

## DARK MATTERS (GHOSTING JUDITH BUTLER)

Reading again Žižek's account of the Real, I am reminded of 'dark matter,' that undetectable hypothetical substance that is said by some to structure the entire universe. Eluding the ubiquitous pull of electromagnetic force, this dark matter is visible only through its invisibility, through its gravitational pull on visibility itself. Darkness, it seems, is what we are really perceiving when we see the spectacular explosions of charged atoms that constitutes, equally, the atrocities of Guantanamo and the click of a mouse, the underground activity of the Large Hadron Collider and its full spectrum realization in the language of digital media. History itself, dark matter would suggest, can only be a phantasmatic relation to the real gravitational pull of darkness.

And so we can hear the ambivalence that is performed in, by, and through dark matter. On one hand, dark matter is the outside of special relativity theory, that which is excluded from electromagnetic force, that which exceeds the speed of light; on the other hand, dark matter is included in special relativity *as its constitutive outside*, as that which is necessary for electromagnetism to be intelligible as a force, as that which has no speed.

Listening to Butler, then, we can also hear the pull of dark matter—the pull of relativity itself, performed in the theatre of science—as a push, we can hear the movement to relativize light to darkness as the double-move to consolidate darkness itself in the language of light. That is, by nominating darkness as 'dark matter,' we rob it precisely of that which is dark. The magic in every good magic trick is worked in its setup: if the magic of science is that it allows us not only to see in the dark but to see the dark itself, the trick lies in the fact that the darkness that science addresses was never really dark, only invisible. Darkness isn't illuminated by science, which would be to make it contingently visible and thus to feed this contingency back onto reality itself; darkness is robbed of its darkness by science precisely because it is rendered *invisible*, because it is always dark *matter*; the constitutive ahistoricity of the language of the universe is always citationally and historically constituted through the language of history, which is in our time the language of science. The term 'dark matter' is the constative claim that "it isn't 'all relative' after all," a constative claim that simultaneously performs the insistence that *it is* all relative, but radically so.

So Butler has an argument with dark matter: it is an argument that ends with her insisting that just because the term is questionable, that doesn't mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds. This too, I think, is the composer Richard Barrett's perspective when he argues that composition—and, by extension, performance and listening also—is a means to "explore the 'structure of the imagination' and perhaps to discover something about imagination's nature [...that is] inaccessible to scientific method." The 'turn' that figures so prominently in Butler is here made on the site of music. You see, in the discourse of music, sound itself has often been associated with materiality (whether inert or procreative), whereas music has been associated with the principle of mastery (rational and evolutionary—in the sense that monkeys cannot hear music). However, in this opposition sound is precisely what is excluded, in and by the opposition. In this sense, when and where sounds are represented within this economy is precisely the site of their erasure. Moreover, when sound is described within musical descriptions, it is at once a substitution for and displacement of the sounds themselves. One cannot understand sound through the figures that music provides, but rather through siting sound as the unsoundable condition of figuration, as that which, in fact, can *never be* sounded within the terms of music proper, but whose exclusion from

that propriety is its enabling condition.

It is no wonder then, that the discourse of music only hears sounds in catachresis, that is, in those figures that function improperly: as the inadvertent harmonies of creaking partials emitted from an overpressed violin bow, or the amplified rhythmic groans of fingers on a fingerboard, or the voice itself turned inside-out. This catachrestic nature denotes precisely where Barrett enters the discourse of music, returning sounds to haunt and co-opt the musical language from which sound is excluded. Barrett's sounds are not understood as independent of their activation, and are not reduced to the matrix of music. This explains in part the radical citational practice of Barrett, the catachrestic usurpation of the "musical" for fully non-musical purposes. Pitches are used, after all, as are so-called 'classic' instruments! Barrett mimes music and, in the mime, takes on a language that does not effectively belong to him, only to call into question the exclusionary rules of proprietariness that govern the use of that discourse. This contestation of propriety and property is precisely the option open to sound when it has been constituted as an excluded impropriety, as the improper. Barrett channels Butler to insist that sound neither is nor has a musical essence, and this is the case because 'sound' is what is excluded from the discourse of music. The point is that even when sounds take on a musicality in Barrett's compositions— as participant's in the unfolding of a dramatic form, for example—even then they do so as a kind of radical mime that seeks to jar music from its ontological presuppositions.

This isn't to posit Barrett as in some way completing music, or even as overcoming it, as much as to insist that Barrett is working with a construction of sound that moves well beyond the ear faculty. Paradoxically, in the same move that intensifies compositional specificity to the point where sound and music begin to really trouble one another, in this very hypernotated practice the un-notated also begins to insist on itself. Put simply, *Dark Matter* becomes a performance of disavowed improvisation. Or, we could say that Barrett simply can't accommodate Ornette Coleman who, playing a plastic saxophone, also repudiated the organizing principles of melody and harmony. These elements are also rejected in Barrett's music, in favour of complexly calculated measurable constructions; Coleman, though, spurned the musical in favour of what he thought of as the 'material energy of the instrument itself.' Coleman came to this style when he realized that the melodies that he was playing—indeed, melody itself—were derived from the specific parameters of a human voice. What would it be like, Coleman wondered, *to play the sax* rather than sing vocal lines instrumentally through it? The point is that the qualitatively different intentionality that is at play in Coleman's *improvised* music cannot register *in its own right* in Barrett's *compositional* construction of music, despite the fact that their sound-worlds are at least similar. The point, then, is that the foreclosure of this intentionality constructs Barrett's music as materially constituted, in part, by the *normative intentionality* that it puts in play as having preceded it. To begin to register Barrett's *Dark Matter* is not to begin to complete the question of sound as it relates to music, but rather to free sound from its sounds so that it might be considered in terms of the normative discourse through which it is mobilized (and that it simultaneously, and citationally, mobilizes).

All of which is to end with a simple question: if Butler's argument with the Real is aimed at learning "how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation," how do we register this aim without invoking the very value-form that it seeks to keep in contestation? Or, how do we register the gravitational pull of dark matter without invoking the question of its force (electromagnetic or otherwise)? Or, finally, might we begin to hear *Dark Matter* as a-musical, as a kind of dark delirium? And, if so...how might that register?