semantics is that as semantic conventions grow rigid they become, paradoxically, *less* meaningful: when music grows too easy to interpret, the ear hears the interpretation and not the music" (160). In other words, since clichés in language tend to either ossify meaning or distract from the process of signification, semantic codes in music rely on a certain extant currency within a musical community, but as currency they also risk inflation whereby *more* music is needed to mean as much as was signified earlier. Familiarity, at a point, breeds indifference; clichés become hollowed-out and need periodic renewal, and art responds to this call for renewal with its cycles of forward-looking avant-gardes and historicist neo-movements.

Albright also appears to be deeply skeptical about the music-as-language model, even while entertaining its basic tenets. He raises the issue of rhetoric, for instance, not being an *intrinsic* feature of music, but rather a break at music's limit, a sort of malfunctioning of music's parameters to allow for quasi-linguistic intrusions foreign to its lack of clear referents, its inability to speak in a "past tense":

The more closely we examine the hypothesis that music is a language, whether in theory of practice, the less tenable it appears. After exhaustive study of Mattheson's tables of tropes and of many other old treatises, the musicologist George J. Buelow . . . concludes, "Many of the musical figures . . . originated in attempts to explain or justify irregular, if not

incorrect, contrapuntal writing.” In other words, the rhetorical aspects of music seem to be concentrated in various areas of deviance from accepted musical practice; so we are left with the uncomfortable dilemma that music is a kind of rhetoric, even while *music is more rhetorical when it breaks down than when it obeys the rules*. (171, emphasis added)

Later, Albright considers ways that music might aspire to the conditions of language even without being one—riffing on a Borges tale in which a noun-less language uses only verbs to signify without referents (“*The moon rose over the river*” translates into “*Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned*”), Albright proposes that music might also be thought of as a language in this capacity, with *only* verbs, as it can seemingly describe action (whether through established codes or degrees of acoustic verisimilitude like storms, birds, or rain) even without clear referents or nouns.

In analyzing music’s non-linguistic character, however, Albright finds that music paradoxically becomes more language-like. Arguments for music’s abstract, non-linguistic nature still tend to evoke language-like qualities even in defense against music’s powerlessness to express anything. These arguments tend to rely on the visual arts or the visual medium (a position most typically characterized by Eduard Hanslick or Stravinsky) to explain how music *means*, that is, not as language but as “visual art realized in sound.” And yet music by this account still retains traces of the linguistic, detectable in such language as *dramatic/narrative* structures, *rhetorical* modes, *gestural* movements, etc. Or observe the work of French post-structuralists Derrida, Saussure or de Man: how language itself can as easily be thought of as fractured and incoherent, with its endlessly deferred signifiers never leading out of language to any reality. If music is a defective language, then certainly *language* per se can also be seen as defective by those same arguments. Albright has effectively underscored one of music’s most pervasive contradictions: “the more we try to understand music as language, the more strongly it resists that understanding; and the more we try to understand music as the opposite of language, the more sweetly, strongly, plainly it speaks to the ear” (177).

When discussing music’s tackling of so-called origin mythologies, Albright misses a major opportunity to extend his discussion of “music’s mythologies”—that is, music which explicitly tackles musico-narration of creation myths, or “points towards its own origins.” He consistently reiterates that *all* artworks point toward their own origins (“The artwork contains within itself the history of its medium” [177]), even overturning Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s *Shoes* to assert that the real subject is not the harsh peasant life but rather the history of visual arts itself, the mud on the bottom of the shoe being imaginatively re-written as mud transplanted from the

cave walls at Lascaux. Yet moving to music, Albright seems curiously stuck in either Greek (Orphic) or Judeo-Christian (Creation) myths when discussing music's "pointing towards its own origins"—focusing on the rather obvious (though no less spectacular) case of Haydn's *Creation* or Rebel's *Les éléments*, the kind of example which doesn't so much require illumination as mere mention, and later, more curiously, Schoenberg's obscure *Genesis Suite*. Albright might have moved beyond these rather isolated examples of religious/mythological origin narratives toward more "agnostic" creation narratives in music; for instance, how the initiatory move from unpitched to pitched music in Berg's *Drei Orchesterstücke* or Carter's Double Concerto compellingly suggests a narrative of creation *ex nihilo*.

Albright does indeed suggest a musical narrative derived from a "scientific account of creation" but only mentions Xenakis' *Pithoprakta* as an example for modeling chaos. This discussion still feels rather thin without a true accounting for non-theistic origin myths in music. Spending so much time describing what is arguably Stravinsky's weakest piece, *The Flood*, makes the omission all the more frustrating. Ultimately what this section lacks is not an exhaustive compendium of possible creation narratives in music but rather an account of the ease with which any music can be made to embody an origin narrative; moreover, that the *ur*-narrative implied by and underlying such diverse but flexibly applicable narratives is *the medium of music itself*. Music's time-bound quality and amorphous ambiguities mean that every piece must unfold (indeed, must *create itself*) before its listeners each performance. While individual compositions may capitalize on this particular quirk of music at the service of a specific narrative program, in reality each piece of music already tells a creation myth each time it sounds for us—its own creation myth, yes, but also music's.

Albright goes to great lengths to salvage the narrative dimension of music. He considers narrativity an indispensable feature of all music, not just programmatic music. Put another way, music is particularly flexible when asked to carry the semiotic weight of narration: *all* music "deals in various nameless-nesses, and yet half-namable apparitions keep eerily coming into being" (201). Toward a definition of music: "*nameless yet half-namable apparitions*"—ever absorbent, ever ready to entertain our fanciful readings hurled at it. Yet this hyper absorption is also maddening in the interpretive promiscuities it allows. Like Sartre's beautiful aphorism (music: the *belle muette*, with eyes full of meaning), she smiles at us and answers *yes* too willingly to all our inquiries, convinces us our riddle solvings are the right ones; we step aside, satisfied, only to watch the next suitor step forward to propose the opposite solution—*yes* music answers again, smiling still enigmatically.

Later Albright most productively takes the Adorno argument (“Music is a narrative that narrates nothing”) to task, by way of a loving critique of Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s *Music and Discourse*. Nattiez, to summarize, extends Adorno’s argument but focusing on the *that narrates nothing* aspect, grounding it in a linguistic critique which finds music (unlike real language) unable to extend its referents beyond the level of its “sonorous discourse.” Because of this, “music cannot lie. The responsibility for joining character–phantoms with action–shadows lies with me, the listener, since it does not lie within *music’s* semiological capacities to join subject and predicate” (Nattiez, quoted in Albright 2014, 202).

Very well, but Albright shows that the wealth of interpretive narratives which a given piece of music seems to welcome, that same promiscuous *yes*, is not a sign of its semiological deficiencies but rather points toward music operating “at the narrative core of things” (204). The same conclusion which might have made the section on music and origin mythologies stronger (that is, that music’s very *medium* constitutes its creation myth) is inevitably reached here: for the narratives music deals in, welcomes, emulates, are also all *ur*–narratives. That we tend to get squeamish when such narratives are too clearly articulated does not discount music’s narrative capacity: it only points to a distaste for music whose meaning terminates, freezes, in a hyper–specific *individual* narrative. But music’s capacity, indeed its tendency, to entertain narrative reading suggests more basic narrative structures either set into motion by composers or read into the work by narrative–minded listeners. Albright suggests that even literary narratives, with precisely those subject/predicate relationships denied to music, still function as *ur*–narratives: “it could be said that a written narrative is nothing but an incitement [for *us*] to make a narrative, since written stories...become significant to us only insofar as we fill in their blanks, as we remap them onto private grids of thought and feeling” (206).

The strange brevity of Part Two (80 pages compared to the previous 200) remains baffling. While the book does set out to account for both the unity and diversity of the arts, “Art Rampant” is the most proper place for Albright to develop everything he has diligently set up in Part One and put his comparative arts theory to productive work. The discussion of “pseudomorphoses” should constitute the meat of Albright’s argument, as they are the most characteristic byproducts of panaesthetic pedigree, yet his examples often feel thinly sketched or oddly chosen. Six whole pages are eaten up quoting Leonardo da Vinci in the section on pseudomorphs (“From Painting to Music”), yet da Vinci doesn’t even describe anything related to music but rather ruminates on the superiority of painting as a medium, which grates against the framework of Albright’s discussion of

music born of painting. But the topic of the visual medium's influence on, and entry into, the realm of music is far too interesting to be left at that. Albright limits himself to depictions of battle scenes in music and, beyond a work by Gloria Coates after Van Gogh, nothing more. The omission of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is curious. Albright's privileging of non-canonic examples over more normative fare proves rather typical of *Panaesthetics*. "Art Rampant: Pseudomorphs" opens with a sweeping dismissal in this vein: "The commonest pseudomorphic translations are from literature to picture...and from picture to literature...[but] here I will treat four of the less common cross-medial thrusts among three important media" (234). Does Albright wish to examine *exemplary* works in the sense of typical or in the sense of extraordinary, uncommon? That is, is his theory best served by cherry-picking a rather limited number of works which adequately demonstrate his concepts, or is a larger theory of art being offered but one from which Albright chooses to underscore his points with less-than-typical examples? Albright clearly has a taste for the unusual, and there is a freshness to fringe art fare. Albright's enthusiasm for these is consistently compelling, but omitting such a major work as Mussorgsky's in apparent avoidance of the better-known leaves his treatment of the topic of musical ekphrasis rather unconvincing.

Moreover, an important ancillary point might have been made when Albright brings up Xenakis' use of technology to transform visual sketches into music, considering this a brand of musical ekphrasis. Yet the process of transferring the orientation of the visual plane onto the time and pitch domain of music is in fact what music notation in the Western tradition already accomplishes. And by this logic isn't all music (notation) a form of ekphrasis? The development of these notational codes is so intertwined with the visual field and how time and space are mapped within these codes that a compelling argument could be made that composers have actually learned to think music *visually*, at least in some major ways throughout the process of structuring, even conceiving of music. All scores are graphic scores, types of "sound pictures," so all music within notated traditions is in this sense "ekphrastic." It is an unfortunate oversight for a book grappling with cross-talk between the arts, and inter-medial blurring, to not even touch upon this point.

A more pressing issue here and throughout Albright's oeuvre is the liberal reusing of sentences, paragraphs, or entire sub-chapters from his own earlier publications. The sections on music and/-as-language, for instance, appear verbatim in the opening chapter of *Music Speaks* (when one encounters so seemingly rare a sentence as "The persimmons are mottled but unripe" in two separate publications the effect of such rhetorical flour-

ish is sadly dampened). A frequent and sought-after lecturer, it is understandable that Albright would draw from his own body of notes, slides and asides when publishing new work; knowing that the material from both *Music Speaks* and *Panaesthetics* began as lectures partially illuminates these works' wandering, sometimes digressive structures.<sup>1</sup> But the lack of new perspectives on older material is frustrating, and the covert, or at least unacknowledged way these chapters are reused across different works betrays a somewhat lax attitude toward originality. The ease with which almost the entirety of the opening chapter of *Music Speaks* was inserted into *Panaesthetics* is itself problematic: are these arguments so imprecise, so beguilingly obscurant at times, to smoothly migrate between books with totally different trajectories and wildly divergent structures without really altering those trajectories? Or was it the ultimate ambition of Albright's thinking to erode the divisions between not only artworks, but between the works about art?

In the final pages of *Panaesthetics*, Albright pans back to the dialectical nature of the opening Introduction having drawn two contradictory conclusions: the aforementioned aphorism *every medium of an artwork is the wrong medium*, and its opposite: *every artistic medium is the right medium*. That we feel so endlessly obliged to rip every artwork from its origin medium into the verbal realm of description more supports the latter conclusion, or at least points toward the necessity of aesthetics (both hermeneutics and theory) as a vital extension of what constitutes the closed art object, if such a thing ever did exist. Criticism makes porous art more porous still—it can breathe more even as it bleeds, its hermetic essence now draining away, now restored again. *Panaesthetics*, and *Panaesthetics*, is above all a life-giving force in and of art, as mediums steal and skip and slip across mediums to renew themselves, freely colonizing other arts. Albright channels this boundless appetite. Indeed the final slippery go-between, the ultimate panaesthetic ambiguity here, involves the blurred lines between those very worlds of praxis and theory, between art and its aesthetics. As both literature and theory *Panaesthetics* proves a hugely enjoyable and insightful feat of imaginative, sometimes fanciful thinking about—and through—the arts.

POSTSCRIPT: Daniel Albright passed away unexpectedly on January 3, 2015, not long after this review had been completed. He was only 69 years old. *Panaesthetics* is thus the last work published during Albright's own lifetime. The book at hand may ultimately prove to be the summit of Albright's project: "At the time of his death he had recently published the

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book he referred to as the most philosophical of his life, and in many ways the culmination of his life's work: *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*.<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

1. From the preface to *Music Speaks*: "The volume you have in your hand is a sort of rehearsal–piano reduction of a number of multimedia lectures I've given in the past few years" (Albright 2009, xiii). From the preface to *Panaesthetics*: "[T]his book grows out of the Anthony Hecht lectures I gave [at Bard College] in 2012" (Albright 2014, xi).
2. "Panaesthetics," Daniel Albright, <http://panaesthetics.org>.

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