

Post-Ironic Sounds:

Wallacian New Sincerity in “*Unavoidably Sentimental*” for Large Ensemble

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ABSTRACT

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This essay presents a conceptual analysis of my piece *Unavoidably Sentimental* for Large Ensemble. Specifically, the paper traces the roots of the musical thinking in the piece to a notion of Sincerity that emerges from David Foster Wallace’s books and essays. The term New Sincerity, coined by Adam Kelly, is deployed to consider what a post-postmodern Sincerity could sound like in contemporary music. The paper provides general background to the literary discourse around the concept of New Sincerity as an extension of Lionel Trilling’s formalization of Sincerity and Authenticity. It suggests some examples of how a renewed sense of Sincerity could incarnate in contemporary music. As a background for the analysis of *Unavoidably Sentimental* itself, the paper provides background to my prior engagement with concepts like irony and authenticity in music. *Unavoidably Sentimental* is analyzed as a linear process, in which the piece tries to emerge out of a net of self-aware referential musical objects into the creation of sonic states of unmediated human communication between the musicians and the audience. I present different musical strategies in which the piece confronts the limitations of human communication through music, contextualized with reference to the portrayal of communication in Wallace’s writings.

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1. Introduction

1.1 An Artist's Dream

Located in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Artist Dan Graham's *Two-way Mirror Punched Steel Hedge Labyrinth* features a maze of glass walls wherein visitors explore nature while simultaneously faced with their own reflection. The caption of the work reads: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more critical, and more real than art."¹ The distance between what art really "is" and what artists want it to be is at the center of this essay. This gap is both a source of inspiration and a destructive force in the works of David Foster Wallace. The acknowledgement of the limits of the artistic medium and the attempt to get beyond its inherent expressive possibilities create the underlying paradox of his writings. Wallace seems to dream of creating works that are more human than art, works that function as a substitute for real-life, human-to-human communication. The intellectual context in which his texts were conceived makes this endeavor even more difficult.

The attempt to create meaningful communication in music faces similar complexities. It often seems to me that the nature of the material in instrumental music and the innate human mechanisms that perceive it discourage the understanding of sounds and musical works as bearers of relevant meaning (rather than mere acoustic "things"²). Thus, the attempt to refer to something "more social, more critical, and more real" may seem more unrealistic in music than in other artistic mediums. In *Unavoidably Sentimental*, I dream of reaching beyond this limits and attempt to create sincere human communication in sounds.

¹ Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Punched Steel Hedge Labyrinth* (1994-96). Permanent collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

² "Saussure's discovery of the internal structure of the linguistic sign differentiated the sign both from mere acoustic 'things' (such as natural sounds) and from mental processes." Jan Mukarovsky, *On Poetic Language. The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukarovsky*, trans. and ed. J. Burbank and Peter Steiner (Yale University Press, 1977), 18.

1.2 Sincere Analysis

Issues of artistic significance and expression are discussed in this essay through the recent application of the term “New Sincerity” to the works of David Foster Wallace. The idea of a renewed interest in Sincerity applies in the present thesis not only to the expressive trajectories of Wallace’s works and *Unavoidably Sentimental*, but to the methodology of the analysis of my musical work as well. Therefore, the analytical procedures do not concentrate solely on the sounds and the musical structures - “the music itself.” Instead, they position the piece in a broader context, one that is more relevant to “real lived lives.” This runs counter to the modernist and postmodernist tendencies Wallace describes in regard to literary scholarship:

Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity. Such is the modernist legacy that we now presume as a matter of course that “serious” literature will be aesthetically distanced from real lived life. Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism and literary theory, and it’s probably fair to say that Dostoevsky et al. were free of certain cultural expectations that severely constrain our own novelists’ ability to be “serious.”³

There seems to be something honest and authentic in the analysis of music through formal systems or the science of acoustics, reflecting a sense of acceptance of what music “is” and how it functions. Still, I chose to focus on semantics, artistic intentions and conceptual thinking in the analysis of *Unavoidably Sentimental*. In doing so I hope to legitimize music’s ability to be “serious” in a contemporary, reference-saturated context.

³ David Foster Wallace, “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 272.

2. New Sincerity in Contemporary Literature

The term “New Sincerity” was first introduced in cultural studies by film critic Jim Collins in his 1993 essay, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity.”⁴ The term was later popularized in contemporary literary criticism by Adam Kelly in his 2010 essay, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction.”⁵ Although Kelly’s terminology was applied originally to Wallace’s works, it has been further attributed to other writers of Wallace’s generation as well:

There is currently no critical consensus as to what the term “New Sincerity” means or who belongs under it, but in a literary context it is increasingly being applied to a loose group of “Generation X” or “post-baby-boomer” writers - usually including (but not limited to) Junot Diaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Rick Moody, George Saunders, and Wallace - who are seen to articulate responses to postmodern irony and poststructural theory.⁶

In the context of this essay, the term is not associated with a new artistic movement or a well-defined aesthetic, but rather used to observe common trends in the way artists have been dealing with artistic creation in the post-“End of History” era. It will be further extended to examine how terms like “Sincerity” and “Irony” have been addressed and developed in music.

2.1 Sincerity, Authenticity and New Sincerity

Kelly’s point of departure is Lionel Trilling’s 1972 study “Sincerity and Authenticity,”⁷ which conceptualizes the distinction between the two terms. Trilling sees the origins of Sincerity

⁴ Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins, 242-63 (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering, 131-46 (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010).

⁶ Iain Williams, “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s “Octet,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56:3, 299-314.

⁷ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

in Renaissance Humanism, as exemplified by Hamlet's promise to be true "to thine own self"⁸ and Sir Philip Sidney's Muse's command to the Poet: "Look in thy heart and write."⁹ Sincerity, in Trilling's terms, has to do with intersubjective truth and communication with others; it relates to the performativity of the self rather than to an internalized truth. He defines Sincerity as a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling,"¹⁰ which involves a demonstrable awareness of a public self. Sincerity, then, has to do with the consistency of the inner self and its public manifestation. The emphasis that this notion places on overt actions has caused a decline in its popularity. By the 1970s, Trilling described Sincerity as an "anachronism" that his contemporaries (i.e., his postmodernist colleagues) are likely to discuss "with discomfort or irony."¹¹

And indeed, according to Trilling, the modernist literature of the twentieth century abandoned these ideals, associating Sincerity with artificial dishonesty: "One cannot both be sincere and seem so."¹² Thus, the ideal of Sincerity was superseded by the ideal of Authenticity - a personal, inwardly-oriented self-expression. Modernism's attention was directed to the internal consistency of intent and manifestation and not to the compatibility of an emotion and its public display: "The criterion of sincerity, the calculation of the degree of congruence between feeling and avowal, is not pertinent to the judgement of their work."¹³ In this context, authentic writing dismisses the possibility of sincere expression. Modernist literature avoids artistic creation for extra-aesthetic purposes. The distinction between humanism and modernism in Trilling's theory

⁸ From William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602):

This above all: to thine own self be true
And it doth follow; as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Hamlet, Act 1, scene 3 (Oxford University Press; Reissue edition, 2008), 78.

⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* (1580s, Reissue edition: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 1.

¹⁰ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² Andre Gide, trans. Dorothy Bussy, *The Immoralist* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1930), 88.

¹³ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 7.

places the focus of the former on sincere congruity of the inner world and the artistic product, and the latter's on the internal aesthetic consistency of the work as a form of expression.

Adam Kelly frames New Sincerity as an attempt to restore a lost sense of Sincerity while maintaining an honest self-awareness of the artistic process. New Sincerity, according to Kelly, is an “aesthetic response by a generation of novelists to the challenge to older forms of expressive subjectivity that coalesced in the period during which they began writing.”¹⁴ He mainly draws on Jacques Derrida's thesis about the impossibility of a pure gift to formalize the unavoidable connection between performativity and self-expression. Therefore, New Sincerity writers approach sincere expression “through the frame of paradox,”¹⁵ aware that every attempt to externalize parts of the self will be understood as a pose. Although the attempt at a new Sincerity is bound to fail, it creates an opposition to pop culture's postmodern irony and hyperbolic self-mockery.

These definitions of Sincerity and New Sincerity are inherently problematic and self-contradictory, especially in regard to the perception of the consistency of a “self.” “In a traditional sense,” cultural theorists Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal write, “sincerity indicates the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it. But the very distinction between inner self and outer manifestation implies a split that assaults the traditional integration that marks sincerity.”¹⁶

2.2 “New Sincerity” in the works of David Foster Wallace

Kelly proposes the term “New Sincerity” to replace the attribution of “postmodernism” to Wallace's writing. Expanding on Steven Connor's observation that “being modernist always

¹⁴ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁶ Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal, *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

meant not quite realizing that you were so, being postmodernist always involved the awareness that you were so,”¹⁷ Kelly adds that “Being postmodernist in Wallace’s generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity.”¹⁸ Wallace attempts to get beyond modernist abstract experimentalism and to restore the importance of art as a means of communicating the inner self. His focus is not on a modernist sense of authenticity, but rather on older forms of self-expression that depend on the visible congruence of intents and actions. Thus, Wallace’s notion of Sincerity deals with “not just what’s true for me as a person, but what’s going to sound true. What’s going to hit readers or music listeners, or whatever; what’s going to hit their nerve endings as true in 2006 or 2000 or 1995.”¹⁹

But Wallace doesn’t simply turn his back on modernism. Rather, his works create complex relationships between a self-contained internal logic and the romantic expressive ideal. They are doing so through “the feedback loop of irony and sincerity.”²⁰ Wallace’s writing doesn’t give up overly-self-aware formal manipulations and the use of textual references, but tries to convey through them quaint values such as “love, trust, faith and responsibility”²¹.

The most explicit formalization of Wallace’s position in this regard appears in his article “E Unibus Pluram,” which deals with the influence of TV culture on fiction writers. Wallace identifies the ironic extremes that TV production has reached during his life time: “The best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern

¹⁷ Steven Connor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁸ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” 145.

¹⁹ David Foster Wallace interviewed by Michael Silverblatt on March, 2006, on radio station KCRW’s “Bookworm.”

²⁰ A.O. Scott, “The Panic of Influence: *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, by David Foster Wallace,” *The New York Review of Books* (February 10, 2000), 39-43. e

²¹ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” 139.

art could have dreamed of.”²² He fears TV’s influence on American authors and claims that it “helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to an unrealistic world”²³. Opposing irony, which in Wallace’s formulation means “exploiting the gaps between what’s said and what’s meant,”²⁴ his aesthetic position calls for “completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity.”²⁵ Unlike older forms of Sincerity, Wallacian Sincerity is constantly aware of the lack of genuineness in the process of externalization implied by the ideal of artistic expression. Thus, Wallace often exposes the inauthenticity of his characters’ actions and the way in which their self-consciousness distorts their genuine intentions. According to Kelly, he “asks what happens when the anticipation of others’ reception of one’s outward behaviour begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic.”²⁶

2.3 New Sincerity and Privilege

Before continuing the discussion with a more personal account of Wallacian Sincerity and its application to music, I would like to address some of the more problematic aspects of the notion of New Sincerity, as well as of Wallace’s writing in general. Statements regarding the inability to properly communicate and the limits of expression often entail a privileged artistic position. Furthermore, one may identify a sense of entitlement and narcissism in focusing on self-awareness as a destructive force in human relations.

²² David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2010), 159.

²³ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁵ David Foster Wallace, *Octet*, in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1999), 131.

²⁶ Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” 142.

In literary circles, the term “New Sincerity,” as coined by Kelly, has been criticized repeatedly for its exclusivity and its affinity to neo-liberal concepts and ideologies²⁷ (a connection reaffirmed by Kelly himself, whose monograph-in-progress’s title is “*American Fiction at the Millennium: Neoliberalism and the New Sincerity*”²⁸). One striking criticism appeared in a 2017 essay by Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts titled “White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest’s New Sincerity.”²⁹ The authors accuse Kelly’s thesis of being infected with “forms of racist and sexist exclusion,”³⁰ and maintain that his reading of Wallace “works to restore white men to positions of representative cultural authority.”³¹ Their criticism, drawing on the work of political and cultural theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva, concentrates on the depiction of characters of different genders and races in *Infinite Jest*. It focuses on these characters’ rehabilitation process in the context of the Alcoholics Anonymous philosophy. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts identify in the novel a moral position that affirms AA’s philosophies as a cure to the “loss of a self”: “That this loss is overwhelmingly experienced by *Infinite Jest*’s white men, however, suggests that AA is geared specifically towards alleviating an ailment Wallace codes as white and male.”³² They identify basic concepts in AA as being exclusive and as prioritizing whiteness and masculinity, and maintain that “Kelly’s New Sincerity glorifies AA for the same reasons *Infinite Jest* does.”³³

In addition, they discuss “Wallace’s melodramatic binary”³⁴ of affectless irony, prevailing in pop culture on one side and sincere literary expression on the other. Trying to

²⁷ Iain Williams, “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet,’” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56:3 (2015): 299-314.

²⁸ See Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts,” *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5:2 4 (2017).

²⁹ Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts. “White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*’s New Sincerity,” *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5:1, 6 (2017): 1-28, <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.182>.

³⁰ Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, *White Guys*, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

“unravel the cultural elitism that motivates New Sincerity,”³⁵ the authors assert that “if it is only white male subjects who suffer from this affectlessness in *Infinite Jest*, it is also only they who can ‘recover’ from it.”³⁶

I find Wallace’s struggle - trying to communicate on a simple human level but only being able to express himself in an elitist, exclusive manner - to be one of the driving forces of his prose, and especially the frustration and depression that saturates it. He represents a privileged generation in a western civilization that hasn’t encountered major human disasters at first hand, and needs to find new ways to maintain and legitimize a meaningful existence. In a 1994 issue of the *Modern Review*, a London-based magazine, Toby Young puts it this way: “It’s difficult to imagine what a post-ironic sensibility would be like. It’s a bit like finding yourself at the end of history. You’re bored because you’re not participating in any historic events but you can’t very well up sticks and go and fight in a war in a less evolved society.”³⁷

2.4 Simplicity and Communication

As mentioned before, the yearning for simplicity and unmediated communication is one of the expressive pillars of Wallace’s writing, as well as one of the main points of reference for my piece *Unavoidably Sentimental*. Wallace’s characters are engrained with a deep sense of inability to “really” communicate or to fully transmit their own inner private experiences to other human beings. The frustration intensifies with these characters’ heightened awareness to their communicative limitations. Thus, Wallace’s own fictional agent in “Good Old Neon” is “fully

³⁵ Ibid., 24.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Toby Young, “The end of irony? The tragedy of the post-ironic condition,” *The Modern Review* 1:14 (April-May 1994): 6-7.

aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid."³⁸

This side of Wallace's writing feels especially personal and expressive. It represents what seems like an authentic attempt to communicate with his readers in order to break his deep lasting loneliness, as noted by Zadie Smith: "What he's really asking is for you to have faith in something he cannot possibly ever finally determine in language: 'the agenda of the consciousness behind the text.' His urgency, his sincerity, his apparent desperation to 'connect' with his reader in a genuine way - these are things you either believe in or don't."³⁹

Wallace's perception of the range of human communication can be traced in the characterization of the Incandenza brothers in *Infinite Jest*. They represent the two poles of communicative ability. Mario, "the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA,"⁴⁰ is a common character in Wallace's fiction: a "simple" person who is not part of the elite, but is able to have a "real" connection with other people. Mario's physical deformities and limitations make him even more human. He is foremost "a born listener,"⁴¹ the type of person with whom everyone can communicate sincerely: "bullshit often tends to drop away around damaged listeners, deep beliefs revealed, diary-type private reveries indulged out loud."⁴² He is the only character in the novel who is able to believe in something and has a sense of purpose, without the need to revert to irony and cynicism: "Mario felt good both times in Ennet's House because it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard

³⁸ David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," in *Oblivion: Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 181.

³⁹ Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (Recorded Books, 2010), 290.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 184.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80.

somebody say God with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way.”⁴³

On the other extreme, Hal appears to be a literary incarnation of the way Wallace sees himself. He is what literary critic Heather Houser calls the “characterological center for the novel’s critique of detachment.”⁴⁴ Hal’s talents and intellectual ability are not an asset, but rather an obstacle in establishing a sincere channel of communication with other people. His self-reflective nature seems to be the cause for his anhedonia and paradigmatic lovelessness. Unlike Mario, he’s unable to believe in anything: “How can you pray to a ‘God’ you believe only morons believe in, still?”⁴⁵

The entire premise of *Infinite Jest* could be seen as an extensive therapy for Hal’s loneliness. Late in the novel, James O. Incandenza, Hal and Mario’s father, appears as a wraith to the convalescing Don Gately, and explains that he created the irresistibly addictive avant-garde film “Infinite Jest” in order “to contrive a medium via which he [James] and the muted son [Hal] could simply converse.”⁴⁶ Through Hal, Wallace is able to write some of the most touching monologues in the book, sometimes even in first person:

It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately - the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it.⁴⁷

The quintessential paradox of communication in the center of Wallace’s literary project is what makes his New Sincerity so appealing to many artists of our time. The will to share a

⁴³ Ibid., 576

⁴⁴ Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 125.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 350.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 838.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 900.

private experience with others stands sometimes in contradiction to the artistic tactics and techniques that are the essence of artistic creation. There is a sense in Wallace's fictional world that the more one reaches to an inner depth, the less one is able to have meaningful relationships with the other.

2.5 Sincerity and Paradoxes

The way to cope with the paradox of communication in Wallace's texts is to expose it and create self-contradictory semantic loops that make it impossible to challenge their authenticity. Wallace approaches Sincerity and irony in contradictory ways, turning "irony back on itself, to make fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth."⁴⁸

He goes a long way into the recursive labyrinth of self-awareness, being aware that you're aware, aware that you're aware that you're aware and so on. In one of his interviews he claimed that the only interesting thing about postmodernism is that it is "highly self-conscious, self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers, and the fact that readers probably knew it."⁴⁹ For Wallace, self-awareness appears to be a deconstructive force in artistic expression. Wallace's writing continuously exposes its own inauthenticity and the weakness of its cynicism, but can't really offer an alternative: "Irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."⁵⁰ Here, Wallace continues an early 20th-century tradition of paradox rooted in thinkers and writers like Gödel, Wittgenstein, Borges and Calvino. In this tradition, paradox is the only way to find truth and to understand human logic. The hopeless

⁴⁸ A.O. Scott, "The Panic of Influence".

⁴⁹ David Foster Wallace, interview, "The Charlie Rose Show," PBS, March 27, 1997.

⁵⁰ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 67.

attempt to find meaning beyond the paradox, or to break the recursive referential loop, seems to be Wallace's lifelong expressive endeavor and a point of reference to what new art or New Sincerity should look and sound like: "In serious contemporary art, that televisual disdain for 'hypocritical,' retrovalues like originality, depth, and integrity has no truck with those recombinant 'appropriation' styles of art and architecture in which past becomes pastiche, or with the tuneless solmization of a Glass or a Reich."⁵¹

⁵¹ Ibid., 25.

3. New Sincerity in Music

With the consideration of the notion of New Sincerity in contemporary literature, I would like to turn to an examination of what this concept could imply in music. Sincerity appears to be trickier to grasp in music than it is in literature. The correlation between words and the human inner world is relatively straightforward, as words represent thoughts that are usually realized internally and linguistically. But mapping abstract non-linguistic sounds to private human experiences is a more challenging task, one that composers have often avoided altogether, as demonstrated by Igor Stravinsky's ironic response when asked about it: "[Sincerity] is a *sine qua non* that at the same time guarantees nothing. Most artists are sincere anyway, and most art is bad - though, of course, some insincere art (sincerely insincere) is quite good."⁵² The difficulty of discussing musical semantics is further challenged by postmodern skepticism. In Wallace's words, "today's irony ends up saying: 'How very *banal* to ask what I mean.'"⁵³

This chapter tries to suggest a few parallels in contemporary music to the notion of New Sincerity, presenting examples of how composers have addressed the relation between their work and their notion of a "self." The examples offered here are in no way exhaustive. They present a tiny drop in the ocean of expressive possibilities in music - specifically those examples that have been significant to me and can provide context for the analysis of *Unavoidably Sentimental*.

3.1 New Sincerity in Punk Music

The term New Sincerity was first used in a musical context in the mid-1980s, in reference to a group of alternative rock bands based in Austin, Texas. These bands worked against the ironic attitude of most punk rock groups of the time. According to Barry Shank, these groups

⁵² Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 119.

⁵³ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 22.

yearned for “a cultural marketplace free of deceit, where a sincere expression, a pure representation, could arise from some essence of the performer untainted by the polluting structures of capitalism and then could be distributed through direct channels to a populace longing for it.”⁵⁴ In addition, they tried to create a simplified sense of musical training and performance with “a reduced emphasis on the precisely accurate execution of musical structures.”⁵⁵

The notion of New Sincerity in this regard precedes Kelly’s 2010 article. Although there are some similarities between the punk ideology and Wallace’s relation with popular culture, this chapter refers to Kelly’s terminology and tries to draw parallels between Wallacian New Sincerity and some trends in contemporary music.

3.2 Old Sincerity

Before looking for examples of New Sincerity in contemporary music, I would like to propose an equivalence in music to Trilling’s definitions of Sincerity and Authenticity. The claim here is that the relationship of romantic and modernist music with language represents two opposing poles that are analogous, to a certain extent, to the relationship between renaissance and modern literature and expression, as formulated by Trilling.

The attribution of Sincerity to abstract musical expression may be associated with the emergence of Romanticism in western European music. The pinnacle of this view can be found in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s important review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the German *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of 1810. In this lengthy review, Hoffmann finds enormous emotional content in the work, describing it as a piece that “sets in motion terror, fear, horror,

⁵⁴ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 147.

⁵⁵ Shank, *Dissonant Identities*, 133.

pain and awakens the infinite yearning that is the essence of romanticism.”⁵⁶ In a romantic post-“Sturm und Drang” manner, he describes the orchestral sounds of the symphony as ones “by which our breast [is] oppressed and frightened by presentiments of the monstrous.”⁵⁷

Equally important to Hoffmann’s interpretation of Beethoven’s symphony is the lengthy theoretical introduction, which lays the foundation for the perception of instrumental music as “the most romantic of all arts.”⁵⁸ The idea that abstract sounds can extend the expressive possibilities of language and represent parts of the “self” that are not expressible in words is central to the romantic perception of instrumental music. Thus, the listener of instrumental music, according to Hoffmann, must surpass her linguistic perception of communication and “surrender [her]self to the unspeakable [dem Unaussprechlichen].”⁵⁹

The argument that is implied here is that the set of human experiences is far more encompassing than can be expressed in words. The delta between the two sets (meaning, what is left from the set of expressible human experiences when removing the experiences that can be expressed in words) offers a space for non-linguistic artistic expressions such as music.

Saussure, among others, finds this sort of non-linguistic expression much harder to define:

“Psychologically our thought - apart from its expression in words - is only a shapeless and indistinct mass.”⁶⁰ Thus, in the musical expressive process, the composer “presses out”

something from her inner world to the acoustic reality, and in that way represents/recreates the internal indistinct mass sonically. The romantic position that is suggested here is that in our so-

⁵⁶ Friedrich Schnapp, ed., E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Schriften zur Musik: Aufsätze und Rezensionen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 36. Translations by Steven Cassedy, taken from “Beethoven the Romantic: How E. T. A. Hoffmann Got It Right,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71:1 (Jan., 2010): 1-37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York : Philosophical Library, 1959); McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966, 1983, pp 111-112. Original ext: *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris-Éditions Payot), 1916.

called inner world, there are thoughts that can be verbalized and reflected in words, but there are other elements that need other non-linguistic means in order to be expressed.

3.3 Modernist Authenticity

Apart from the general weaknesses of Sincerity that have to do with the inconsistency of the “self” that is being codified, or the discrepancies between performative expression in the art work and the actual inner state of the artist, Sincerity in music - in the manner it is described above - brings an additional set of complications. Unlike language, music’s mimetic capacity is very limited, and especially questionable in instrumental music. The existence of private, internalized sonic experiences that could be recreated acoustically is dubious, as is the alignment of inner psychological states with audible vibrations in the air. In general, the type of Wagnerian significance of sound figures, this sort of one-to-one mapping, may appear simplistic, unconvincing and even dishonest in a modern work.

And so, around the turn of the century, some composers became wary of the development of an irresistible affinity between music and language, a sentiment critiqued by Adorno: “as if the progress of musical similarity to language had been paid for with the authenticity of music itself.”⁶¹ Romantic music’s meta-linguistic ideal was seen as a degenerate form of expression. The loss of independence and authenticity of the musical expression drew composers of the time away from the language-metaphor: “The movement that is subsumed under the name of the new music,” Adorno declared, “could easily be represented from the perspective of its collective allergy to the primacy of similarity to language.”⁶²

⁶¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Music, Language, and Composition,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie and others (University of California Press, 2002), 119.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 118

For certain modernist composers, the idea that sounds can represent an internal, indistinct existential mass was replaced by attempts to create abstract systems that produce musical material in a constructive and sometimes calculable way. This attempt was influenced by early 20th century excitement around the recent formalization of logic. The systematization of the rules of inference was considered the key to understanding the human mind. One of the most notable systems of this kind was Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, in which, according to Adorno, "the linguistic values at first recede very strongly in favor of constructive ones."⁶³ The authenticity of the musical work is detached in this context from the expressive ideal, and therefore from the language-metaphor. Composers were hoping to engage with the logic of music itself, one in which, as Adorno put it, "a natural law that is taken literally and, moreover, misunderstood, will replace musical language's lost aesthetic authoritativeness."⁶⁴

Adorno considered this to be one of the defining aesthetic and ethical positions that drove the development of modern music: "Through an ascetic taboo against everything that was linguistic in music, they hoped to be able to grasp pure musicality in itself - a musical ontology, so to speak - as the residue, as if whatever was left over was the truth."⁶⁵ In accordance with romantic values, modernist music, according to Adorno, regarded "whatever is left" in musical expression when subtracting linguistic elements as the ideal ethical musical expression. The difference between the two movements is in modernism's attempt to avoid language altogether as a model for conveying meaning, and instead find other "natural laws" that govern communication in instrumental sounds.

The dichotomy that is suggested here between romantic Sincerity and modernist Authenticity does not imply the existence of a widespread, consistent aesthetic or historical

⁶³ Ibid., 119

⁶⁴ Ibid., 122

⁶⁵ Ibid., 120

movement. Rather, it (the dichotomy) tries to pinpoint two important aesthetic positions that existed during the 19th and 20th centuries in European music, and which serve as points of reference to the conception of New Sincerity in music.

3.4 New linguistic Sincerity

Considering Adorno's critique of the modernist abandonment of the language-character of music, one of the incarnations of New Sincerity in music can be found in a renewed interest in linguistic musical expression, and in music as a medium of communication; as noted by Wallace, "Art, after all, is supposed to be a kind of communication."⁶⁶ Due to the elasticity of the language-metaphor itself, the revived interest in music's linguistic expressive ability can be traced along different lines. I would like to give two very different examples: one that relates to the aforementioned 19th century expressive ideals, and one that uses language to create an extremely direct, sincere expression in musical works.

One of the pockets of resistance to the modernist renunciation of Sincerity, expressivity and the language-character of music can be found in the 1970s German movement that came to be known as New Simplicity. The most notable composer under the New Simplicity umbrella was Wolfgang Rihm, who explicitly aligned himself with romantic self-expression as a meta-linguistic attempt: "Through facture and diction, I deliberately put my music in the tradition of Beethoven, Bruckner, Mahler, and Hartmann, because I learned from these composers to understand music as a speaking transition into the unspeakable; as an alleged offense, which allows me to talk to people when I am too anxious and panic-stricken, [...] where we have no more words."⁶⁷ The way Rihm and his contemporaries handled the inherent inauthenticity of the

⁶⁶ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 199.

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Rihm, Program note for *Dis-Kontur* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1974, musical score). Translation by the writer; original quote in German: "Durch Faktur und Diktion stelle ich meine Musik bewusst in die Tradition

expressive romantic endeavor was through an elevated awareness of the self and of the history. While Rihm acknowledged the essential linguistic character of musical expression, through uncovering the extended historical expressive aura of the musical material, he tried to create a musical logic that follows “pure musicality in itself,” thus complexifying the direct one-to-one mapping between sounds and inner states. In Rihm’s music, the language metaphor itself is an object that is regarded in a conscious historical context.

A completely different approach to the language-character of music involves the use of text to share private thoughts in the context of a musical work. There have been very few attempts in the history of western music to use real confessional textual content in the context of a musical work. But this was the case with Canadian composer Claude Vivier. In some of his late works, Vivier tried to incorporate autobiographical accounts in what I find to be the closest example to a personal diary in music. His 1985 *Lonely Child* can be heard as a lullaby to Vivier’s self as a child (Vivier was adopted at the age of 3). It is a first-person account of Vivier’s childhood experiences and his sense of solitude. Another striking example is his piece “Glaubst du an die Unsterblichkeit der Seele,” which Vivier left unfinished. The work describes a real first-person incident and has arguably predicted his own murder on March 7th, 1983:

I couldn’t tear my eyes off the young man it seemed as if he had been sitting across from me for all eternity and it was then that he addressed me, he said “Quite boring this metro, huh!” I didn’t know how to respond and said, somewhat disoriented at having my gaze returned “yes, quite” then perfectly naturally the young man came to sit down next to me and said: “my name is Harry” I answered him that my name was Claude then without further introductions he took out a knife from his dark black vest that he probably bought in Paris and stabbed me right in the heart.⁶⁸

Beethovens, Bruckners, Mahlers und Hartmanns, weil ich von diesen Komponisten gelernt habe, Musik als sprechenden Übergang ins Unsagbare zu begreifen; als einen behaupteten Vorstoß, der es mir ermöglicht, auch dort mit Menschen zu reden [...] wo wir keine Worte mehr haben.”

⁶⁸ Claude Vivier, *Glaubst du an die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1982-1983), musical score).

This kind of unmediated communication appears very close to Wallace's ideal of Sincerity. In Vivier's case, the artist - "meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona"⁶⁹ - communicates directly with his audience. But although the use of spoken words remains in the realm of sound, the use of sounds as the actual bearers of the linguistic sign simplifies the relation between music and language. Creating the aforementioned type of Wallacian sincere communication in music is trickier when the medium of communication involves abstract, non-linguistic musical material.

3.5 New Sincerity and Existential Musical Experience

As mentioned in the discussion of Wolfgang Rihm, one of the strategies to create sincere unmediated artistic communication involves a heightened awareness of the material and an ongoing self-examination of the creative process.

In his 1969 article "On Structuralism,"⁷⁰ Helmut Lachenmann lists four aspects that contribute to the expressive quality of a sound: Tonality, Acoustic-physical experience, Structure and Aura. The aura of a sound is a compositional aspect of a sound that lies at the core of Lachenmann's aesthetic. The idea that a sound object carries within it historical baggage, socio-economic implications, and political significance offers an additional dimension to the compositional space. Instead of adhering to algorithmically determined rules for constructing musical structures, one might refer to a sort of Wittgensteinian family resemblance in order to create context-conscious hierarchies of sounds within a piece of music. Composition in that framework refers not only to temporal relations, pitch levels and timbre, but also to a renewed sense of tension and relief in many other dimensions that are related to the aura and the position of the sound in a cultural context.

⁶⁹ David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011), 68.

⁷⁰ Helmut Lachenmann, "On Structuralism," *Contemporary Music Review* 12:1 (1995), 98.

The acknowledgement of the aura of a sound opens a possibility for a new kind of expression – one that doesn't depend solely on the internal logic of the piece, but rather creates a set of references that point to the extra-musical world. Furthermore, a critical view of a modernist structural approach to composition could open a way to a more direct communication:

Every means brings its aura to a certain extent. [...] What did the cowbell in Stockhausen's *Gruppen* or *Zyklus* have to do with their rural function, and what were they looking for next to the salon plant Celesta? The "pure" concept of structure can at best alienate the original and meanings and conditions of the material by such provisions as to either a) negate b) consciously or casually ignore them with the help of appropriately reckless structural laws. Both, however, lead to the aesthetic conflict, and with the "pure communication" it is now made even more so.⁷¹

Lachenmann's approach is meant to push the perception of his music into a state of "pure experience" where the artistic experience supersedes existing conscious categories and communicates directly with a deeper level of human existence:

In this desirable state where one is "emptied" of thoughts and conventions, one's own existence shines in the unconnected moment. It is [the] state of the eternal "Now" that the composer intends to conjure in his work: *NUN* is the attempt to create a kind of presence. Not music that continues, no discursive text, but music as a situation. This is also how I put it in my opera: Music is a meteorological state.⁷²

3.6 New Sincerity and Spontaneity

Another artistic approach that spread in the 20th century involves the treatment of the creative process itself as the artistic product, as is the case in improvisational art. This sort of radical subjectivity implies an artistic apparatus that partially bypasses the potential for irony. A different kind of Sincerity emerges - one that is not processed through the rational conception of romantic expression – but rather a sort of involuntary authenticity. In this type of New Sincerity,

⁷¹ Helmut Lachenmann, "Bedingungen des Materials," in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966-1995* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996), 37.

⁷² Helmut Lachenmann, Program notes, *NUN* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1999, musical score).

music stands in a privileged position in comparison to literature due to its performativity and production techniques.

Daniel Belgrad identifies a “culture of spontaneity” in the postwar American arts that provides an alternative to corporate liberalism, rationality, empiricism, modernity, objectivity and mind-body dualism.⁷³ Belgrad asserts that this “aesthetic of spontaneity” originates in African-American culture, and gives a myriad of examples of its development in different art mediums in the postwar years, including abstract expressionism, Bebop, gestalt therapy, Jungian psychology, beat poetry, experimental dance and Zen Buddhism. In the context of “concert music,” he mentions John Cage, who “used a variety of methods to circumvent any conscious or unconscious communication of his own subjectivity through his music.”⁷⁴ Cage, in this context, represents an extreme position in regard to communication through art, a position that makes this endeavor impossible and obsolete: “Within the culture of spontaneity, the imperative to communicate authentic human experience made subjective expression seem both important and difficult. By contrast, Cage asserted that nothing of importance could be communicated.”⁷⁵

Cage’s perspective does not represent a real approach to New Sincerity, but rather reflects on the modernist complexion with authenticity. Nevertheless, the freedom to expose the creative process, to treat immediacy and intuition as valid creative forces, has opened a new space for composers. An example can be found in Giacinto Scelsi’s music. Scelsi abandoned the serial techniques of his early music, and developed a unique creative process, in which he himself along with other hired musicians improvise together regularly. His favorite improvisations served as sketches to be transcribed by assistants and transformed into published

⁷³ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

⁷⁴ Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 253.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

works.⁷⁶ In his music, the urgency of the live creative process generated a sense of freedom and “zen spontaneity”. Thus, Sincerity is achieved by forcing the creative process itself to follow the artist’s intuition. As noted by Benedetto Croce, “to intuit is to express; and nothing else (nothing more, but nothing less) than to express.”⁷⁷

3.7 Musical “Being”

An additional central aspect of Scelsi’s works is his relationship with time and musical development (or lack thereof). The connection between the freedom and spontaneity in Scelsi’s music and his use of prolonged sonic states is at the core of the sense of Sincerity that emerges from his music. This relationship seems to inform one of the modes of writing that have been rising in recent decades as an opposition to irony: musical stasis, an artistic attempt to work against a romantic sense of development in music and towards a sculptural perception of it - a sense of “being” instead of “doing.”

This artistic endeavor relates to genres such as “Noise” and “Drone music” and has been prevalent with contemporary composers such as Anna Thorvaldsdottir, Klaus Lang, John Luther Adams, and Clara Iannotta, who in the program note to her piece *dead wasps in the jam-jar (iii)* provides a metaphorical account of the object-like, development-resistant perception of music: “For a long time my music has been about creating a surface on which things move, blend, but mostly hide what is underneath them. A surface is nothing more than a reflection, and I was

⁷⁶ See Nicola Bernardini, “Recovering Giacinto Scelsi’s Tapes,” *Proceedings of the 2007 International Computer Music Conference (ICMC 2007)*, Copenhagen, Denmark, August 27-31, 2007, n.p. Available at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/i/icmc/bbp2372.2007?rgn=full+text>.

⁷⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: The Noonday Press, [1909] 1953), 5.

constantly veiling the real mirrored image, probably also because I was (and still am) not sure yet of what this image was, even though I knew what its shadow looked like.”⁷⁸

Working against instrumental sounds’ acoustical tendency to develop in time, these composers try to create musical surfaces and states in which a listener can simply exist. They shape sonic landscapes in which the audience can temporarily live. This type of musical phenomenology draws on the composers of the previous generation, such as the aforementioned Scelsi, as well as Morton Feldman and the late works of Luigi Nono. Sincerity in this context extends beyond intersubjective intention into the experience and perception of the listener.

In both generations’ works, the stasis in most of the traditional musical parameters is often accompanied by an emphasis on nuances of timbre. Timbre offers a potentiality of communication of the private non-linguistic “indistinct mass.” As such, timbre could be considered as an ideal medium for musical Sincerity. The paradoxical nature of timbre as a medium of communication is described by Jean-Luc Nancy:

That is why Wittgenstein, after discussing the borderline, or imaginary, experience of hearing a sound separated from its timbre, comes to take timbre as a privileged image of what he calls "private experience", consequently, experience that is not communicable. I would say that timbre is communication of the incommunicable: provided it is understood that the incommunicable is nothing other, in a perfectly logical way, than communication itself.⁷⁹

The yearning for an artistic state of “being” can also be traced in Wallace’s choice to dedicate dozens of pages in the end part of *Infinite Jest* to Don Gately’s state of physical pain while not being able to communicate. Wallace creates a literary “now,” trying to bring the reader to endure the momentary pain with Gately: “No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here

⁷⁸ Clara Iannotta, program note for *dead wasps in the jam-jar (iii)* (Leipzig and New York: Edition Peters, 2018, musical score).

⁷⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 47.

was a second right here: he endured it. What was undelalable--with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering.”⁸⁰

Wallace’s literary attempt to create a state of “being” exposes an elementary difference between music and literature. The physical properties of sound make immersion an idiomatic feature of music as a medium of communication. Thus, stasis has a greater potential to inform a sense of New Sincerity in music than it has in literature, in which the lack of narrativity raises a greater challenge. In both music and literature, however, the prolonged state of “being” is an artistic desire that is hard to fulfill. This paragraph from Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* seems to question the achievability of the musical and literary stasis to which Wallace and Scelsi attempt to arrive: “Can one tell - that is to say, narrate - time, time itself, as such, for its own sake? That would surely be an absurd undertaking. A story which read: ‘Time passed, it ran on, the time flowed onward’ and so forth - no one in his senses could consider that a narrative. It would be as though one held a single note or chord for a whole hour, and called it music.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 852.

⁸¹ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1924), 560.

4. Authenticity and Irony in my own music

Irony has played a major role in my music since I started to compose. Coming from a highly critical personal background and a family that was extremely skeptical about art, I needed to continually reaffirm the legitimacy of art-making through logical tricks and paradoxes. In various pieces I tried to confront the authenticity of my artistic work through oxymoronic tactics that preclude criticism. This type of background is one of the factors that drew me to David Foster Wallace's writings. His texts expose the weaknesses of intellectually self-aware reflections when it comes to human communication. Conscious cognitive contemplation fails him time and again, which in turn draws him to the use of irony in order to create paradoxical logical structures that mask the inherent flaws of his literary work.

This attraction idolizes the emergence of the self-referencing paradox as a key to absolute truths in the early 20th century, as found in important milestones in logic: Cantor's theorem, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, Turing's work on the *Entscheidungsproblem*, and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This interest is explicit in Wallace's 2003 book *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* that attempts to make accessible the history of mathematical set theory around the turn of the century. Wallace's point of departure is pop literature's obsession with "mad scientists," and specifically with Georg Cantor, who, Wallace notes, was "in and out of mental hospitals for much of his later adulthood."⁸² But the book concentrates on the mathematical development of the notion of infinity in set theory and logic, rather than on the biographies of the mathematicians. However, through debunking popularized myths about Cantor, such as the claim that he "derived many of his most famous proofs about ∞

⁸² David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 5.

while in asylum,”⁸³ Wallace draws attention to the influence of pure intellectual achievements on human lives--or the lack thereof.

The present chapter briefly presents approaches from several of my works, in which I tried to address the logical inconsistencies of musical expression. These earlier attempts are presented in order to give context to the sort of musical communication that is referenced in *Unavoidably Sentimental*.

4.1 Paradoxes of meaning

The question of referential meaning in music has divided composers and philosophers since music established itself as an art form. Issues of semantics and significance have been crucial to my own music as well, especially in the context of breaking the one-to-one mappings between sounds and meanings. In *But that is all misunderstanding* (2011) for four voices and four instruments, I used texts by Ludwig Wittgenstein to create a paradoxical self-referential significance loop. Late Wittgenstein, in his renewed interest in the actual use of language, used music to complexify the understanding of the referentiality of the linguistic sign. According to Wittgenstein, the attribution of a simple signifier-signified relationship to musical material makes music redundant: “If seeing the dance is what is important, it would be better to perform that rather than the music. *But that is all misunderstanding*.”⁸⁴

In the piece, the musicians narrate different excerpts about music’s referentiality from Wittgenstein’s late lectures. These excerpts are accumulated to assert the impossibility of music to point to a reality outside itself:

What we call "understanding a sentence" has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme than we might be inclined to think. But I don't mean that understanding a musical theme is more like the picture which one tends to make oneself

⁸³ Ibid., 167.

⁸⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 69.

of understanding a sentence; but rather that this picture is wrong, and that understanding a sentence is much more like what really happens when we understand a tune than at first sight appears. For understanding a sentence, we say, points to a reality outside the sentence. Whereas one might say "Understanding a sentence means getting hold of its content"; and the content of the sentence is in the sentence".⁸⁵

The idea in the piece was to try to express in music the lack of ability of music to depict anything or to signify an understandable meaning. In that way, it creates a paradox - if the piece successfully conveys this message, it means that referentiality is impossible in music and therefore the message couldn't have been delivered. If the piece fails to express the idea, then it proves its premise.

4.2 Limits of musical expression

Background Music for a Fundraising Event (2010) for large orchestra begins with narration of testimonies of human suffering from different parts of the world. The texts are read by the musicians in the orchestra and are combined with instrumental sounds simultaneously performed by the same players. Speech functions as another acoustical layer in the instrumental texture, which gradually develops and grows into a climactic orchestral *tutti*. In this rhetorical fabric there are too many testimonies read in parallel to be conceived and understood; thus, the overall perception of the sound gives a false impression of redemption. Human suffering becomes background music for the conscience-clearing process that leads to a catharsis. In addition to the musical process, the intensity of the message is realized in the experience of the orchestra members. They are asked to read horrible testimonies without being heard - recreating the human attempt to catch the other's attention and the failure to be heard.

The conceptual process ends in a cathartic climax of saturated orchestral sounds. Loud immersive sounds are common in my music, but they always appear in an ambiguous way. The

⁸⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 167.

combination of their evocative potential and the problematic aura they carry require a special compositional treatment. Therefore, these sounds are repeatedly and abruptly broken in the end of the first part of the piece. My contrasting feelings towards the sounds, as well as the acknowledgment of the oversimplification that characterizes the political statement of the first part of the piece, inform the musical choices of the rest of the piece. At this point in the creative process, I understood that with the musical process I was creating, I was being the fundraising event's visitor myself – clearing my conscience without truly listening or acting in any substantive way.

Following this realization, the last section of the piece has only one text being read at a time. The text is audible but not understandable, as it is written in an idiosyncratic language which is impossible to make sense of. The idea was that when we truly listen to an individual voice, we understand that we cannot understand, that these experiences are not communicable. A sense of arbitrariness emerges from the music in this section as well.

The paradox of the expression of the inexpressible was a source of frustration in the creative process of the piece. I had the feeling of arriving at the end of the expressive possibilities of music and had to revert to concrete articulation of my thoughts in words. And so the second part of the piece culminates in a moment in which the musicians scream together: “This art is quite useless.” This sentence refers to the introduction of “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” where Oscar Wilde famously claims that “all art is quite useless.”⁸⁶

4.3 Authenticity of the material

It is probably clear by this point that the set of references that a sound carries is crucial to my approach to musical composition. The recognition of the intrinsic cultural and historical

⁸⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd, 2015), 2.

implications of sound objects makes it harder to control and manipulate them in an artistic context. This realization was in the background of the composition of *Im Zeitalter der Reproduzierbarkeit* (2015) for piano and video. In the piece, I used short excerpts from historic videos of piano performances in order to expose some of the aura of each sound object being used. Every element in this piece is a quotation – the sounds, the chords, the type of processes, the use of videos, and even the existence of consistent harmonic structures.

There is an inherent inauthenticity in the material I was using, perhaps to the level at which “art is coming to resemble economic production.”⁸⁷ The piece abandons the ideal of authenticity of the material - the “here and now of the work of art” - and treats all sound objects as reproductions. By using technically reproduced pianistic gestures through historical videos, the work fluctuates between an ironic look at the ceremonies of piano virtuosity and an honest attempt to create a personal statement with the borrowed elements and found objects. If this piece has a singular aura in space and time, it is not in its materials or process, but between and behind the objects, in an incommunicable layer.

⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 35.

5. Unavoidably Sentimental

Composed in 2017, *Unavoidably Sentimental* is the first of three pieces (the other two being *Goo-prone* and *Generally Pathetic*) that take their names from the same excerpt from *Infinite Jest*: “...Hal, who’s empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic...”⁸⁸

In these three pieces I tried to arrive at a state of simple direct communication through a web of musical references, irony, and self-aware musical consciousness. The pieces try to present my personal answer to what it means to “be really human” in music. In all three pieces, the musical process is designed to question the material and wander through the expressive space between the “hip cynical transcendence of sentiment” and whatever there is on the other end. The relatively long duration of *Unavoidably Sentimental* allows this process to properly unfold and hopefully allows the piece to get closer to Sincerity’s promised land.

5.1 Form

On a high level, the piece has five main sections that build a narrative of perceptual stripping-off of musical categories. Each section has a central characteristic of musical material:

1. Bars 1-158 - Pulsation and abrupt switching of rhythmic elements
2. Bars 159-293 - Energetic EDM-like rhythms
3. Bars 294-388 - Bell-like sounds in speech-imitating rhythms
4. Bars 389-458 - Polyphonic texture of complex voices

⁸⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 694

5. Bars 459-513 - Musical stasis

Although each main section is comprised of distinct and recognizable musical objects and textures, the actual structure has many nonlinear threads in which musical material appears in the “wrong” part of the piece, creating a formal counterpoint to the piece’s main narrative. This is a structural element that loosely relates to *Infinite Jest*, in which the reader has to reassemble a linear narrative from the fractured way in which it appears in the book. In *Unavoidably Sentimental*, the appearance of musical material outside its logical context functions as a disruptive force in the music and breaks the coherence of the musical textures:

The image displays a musical score for a section of a piece, spanning bars 459 to 513. The score is arranged in a vertical stack of staves for various instruments: Clarinet (Cl), Soprano Saxophone (Sop. Sax), Trombone (Tbn), Accordion (Accord), Percussion (Perc), Electric Guitar (E. Gtr), Horn (Hn), Piano (Pn), Violin (Vln), Viola (Vla), and Violoncello (Vcl). The tempo is marked as 80 (♩=80). The score shows a mix of musical textures, including long, sustained notes and rapid, rhythmic passages. Dynamic markings such as *p* (piano), *pp* (pianissimo), *mp* (mezzo-piano), and *f* (forte) are used throughout. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at bar 492. The overall structure is characterized by a slow, static section towards the end of the piece, where fast, alternating rhythms appear out of context.

Fig. 1: Fast alternating rhythms from the first section of the piece appear out of context in the middle of a slow static section towards the end of the piece.

5.2 Between rhythm, texture and harmony

The first section of the piece features a recurring element in my music of recent years - a fast repetition of a sound whose spectrum is changing slowly and gradually. These are slow timbral changes of a sound that is regularly re-articulated. In the piece these sounds are modified either by the playing technique (for example, a change of dynamic in *cres.* or *dim.*), by change in pitch, by transition between sound categories, or by electric modifications (mainly a wah-wah pedal):

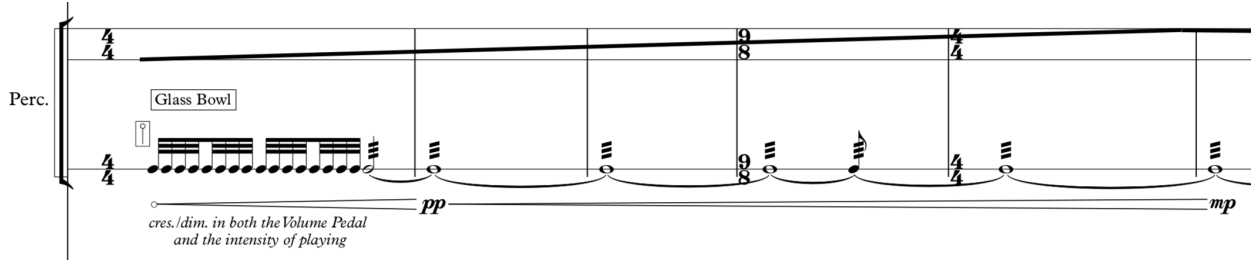


Fig. 2: A gradual change with the Wah-wah pedal, volume pedal and playing a crescendo

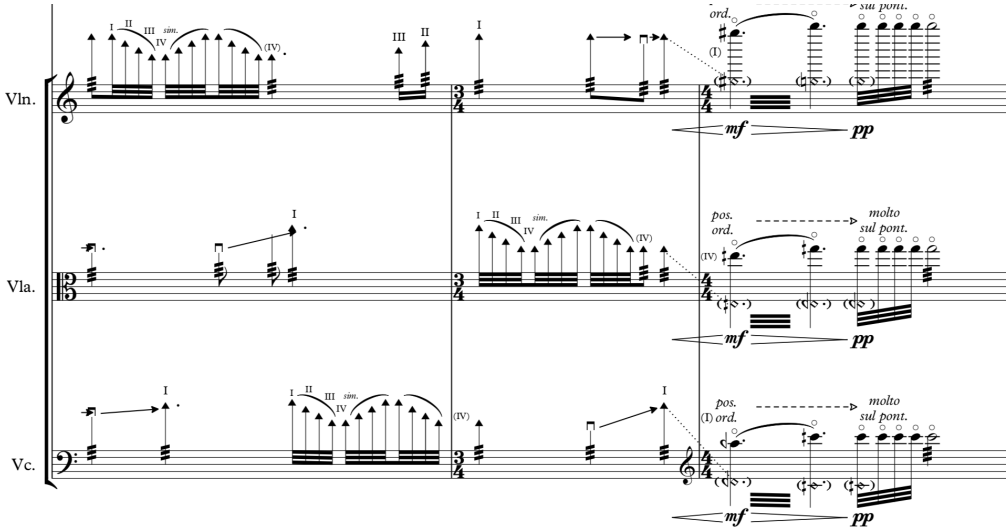


Fig. 3: A gradual change in pitch and a change in sound categories

These musical processes originate in my longstanding interest in sound continuity as a unifying force for harmony, texture, timbre and rhythm. This stems from the attempt to build an

intuition about different cardinalities of infinite sets in Cantor's set theory. Developing an internal representation for the arithmetic of transfinite numbers, brought with it a metaphorical idea that sampling a continuous process takes it down one order of infinity. Pulsation and repetition create a sort of objective snapshot of the continuous modification of the sounds. Two contrasting processes happen simultaneously: one that is built of forward-pulling kinetic energy and the other of a slowly morphing musical object. The combination creates a perception of repetition while the repeated element never appears twice in the same way.

This type of sonic process positions the piece within the context of my other pieces. It signifies an aesthetic background over which the musical events occur.

5.3 Ironic Referentiality

One of the axes along which the musical material in the piece is thought of is a continuum of musical perception with "pure" acoustical understanding of a sound on one end and aware categorical interpretation on the other. That means that some musical materials are imagined to be experienced as pure acoustical phenomena, bypassing the semantic categories that are attributed to most sounds in daily life. This relates to Nishida Kitarō's concept of "pure experience" in regard to the appreciation of a sound prior to positioning it in a pre-existing context: "For example, it means, at the instant of seeing color or hearing sound, the experience prior not only to thinking that it is the function of an external thing or that it is my feeling, but before even the judgment of what this color or sound is, has been added."⁸⁹

On the other end of this spectrum, there are sounds and musical events that are clearly functional and referential. These sounds are intended to be easily contextualized by the listeners. The way the piece handles their cultural and psychological baggage is by positioning them in

⁸⁹ Nishida Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (Yale University Press, 1911; reprint 1992), 8.

rigid musical structures or out of context. These sounds are presented through what Wallace calls “masks of ennui and jaded irony.”⁹⁰ The most obvious musical material on this end of the perceptual spectrum is one that is associated in its sound world and rhythms with Electronic Dance Music (EDM). The EDM moments appear in the first third of the piece. They are not inserted in order to refer to the club culture or to the physicality of a dance, but instead emerge out of an intuitive creative will that is conscious of their context and aura. Thus, the intuitive will to integrate these rhythms is satisfied in the piece, but their significance is not overlooked. The use of popular musical elements itself becomes a secondary implication of these moments and informs their treatment (their abrupt and arbitrary beginnings and endings). The “Pop Reference” is a signified object itself. It functions in the piece in a Wallacian fashion: “Put simply, the pop reference works so well in contemporary fiction because (1) we all recognize such a reference, and (2) we’re all a little uneasy about how we all recognize such a reference.”⁹¹



Fig. 4: Repetitive EDM beat

The bare realization of these rhythms and the crude way in which they appear and disappear create an ironic distance between these moments and the music that encapsulates them. There is a self-awareness loop in their occurrence: awareness of the significance of club music in the concert hall, awareness of the banality of this reference in this context, awareness that other

⁹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 694.

⁹¹ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 48.

people are aware of this banality, awareness that other people are aware of this awareness, and so on ad infinitum.

Another ironic device used in the piece is a musical analogy to switching between TV or radio channels. Loud and short sounds appear periodically (usually percussive sounds or multiphonics in the wind instruments) and switch to a different musical texture abruptly. The recurrence of these signaling sounds creates a false equivalence between the musical events that appear before and after them, thus neutralizing their significance. For example, in the following passage, switching between pulsating sounds leads to a prolonged A note that is being reinterpreted as a minor third of low F#. This brings out a minor chord significance, but in that same moment the signaling sound appears again and neutralizes the minor mode's affect:

The musical score for Fig. 5 consists of nine staves, each representing a different instrument. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Tbn. (Tuba):** Features a series of short, sharp pulses marked with *ff* (fortissimo).
- Accord. (Acoustic Guitar):** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked with *mp* (mezzo-piano).
- Perc. (Percussion):** Includes a section labeled "(Wood Block)" with a rhythmic pattern, and a section labeled "Cymbals" with a sustained sound, both marked with *mp*.
- E. Gtr. (Electric Guitar):** Features a sustained note on the E string, with instructions: "Prepare note on the E string as it will sound immediately in the beginning of the bar" and "with E bow". It is marked with *mp*.
- Hp. (Harp):** Plays a series of chords, marked with *f* (forte).
- Pno. (Piano):** Plays a series of chords, marked with *f*. There are specific fingering instructions: "Strain the lower strings forcefully" and "mf" (mezzo-forte).
- Vln. (Violin):** Plays a series of chords, marked with *ff*. Instruction: "Strain the lower strings forcefully".
- Vla. (Viola):** Plays a series of chords, marked with *ff*. Instruction: "Strain the lower strings forcefully".
- Vcl. (Violoncello):** Plays a series of chords, marked with *ff*. Instruction: "Strain the lower strings forcefully".

Fig. 5

Another way by which the musical “zapping” creates ironic musical moments is the introduction of accidental musical material, out of context and with no significance to the rest of the piece:

The image displays a page of a musical score for a symphony. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. From top to bottom, the instruments are: Clarinet (Cl.), Soprano Saxophone (Sop. Sax.), Trombone (Tbn.), Accordion (Accord.), Percussion (Perc.), Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.), Harp (Hp), and Piano (Pno.). The music is in 4/4 time. The Clarinet, Soprano Saxophone, and Trombone parts feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with slurs and accents, marked with a dynamic of *mf*. The Accordion part has a similar rhythmic pattern, also marked *mf*. The Percussion part has a few notes, marked *ff* and *mf*. The Electric Guitar, Harp, and Piano parts are mostly silent, with some notes appearing in the later measures. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 6: An out-of-context “folk” song in the middle of a serene section

Irony functions in these moments in a limited way. The piece tries to complexify the sense of irony by having these moments occupy relatively short fraction of the piece and by the process of neutralizing the ironic distance between the musical material and the artistic intent throughout the piece, thereby avoiding a sense of indulgent irony. As Wallace puts it, “Irony

after a while becomes the sound of prisoners who enjoy their confinement. The song of a bird who enjoys being in the cage.”⁹²

5.4 Rhetoric expression, Speech Character of Music

Complex microtonal chords in the piano and the harp in speech-imitating rhythms characterize the second main section of the piece, after rehearsal letter Q. The combination of quartertone chords in the harp and the overtone chords from the prepared piano strings creates a complex inharmonic bell-like sound. The bell-sound timbre is emphasized by the combination with tuned gongs. This collection of chords occupies a range between the perceptual categories of harmonicity and inharmonicity. That means that at some moments the listener will be able to identify a fundamental, while at others, there would be multiple, equally salient pitches that cause the sound to be perceived as a bell sound. An additional sound category appears as an extension of the chords in the string instruments - prolonged noises.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Percussion (Perc.), Harp (Hp.), and Piano (Pno.). The score is divided into measures 296 and 47. The Percussion part includes a Gong section marked 'mf'. The Harp and Piano parts feature intricate chordal structures with various microtonal intervals and ornaments. The score is written in a complex, multi-measure format with various time signatures and key signatures.

Fig. 7: Some chords may have an identifiable salient pitch (F or B quarter-tone flat)

but others have a “neutralized” set of fundamentals.

⁹² David Foster Wallace in a documentation of an interview in the German channel ZDF on November 2003 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkxUY0kxH80>)

This manipulation of perceptual sound categories is partially masked by the speed and rhythm in which the chords appear in the piece. In the tradition of “spectral music,” these types of sounds, as well as the transitions between sound categories, are emphasized and extended in time to allow listeners to perceive the nuances of a gradual transition between sound states. The use of speech-like rhythms goes against this spectralist common practice; it is meant to create a perceptual middle ground, where the complex inharmonic sounds interface directly with the perceptual mechanisms that are supposed to interpret linguistic content.

Moreover, the use of the speech-imitating rhythms is an attempt to signal the listener that something is being *told*. It asks for two simultaneous modes of perception – sound as the bearer of concrete textual meaning (as in normal speech), and sound as audible sound waves (as in abstract instrumental sound). This duality creates a sort of direct communication or rhetorical content through timbre and asks for a different kind of listening mode than the music from before rehearsal letter Q. This section is the first point in the piece in which the ironic gap between the musical material and the artistic intent is closed - these chords are intended as an actual attempt at musical communication. They try to convey meaning rather than evoke a known set of references. This is a first step away from the self-aware, semi-ironic treatment of the musical material, towards what Wallace calls “really urgent stuff”:

We seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have either to make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking the really urgent stuff inside asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization flourish or some shit.⁹³

The section that starts at rehearsal letter W extends the piano and harp texture into a polyphony of speech-imitating, timbral-complex voices. There are four voices, each one built of combinations of several instruments. They use different frequency ranges, to allow a clear


⁹³ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 43.

perceptual segregation. Each voice has different sound characteristics, but all of them mimic the rhythms of spoken language:

1. The Percussion and Electric Guitar create a splash of high pitches. The combination of bowed Waterphone and high sliding notes in the electric guitar creates a dense texture in the high frequency range.
2. The Harp and the Piano continue with the microtonal bell-like chords from the previous section.
3. The Strings (Violin, Viola and Cello) play natural harmonics in rhythmic unison, creating high-pitched microtonal chords of different types. They play around the same frequency range of the percussion and the electric guitar, and at certain moments use harmonic glissandi to immerse in their (the Waterphone and electric guitar's) texture.
4. The Winds (Bass Clarinet, Baritone Saxophone, Accordion, Trombone) play low semitone clusters. The wide timbral range of the four instruments creates diversity in the spectra of these chords.

Through the combination of the four voices, the saturated texture intensifies the duality of timbre and speech perception. The polyphonic multiplicity could also signify contradicting inner voices of a less coherent “self”.

5.5 Unmediated Communication

The most literal way in which “Unavoidably Sentimental” attempts to create moments of direct communication between the musicians on stage and the audience in the concert hall is through the theatrical act of staring, marked in the score by the “eyes” symbol:  .

At these moments the musicians are asked to “stare at a specific person in the audience, creating an intimate eye contact. The facial expression should be relaxed without trying to

convey any artificial emotion – as much as possible, a simple, authentic exchange of a look with an audience member.” The occurrence of these moments creates a narrative of its own, with a traditional sense of development.

The first staring moment appears at bar 158, and consists of 20 seconds of staring, accompanied by a sustained microtonal cluster. The second moment appears abruptly, at the peak of an energetic EDM-like section. This section, at bar 292, is longer (30 seconds) and is accompanied by a high cluster in the accordion. These two sections create an emphasis on the visual side of the performance. The way the musicians stare at the audience gives an impression that they are posing for a photoshoot. The combination with the static sound creates a sense of a moment in the concert that is frozen in time.

In both sections, a stimulating acoustic phenomenon accompanies the act of staring - the microtonal clusters create a beating effect that is somewhat confusing to decipher sonically. The overall effect is intended to evoke visual and acoustical stasis, in which the hierarchical positions of the musicians and audience break down and the two groups share a common existence in the performance space. The non-verbal communication through the staring, together with the vibrations in the air produced by the microtonal clusters, are meant to encourage both parties (performers and listeners) to abandon cultural categories of music-listening in favor of a visual-sonic-human state.

The staring element occurs again in bars 345-346 in a different constellation: a short close-up video of the cellist staring at the camera appears in the large screen while the cellist is playing a short solo. This introduces the video component that will reappear later for longer durations with staring close-ups of the clarinetist in bars 367-385, the violinist in bars 385-388, and the guitarist in bar 458 and then in bar 491 until the end of the piece (which ends with the video after the sound dies). The simultaneity of seeing the musician playing live and seeing a

close-up video of the musician staring at the camera is a simple, direct way to expose the communicative nature of music-making itself. Seeing the musicians up close, slightly uncomfortable, hopefully informs the way the listeners perceive the live musicians on stage.

Another type of integration of the two types of communication happens after rehearsal letter BB, where during a section of slow gliding pitches, some musicians are slowly staring and un-staring at the audience. In this section, the direct eye-to-eye communication is barely perceptible; it might not be completely clear whether the look of the musicians is notated or unintentional.

The formal inspiration for these moments comes from Wallace's review of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky. In this review Wallace positions Dostoevsky as an exemplary literary figure who stands in contrast to hip ironic writing, one that is concerned with "what it is to be a human being - that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal."⁹⁴ Wallace claims that Dostoevsky appears to possess "degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we - here, today - cannot or do not permit ourselves."

Throughout the article, Wallace inserts small paragraphs surrounded by asterisks in which he tries to communicate his thoughts sincerely and without filters. For example:

Am I a good person? Deep down, do I even really want to be a good person, or do I only want to *seem* like a good person so that people (including myself) will approve of me? Is there a difference? How do I ever actually know whether I'm bullshitting myself, normally speaking?

***⁹⁵

Or:

⁹⁴ David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 271.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

Is the real point of my life simply to undergo as little pain and as much pleasure as possible? My behavior sure seems to indicate that this is what I believe, at least a lot of the time. But isn't this kind of a selfish way to live? Forget selfish - isn't it awful lonely?
***⁹⁶

These inserts are unimaginably direct and simplistic, provoking in the modern reader a sense of embarrassment, or what Wallace describes as “one raised eyebrow and a very cool smile.”⁹⁷ The moments of staring in the piece have a semi-similar function. They try to avoid the representational system of music perception, and create instead a concert situation that allows the emergence of a simple human exchange. This relates to the modernist tradition of replacing representation with recreation. Human communication is experienced at first hand, instead of being codified and represented in abstract musical structures.

5.6 Towards musical “being” – ending

The concluding section of the piece (starting from rehearsal letter BB) avoids the use of contrasting materials and the excess of events that characterizes the rest of the piece. The texture is comprised of harmonic stasis, lack of rhythms and a very slow movement in pitch. One of its acoustic characteristics is the near-avoidance of perceptible attacks. The attacks of the instrumental entrances are masked and the perceived effect is of a slowly changing timbre. There is an attempt to create one sound surface that changes from within, to compose music that doesn't need to constantly acknowledge the awareness of its creation, or of the multifaceted context of its conception. Instead, we have music that simply “is,” music that simply “sounds.” The ability to dwell in one state for a while without manipulation or reflections entails a sort of Wallacian naïveté. In his aforementioned article about Dostoevsky, Wallace discusses a long monolog from “The Idiot” in which the hero considers taking his own life:

⁹⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 261.

Can you imagine any of our own major novelists allowing a character to say stuff like this (not, mind you, just as hypocritical bombast so that some ironic hero can stick a pin in it, but as part of a ten-page monologue by somebody trying to decide whether to commit suicide)? The reason you can't is the reason he wouldn't: such a novelist would be, by our lights, pretentious and overwrought and silly.⁹⁸

The closing section of the piece reverts to a basic musical element - an E major chord that is sustained in the electric guitar for the last five minutes of the piece. This tendency is intensified from bar 491 to the end where the pitch material is simplified into two notes - E and F quarter sharp, and the sustained E major chord of the electric guitar is accompanied by a close-up video of the guitarist. This moment is the culmination of the process towards simplicity. The chord, the video and the two pitches have neither function nor directionality, and no perceptual proper duration.

The figure displays a musical score for six instruments: Clarinet (Cl.), Soprano Saxophone (Sop. Sax.), Trombone (Tbn.), Accordion (Accord.), Percussion (Perc.), and Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.). The Clarinet and Soprano Saxophone parts feature melodic lines with dynamics like *p* and *mp*. The Trombone part has a steady accompaniment. The Accordion part is mostly silent. The Percussion part includes instructions for 'Tam-tam with Superball' and 'Bass Drum (with Superball)'. The Electric Guitar part shows a sustained chord with a distorted effect, indicated by a box labeled 'Distorted'.

Fig. 8: Distorted E-major chord in the guitar accompanies by E and F quarter-tone sharp in the wind instruments.

In his article “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” Wallace asserts that Lynch’s films are “to

⁹⁸ Ibid., 273.

be experienced rather than to be explained.”⁹⁹ For Wallace, this state of “now,” comparable to the previously mentioned “Pure Experience” concept, is achieved through the lack of a clear motivation in the work. “The absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch’s films strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally don’t.”¹⁰⁰ Analogously, the lack of a recognizable musical agenda in the closing section of *Unavoidably Sentimental* is designed to strip away the subliminal defenses that are established throughout the piece when different modes of communication are offered and contradicted. This is another development of the staring element. The prolonged static harmony creates a concert situation in which the musicians and audience are bathed in sound and are encouraged to simply “be”.

⁹⁹ Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 168.

¹⁰⁰ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, 171.

6. Conclusion

The commercial and critical success of David Foster Wallace's works, in addition to the recent critical interest in challenging his politics of representation and his representation of politics, highlight the sense of privilege emerging from the agony of the "white male 'genius' of the educated middle classes"¹⁰¹ for his inability to properly communicate with the "other." It is apparent throughout Wallace's writings that he struggled with the relatability of his grievances and their relevance to others. His characters tend to feel ashamed by the kind of problems they face and even by the sort of addictions they possess. The legitimacy of their pain and suffering is always questioned, in a characteristic ethical justification. And there begins another instance of a self-referential loop of the performativity of the self, the endless awareness of it, and its implications.

But among the rubble of Wallace's destructive spiral of consciousness and the catastrophically recursive feeling of being a "fraud," the flaws of the western intellectual project are revealed. The redemptive power of education and socialization appears futile. The intellectual achievements of the human mind (whose representative in Wallace's texts is often early 20th century mathematical logic) appear to function as just another obstacle in the attempt by humans to reach one another, to share and communicate. This is exemplified by post-suicide "David Wallace" in "Good Old Neon" when describing his therapist:

It turned out that one of his basic operating premises was the claim that there were really only two basic, fundamental orientations a person could have toward the world, (1) love and (2) fear, and that they couldn't coexist (or, in logical terms, that their domains were exhaustive and mutually exclusive, or that their two sets had no intersection but their union comprised all possible elements, or that: $(\forall x) ((Fx \rightarrow \sim (Lx)) \& (Lx \rightarrow \sim (Fx))) \& \sim ((\exists x) (\sim (Fx) \& \sim (Lx)))$).¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ John Roache, "The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him': David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1), 7 (2017): 27.

¹⁰² David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," 164.

This inability to escape irony and to avoid intellectual swagger pushes ideals like pure experience, simple communication and human contact to become abstract concepts. Straightforward communication is a place experienced only through rumors and recollections. In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, Murray J. Siskind (the academic star of the book) takes Jack Gladney (a professor for "Hitler studies") to see the MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA - a popular, overly photographed tourist spot. Despite its popularity, the visitors of the barn are unable to actually see it. Instead, "they are taking pictures of taking pictures."¹⁰³ Murray's questions about the barn formulate the distance between a real experience and its position in the post-postmodern discourse:

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now."¹⁰⁴

The impossibility of escaping the aura and getting into the "essence" characterizes the representation of communication in *Unavoidably Sentimental*. The recurring orchestrated concert situations in which musicians and their audience are forced to stare at one another's eyes may represent a retreat to irony and a failure to communicate directly through the medium of music. Human communication in this case is literally "performed." The simple act of a common sharing of space and time becomes artificial and referential.

But this all happens in the conceptual layer of the piece. The projection of these intentions that are omnipresent in the artist's inner world into the piece is limited and fragmentary. The "actual" piece may have a completely different perception that focuses on the actual sounds and gestures in the music "itself." The distance between the discussion of the piece in words and the actual musical material is unavoidable, considering the ideal that music

¹⁰³ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Viking Press, 1985), 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

can convey non-linguistic internal “indistinct masses”. Nevertheless, it seems that even in literature - an artistic medium whose material is words themselves - the distance between the artwork and its reflection is still significant and complex. Wallace himself mentions this discrepancy in a rather frenetic interview for a German television channel: “Let me insert that one thing, which I'll bet you've noticed from talking to writers, is that most of the stuff that we think we're writing about in books is very very difficult to talk about straight up.”¹⁰⁵

One my goals in recent pieces, and especially in *Unavoidably Sentimental*, is to treat the complex net of paradoxes and self-referential loops that the engagement with musical meaning exhibits as a valid generative force for artistic creation. This is an attempt to diverge from Wallace's view of knowledge and reflection as destructive forces. Exposing the uncertainties and doubts that emerge from the examination of the artistic process is another strategy to create an authentic expression in the work. The use of irony, the self-referential loops and the artificial formal manipulations, are not a stamp of authenticity for the work itself. They are rather manifestations of an individual who is overloaded with references, reflections and confused observations. They constitute an attempt to create another kind of communication channel, of sharing something that is inconsistent and conceptually imperfect, an indistinct mass in which what appears momentarily as internal logic is always debunked--something that is hopefully human.

¹⁰⁵ David Foster Wallace, Interview in the German channel ZDF on November 2003 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbdR6lkL9jU>).

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