

# Sound Plasma: Horatiu Radulescu's Oto-utopia

## Abstract

This paper will examine the compositional aesthetic of spectral composer Horatiu Radulescu, focusing on his text-based concept / composition *Sound Plasma – Music Of The Future Sign or My D High Opus 19 $\infty$*  (1975). It will argue that Radulescu's engagement with utopia in his compositions and in his overall aesthetic outlook allows for a reevaluation of what the concept can mean and points to the possibility of a utopia that is based upon the listening subject's intensive interaction with what the composer calls 'sound plasma'.

This reinterpretation illustrates a shift from an ocular-centric perspective, where vision-related metaphors and structures of understanding imply the possibility of fixed, clearly-delineated meaning and verifiability, to an oto-centric one, where the experience of listening and the ephemeral nature of sound guide an understanding of utopia that is receptive to its dynamic and conflicting characteristics.

**Keywords:** Radulescu, Spectral Music, Sound Plasma, Oto-centrism, Utopia

## **Sound Plasma: Horatiu Radulescu's Oto-utopia**

### **Introduction**

This essay will examine how utopia relates to the music of Horatiu Radulescu by way of Jean Luc Nancy's oto-centric thinking. Nancy's thoughts on utopia and listening will serve as a point of orientation around which this aspect of Radulescu's music will be clarified, with a particular focus on Radulescu's text-based composition *Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign* or *My D High opus 19∞* (1975). Central to an oto-centric analysis of utopia is an openness to a wavering, multivalent form of knowledge, where fruitful enquiry of the subject does not preclude the presence of paradox and contradiction. Indeed, for both Nancy and Radulescu the play of opposing concepts is key to bringing about a shift in thinking that stems from auditory rather than ocular paradigms. This approach aids an understanding of how utopia can be accessed through art, in general terms, and more specifically through music.

### **Radulescu's Spectral Technique of Composition**

Horatiu Radulescu was undoubtedly one of the most individualistic composers of the post war era. His music is categorized as spectral but reflects a highly personalized take on this compositional method. Although his work is firmly based on spectral theories the music itself is less preoccupied with the empirical, even somewhat didactic, foundations of spectralism than that of other composers in the field. Instead Radulescu's compositions are steeped in a mysticism that seems at once perplexingly anachronistic and intriguingly self-assured. His music, spanning over 100 completed works, is uncompromising, sonically dense and single-minded in its engagement with sound spectra. It is often intensely saturated with vibrant spectral activity, incorporating a sense of vigorous energy over long durations and capable of both extreme delicacy and condensed maximalism. Much of his music comes across as having a strong sense of ritual, where the dynamic morphology of a spectrum or a combination of spectra are steadily worked through, revealing in detail the dynamic inner life of the sound.

After studying composition at the Bucharest Academy of Music, Radulescu moved to Paris in 1969 where he began to develop his style (Radulescu, n.d.). Radulescu wrote extensively for strings throughout his career and often employed spectral *scordatura* where each string was tuned to harmonics of a given fundamental.

Many of Radulescu's scores employ time-space notation as well as specifically designed symbols to designate certain playing techniques. *Das Andere* (1983), for solo viola, violin or cello provides a good example of some of these techniques. One example calls for combining bow speed and positioning to create an irregular, breathy 'phase shifting' timbre. Another technique for the left hand creates a sparkling irregular trilling effect, similar to Morse code, on extremely high harmonics. A third involves very irregular arpeggios across strings, combined with extreme *flautando* bowing and fast changes in bow position (Radulescu, 1983 : 2-3). —Although Radulescu was highly specific about the types of sonorities intended, the performers are often called on to improvise within the limits of these techniques and as such need a particularly keen understanding of the spirit of the pieces and the spectral capabilities of their instrument.

The energetic activity derived from these semi-improvisatory techniques gives an exuberant, occasionally even anarchic flavour to the music, which is reigned-in by the composer's overall formal organization of the work. This is based primarily on implementing changes of density and spectral content rather than on narrative-based thematic or expressive contrasts. The majority of his works reveal a static, expressively ambivalent aesthetic where notions of tension and release are reduced to highly relative terms within the context of spectral webs in states of constant transformation.

### **Ocular-centric and Oto-centric Thinking**

Radulescu's music encourages a fundamental shift in how we understand sound and listening. This shift is one that moves away from visual metaphors as a basis for knowledge and towards an auditory paradigm that is influenced by the multivalent comportment of sound itself. Acoustic ecologist and composer David Dunn describes the differences between visual and auditory as being based on the opposition of

discontinuity and continuity, a central theme in *Sound Plasma*. Vision emphasizes the differences and borders between things, helping us to ‘define and separate contours in space’ (Dunn, 1997 : 97), whereas:

the sounds that things make are often not as distinct, and the experience of listening is often one of perceiving the *inseparability* of phenomena. While we often see something as distinct in its environment, we *hear* how it relates to other things (Dunn, 1997 : 97. Italics in original)

Conceptualizations emerging from ocular-centric thinking focus on aspects such as sharpness of definition, conceptual fixity and verifiability as benchmarks for knowledge. Conversely, just as sound itself is blurry, transient, fleeting, viscous, so too does an oto-centric orientation foster a mode of understanding that is receptive to continuity.

The act of perceiving sound is a fluid one and the immersive quality to listening contrasts with the oppositional and projective nature of vision. There is an intimacy involved in the act of listening, that is lacking in the distancing that seeing involves. Even with ‘focussed’ listening, where we can hone in on and identify particular sounds in the auditory field, we find that the ears do not merely follow the same organizational principles as the eyes. Don Ihde evokes the term ‘auditory aura’ (Ihde, 2007a : 79) to account for the fact that sound has simultaneously an immersive quality and directionality which are continually present in differing ratios depending on our intentional focus (Ihde, 2007a : 77).

An oto-centric conceptual framework hears reality as a recursive folding or overlapping of presence rather than as a durable and parseable configuration of stable elements. If the eyes seek to assertively define the object, narrowing the scope of enquiry closer to the unity that is that object’s truth, the ears receive, in reality’s layering, an unresolvability whose ‘truth’ is a type of life force that is nourished by time. Change, activity and temporality vivify the veiled appearances of reality. They are, indeed, a pulsing that renders the world comprehensible in quasi-organic terms. This notion correlates with Radulescu’s tendency to describe sound in terms of a living entity, as he does throughout *Sound Plasma*. His frequent use of biological metaphors is an appropriate means by which music itself can be conceptualized oto-centrally.

One central component in the piece is the narrow frequency band. At its most basic this is a frequency located anywhere within the audible spectrum, ‘irregularly trembling’ within a gamut of 1/4 to 3/4 tone (Radulescu, 1975 : 9). Beginning with the ‘plasma’ of the title, Radulescu calls the narrow frequency bands that comprise the spectrum of audible sound ‘vibrating (living) sound plasma’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 4) and, further on ‘living [and] breathing’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 9). The sound micro plasma, of which the narrow frequency band is a part, is also a ‘cell of the future music’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 9), the irregular oscillations of combined narrow frequency bands are called ‘electro cardiograms’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 9) and the composer’s new formulation of rhythm is referred to as a ‘spectrum pulse’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 4). The entire theory of sound plasma also becomes a means by which the traditional approach to composition is transformed, allowing it to ‘reach a living plasma, a natural state’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 6). Transformations that are implemented on the ‘life of the sound plasma’ are referred to in evolutionary (and involutory) terms (Radulescu, 1975 : 15) and ‘The Music’ itself is ‘an Abstract Organism’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 16).

A final key point of contrast between the ocular and the auditory is the tendency of ocular-centric thinking to be guided by the law of non-contradiction, leading to somewhat binary conceptualizations. One of the most prominent of these is the subject / object paradigm and this dichotomy in particular is radically challenged in the process of listening. This point is central to understanding the nature of Radulescu’s utopian sound world and will be elaborated on later in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening* (2007).

### **Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign**

*Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign* or *My D High opus 19 $\infty$*  (1975) is a text-based work that is both a treatise and composition, and it serves as a clear point of reference in understanding Radulescu’s entire aesthetic. As *Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign*, it is a conceptual text, outlining various perspectives on Radulescu’s spectral technique. This is focused on a progressive and intensive treatment of sound spectra as compositional material. As *My D High Opus 19 $\infty$*  it works as a freeform spectral composition that uses the conceptual text as a guide. In this form the piece is

concerned with either the sounding or imagining of a d in a ‘very high register’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 1) using the text as theoretic data, which will guide the treatment of this sound and its spectrum as it is performed. *Sound Plasma* points the way to a revolutionary future-focused music that leaves behind the outmoded ‘mania of acting with sounds’ (Radulescu 1975 : 3) that had resulted in composition becoming a mere ‘musical dramaturgy’ reduced to a state of ‘pantomime’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 3). Instead *Sound Plasma* encourages us to ‘enter the sound, play there and play from there’ (Radulescu 1975, p. 4)<sup>1</sup>.

The text is at times a rather opaque, with an esoteric tone and this idiosyncratic style is further augmented by its being printed on purple paper with white handwritten text. The content is made more obscure by the inclusion of lines of Radulescu’s poetry, which are superimposed over the text proper. Radulescu’s ideas are also outlined in a rather labyrinthine manner, which necessitates aligning concepts with their definitions across disparate pages. In view of this, the following is an overview of the core concepts in *Sound Plasma*.

After a short explanation of the work as concept and composition<sup>2</sup> Radulescu offers a brief critique of the history of Western art music. Pythagoras’ discovery of the relationship between harmony and number should have paved the way for a more involved relation between composer or listener and sound. Over the following centuries composers ‘made music treating sound from the outside’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 3). The musical textures such as monody, homophony, polyphony and heterophony, as well as scales, rhythm and modal and tonal gravity centres are, in Radulescu’s words ‘historically exhausted’ symptoms of this discontinuity (Radulescu, 1975 : 3). In contrast, Radulescu cites both Ligeti’s *Atmospheres* and Stockhausen’s *Stimmung* as examples of ‘special state music’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 3) which tie in with his own spectral aesthetic. These are works where timbre and continuity, texture and shifting densities of sound, take priority over functional harmony and thematic development.

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<sup>1</sup> La Monte Young in the early 60s was expressing similar views about “get[ting] inside of a sound” (Young *et al*, 2004 : 74). It is unclear exactly how familiar Radulescu was with his music or theories or, indeed, how interested he was in American spectrally-orientated composition. One clear reference occurs in a interview with Bob Gilmore from 1996. Here Radulescu refers to James Tenney and Alvin Lucier as ‘the best in America’ (Gilmore, 2003), with a qualification about Tenney’s music tending to be ‘too theoretical’ (Gilmore, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Before embarking on reading the text, the reader is instructed to ‘meditate upon the 5040 combinations of the 7 words in the title...[for] nearly 7 days’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 1)

Radulescu organizes the varieties of sound into five categories, which he calls the 'five global sources' (Radulescu, 1975 : 7). These are language or articulation (L), sound derived from instruments or objects (O), sounds from a human source, which include vocal or breath sounds (H), sounds from nature (N), which include not only environmental sounds such as birds or rain but also folklore, and finally sounds from electronic sources (E) (Radulescu, 1975 : 7).

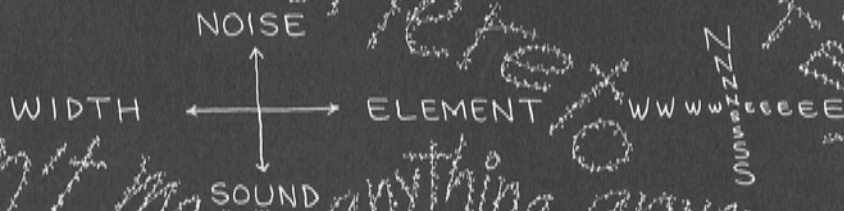
The narrow frequency band can be utilized as a single frequency or in a more complex form where it is derived from the 'co-existence and synthesis' (Radulescu, 1975 : 9) of sound sources. Either way it acts as a fundamental whose spectral components are used as material for slow transformations over time. The continuous irregular ebbing and flowing of spectral energies in the narrow frequency band is called the spectrum pulse (Radulescu, 1975 : 11).

The fluctuations of the spectrum pulse occur, over relatively short timescales, between the limits of 'noise' and 'sound', which are two cardinal points on the sound compass (fig. 1). 'Noise' relates to irregular, unclear spectra, while 'Sound' relates to periodicity of waveform and clarity of tone (Radulescu, 1975 : 5). The overall large-scale form of the music, the quantitative element, is described in terms of a 'macropulse', which refers to parameters such as 'density, quantity [and] time' (Radulescu, 1975 : 5). This is defined in relation to its location between the limits of 'Width' and 'Element'. 'Width' relates to 'wide atmospheres of agglomerate and dense sound plasma' (Radulescu, 1975 : 6) and 'Element' refers to 'a narrow band of rarified sound plasma' (Radulescu, 1975 : 6).

The sound compass is also used as the basis for mapping seven different types of transformations that can be applied to both spectrum pulse (quality) and macropulse (quantity) of the sound plasma. Radulescu refers to these processes as evo-involution, transformative movements within the limiting parameters of the cardinal points of the sound compass (Radulescu, 1975 : 5). These seven transformations are organized in a simple hierarchical structure containing three levels (see fig. 2).

## CARDINAL POINTS OF THE SOUND COMPASS

The relatively infinite space in which sounds occur could be defined through the following CARDINAL POINTS



The MICROPULSE of the SOUND PLASMA, operating on the harmonic resonance formants (overtone) of the NARROW FREQUENCY BAND, and producing colour changes, SOUND SPECTRUM CONSISTENCY, QUALITY, SPACE

is the result of a NATURALLY IRREGULAR and BI- or MULTI-DIRECTIONAL evo-involution between and within

the N  
and  
S dead conceal

NOISE means UNCLEARNESS, wave unperiodicity, irregularity, opaque spectrum, confusion between fundamentals and harmonics, i.e. between NARROW FREQUENCY BAND and its EMANATION (harmonic aureole), co-existence of more than a single narrow frequency band as fundamental, etc.

SOUND pole represents CLEARNESS, wave periodicity, regularity, serene spectrum, etc.

The MACROPULSE of the SOUND PLASMA gives to the music its

DENSITY, QUANTITY, TIME and represents a NATURALLY IRREGULAR and BI- or MULTI-

M 1765 E

crushima the crumbled skies

Fig. 1. Excerpt from *Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign* (p. 5) outlining aspects of the sound compass.



**EVO-INVOLUTION**

Through the term of evo-involution we describe the life of the sound plasma, its tensed transformations, the qualitative and quantitative trajectories which it follows within and between

SILENCE (0)  $\xleftrightarrow{\text{and}}$  SOUND CLIMAX ( $\infty$ )

With reference to the sound space, the evo-involution is a set of 7 processes which could be represented by the following hierarchy of symbols:





I ○

II ◇ □

III △ ◁ ▷

(A possible use of all these symbols is offered by the composition *SMALL INFINITIES' TOGETHERNESS*).

On the first level, it is a question of directional symbols:

- 
 - towards NOISE from SOUND WIDTH and/or SOUND ELEMENT;
- 
 - towards WIDTH from NOISE ELEMENT and/or SOUND ELEMENT;
- 
 - towards SOUND from NOISE WIDTH and/or NOISE ELEMENT;
- 
 - towards ELEMENT from NOISE WIDTH and/or SOUND WIDTH.

The second level of processes uses multi-directional symbols:

- ◇ - simultaneously towards all the limits of the sound space;
- - simultaneously towards the central (neutral) sound space zone.

On the third level of processes we find the global symbol of Circle

- - purest EVO-INVOLUTION as a sum of all the 6 previous processes, or at least as a simultaneity of the last two (◇ and □).

pre-existing soul of THEN

H 1965 E

**Fig. 2** Section on Evo-Involution in *Sound Plasma – Music of the Future Sign* (p. 17), showing seven types of plasmodic transformations hierarchically ordered. Note also Radulescu’s “stardust poetry” (Radulescu, 1975 : 2) superimposed over the text.

## Radulescu's Oto-utopia

Throughout *Sound Plasma* Radulescu presents his ideas in a somewhat enigmatic manner. Instead of presenting concepts as fixed and definitive statements, ambiguity and the integration of opposites are used as a generative force providing an alternative to the ocular-centric approach that would attempt bring to light a strictly delineated meaning of utopia. If the utopia presented here is enigmatic and not clearly defined, this allows for a greater fluidity in the conceptualization of the term that accords with its rootedness in sound.

Although the underlying theme of utopia is present in the entire concept of *Sound Plasma*, the term itself is mentioned explicitly only once, at the beginning where the composer outlines the core intention of the work. As stated above, the main material for the composition is a narrow frequency band, a d sound in a very high register which can be performed or imagined. The text reads:

[t]he harmonic aureole of this high d enters more or less the ultrasonic realm.

When you feel UTOPIA surging and tending to overcome REALITY, and vice versa, imagine or realize a reflection of that harmonic aureole into the infrasonic realm.

This mirroring process, the increasing crystallization and stress at two poles may induce “nirvana” within the audible realm... (Radulescu, 1975 : 2, capitalizations in original)

This short excerpt contains a number of perplexing features. The most prominent is the way in which utopia is not simply depicted as the goal of the piece, it is rather a means to an end that stands apart from utopia as such and yet, by retaining a clearly utopian function, remains a utopia. “Nirvana” stands as something other than utopia while keeping its meaning intact. There is also seemingly no practical difference between the actual realization or imagining of this sound, and the entire process is set in motion by the idea that utopia and reality are somehow intimately interlinked as two equally matched, but opposing states, both tending to overcome the other, where neither gains the upper hand.

In this model, the ideal of utopia is already interfused with material reality and vice versa. Radulescu's text implies that this utopia / reality duality is dependent on a dynamic bi-directional movement between earthly reality and utopic ideal. On the one hand, moving towards the ideal, this dual-concept overreaches itself, by way of the

listening subject's contemplation of sound, to manifest a third state: "nirvana"<sup>3</sup>. Conversely there is a counter-movement towards the real as utopia / reality simultaneously de-idealizes itself by manifesting as a "nirvana" that is firmly based in the phenomenal realm, through sound. In this way Radulescu depicts a sounding, which creates a radically transformed utopia that has moved away from its dual noumenal / phenomenal self to become something 'other'.

The concept of 'otherness' is an access point by which Radulescu's oto-utopia can be understood. In its general form utopia is not merely an alternative state of being to what is presently the case, but one that is infused with the ideal of perfection manifest in the contingent comings and goings of the world. This contradictory position highlights the inherent tension between metaphysics and material-bound reality; the latter being what utopia both stems from and simultaneously attempts to transcend.

Thus the irony at the heart of utopia emerges – it is unrealizable, in concrete terms in the real world. Utopia is always present at a distance, and yet also continually promises its establishment in the here and now. The word, coined by Sir Thomas More and stemming from the Greek words '*ou-topos*', in its very construction refers to 'no place' ("Utopia", n.d.). Utopia is a word that names a place that is no place. There is therefore an aporetic element to the concept, but this unresolvability is important in that it echoes something of music's ability to convey significance without meaning.

In *In Place of Utopia* (2012) Jean Luc Nancy interprets utopia's possibility as a place that is at the same time *outside of* place (Nancy, 2012 : 4), Understood in these terms, utopia opens itself to an oto-centric interrogation; that is, one that stems not from a *logos*, which as a clarifying, categorizing and delineating method is at root intertwined with the ocular, but rather from a paradigm that is guided by the diffuse nature of sound and the ozmotic experience of the listening subject. Indeed, it is the avoidance of a clear musical *logos* in Radulescu's work, its static quality in relation to an expressive narrative, that makes it possible for an oto-centric relation between listener and work to be established.

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<sup>3</sup> "Nirvana" is appropriately written in quotation marks, as if the term needs to be clearly presented as a relatively arbitrary sign signifying an ineffable state that is outside of reality and utopia.

Radulescu's music is not a commentary on utopia, but rather an attempt to create an 'other' utopia by placing the listener in alignment with the inner life of sound and the dynamism of sonic spectra. Through sound (which is also always listening), such a utopia is an intimate meeting between acoustic phenomenon and listening subject; a way of being, or being together, that interconnects percept and perception. This utopia is not a society or political state, but it does retain the meaning of community in the sense that sound and perception meet through the music to commune with and through each other.

As such the oto-utopia evoked in Radulescu's music also implies a destabilization of the standard opposition between subject and object. It is based on a blurring of boundaries where sound as a quasi-organic substance and subject as living listening organism intermingle. The essence of an oto-utopia, being founded on the rapport between sounding and listening, is therefore a listening to the sounding of a non-localizable self; a simultaneity of percept and perception that is rendered through the multi-directional comportment of sound.

For Nancy, listening implies that the subjective listener and the objects that constitute the world are no longer defined in strict opposition to one another<sup>4</sup>.-Rather, the terms subject and object dissolve in a shared participation with a "sonorous present" (Nancy, 2007 : 13) that is founded as much on the spatial aspect to sound's resonance as it is on the temporal. Listening is to enter a space that "opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me" (Nancy, 2007 : 14). A little further on he states:

To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other (Nancy, 2007 : 14 italics in the original)

The destabilizing of the subject / object divide opens the way to more fully understanding how listening and utopia interrelate. Separated from the dichotomized model derived from an ocular paradigm, listening subject and sounding object form an interactive field of resonance<sup>5</sup>. As the coherence of the perceiver / percept structure loses its steadfastness so too does the notion of place. If sound and listener form a

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Janus, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ihde, 2007a : 73-83 and Ihde, 2007b : 217- 223

whole then the location of this participatory unit is no longer stable or easily identifiable. In this way an oto-utopia is founded on, in the first place, a sounding fused with a listening-to-that-sounding such that the location of the listener is interwoven with that of the sound and vice versa creating a diffuse place that is, like utopia, also ‘no-place’ or outside of place<sup>6</sup>.

Appropriately, given Nancy’s oto-centric orientation here, the interaction of opposing concepts is not strictly dialectical and does not result in a firmly resolved synthesis. An aurally--guided mode of thinking is present that uses paradox as an expressive stratagem to reveal, in oto-poetic terms rather than ocular-logical terms, something essential and ineffable about the comportment of sound and listening; a quality whose semantic ambiguity is a necessary function of its oto-centric basis. Similarly, the many references to dichotomized concepts in *Sound Plasma* (eg. the ultrasonic and infrasonic realms, the work as being performable or imagined, the concept of evo-involution, the poles of the sound compass, the theoretical text set against superimposed stardust poetry etc.), are not utilized in a dialectical manner. A rather more circular, perhaps somewhat ‘devilish’ (Radulescu, n.d) anti-logic is at work here, evoking the co-presence, rather than dialectical structure, of the directional and immersive in Ihde’s *auditory aura* (Ihde, 2007a : 79, see above)<sup>7</sup>.

## **Art and Utopia**

In *In Place of Utopia* (2012) Nancy is pessimistic about the forms that utopia’s ultimate manifestation would take, but sees art as providing an alternative to this dilemma. He argues that ultimately utopia, in its standard socio-political formulation, finds itself caught between two equally untenable positions, one essentially totalitarian and the other essentially devoid of the possibility of manifestation (Nancy, 2012 : 9). However art could “give place to the other of place” (Nancy, 2012 : 10),

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<sup>6</sup> La Monte Young has commented on a similar experience, where the formerly distinct concepts of sound, listener and place are destabilized, and tend to fuse together, through the act of intensive listening. In a published lecture from 1960, describing his time improvising with Terry Riley and dancer Ann Halprin, he remarked: “Sometimes when I was making a long sound, I began to notice I was looking at the dancers and the room from the sound instead of hearing the sound from some position in the room.” (Young *et al*, 2004 : 74)

<sup>7</sup> It is significant that the score itself is not to be read linearly but rather should start from any page and ‘follow a spiral design’ (Radulescu, 1975 : 2)

thus providing a viable alternative to a utopia bound between two undesirable states. In this light the tripartite structure outlined near the beginning of *Sound Plasma*, that entails utopia, reality and “nirvana” could be read as a generalized reformulation of Nancy’s conception, where “nirvana” becomes the desirable alternative, the ‘other’, to the ontologically opposing states of reality and utopia.

Nancy begins by examining the relation between the signifier ‘utopia’ and the meaning allocated to it. Utopia is, first and foremost, a word that refers to a “chimerical dream, foreign to the real” (Nancy, 2012 : 4), which nevertheless desires to become something more than a mere unattainable ideal. It is therefore “a non-place of meaning through which, in fact, something else than a place among others in the configuration of meaning perhaps arises in thought” (Nancy, 2012 : 4). He elaborates by describing how utopia is tied to two concepts. In one form it is a product of literature, an openly fictive representation which nevertheless gains its power from the demand that this fiction oppose the established order as a ‘polemical negation of the real’ – a necessary impossibility (Nancy, 2012 : 7). The second aspect traces an opposing trajectory and presents a utopia that is inevitably intertwined with a world. Even as representation, its ultimate referent is, in a broad sense a society. This involves the interwoven transmissions of meaning between members of a community; a community that is crucially something other than familial or imperial grouping. (Nancy, 2012 : 8)

However, this leads to a dilemma where utopia becomes a choice between two ultimately undesirable forms. On the one hand utopia exists as a void-like non-place opened in the world, without ‘pre-given meaning’ (Nancy, 2012 : 9). In this way the concept is a product of a fundamental lack. On the other extreme, utopia is a saturated totality of meaning, whose totalization stands as a ‘crushing and domineering “vision of the world”’ (Nancy, 2012 : 9). This dilemma is devoid of the subtlety and fragility needed to keep utopia ‘in balance’ (Nancy, 2012 : 10), and Nancy’s position is that the problem as it stands is unsolvable. As an alternative he suggests that art may be able to take the place of the non-place that is utopia without merely displacing it as a replacement (Nancy, 2012 : 10). Art keeps utopia in a state of trembling balance, keeps its mystery intact, while also offering itself as an anti-assertion that stands as an alternative to the real. Utopia then is defined by its fragility, by its ‘otherness’. Access is gained not through the dialectic movement of worldly ideas, but through a leap of

sorts towards the aesthetic. In the light of this delicate– formulation, Radulescu’s music invites us to partake in an intensive, participatory listening that would resonate reciprocally with sound plasma, opening up the possibility for the emergence of an alternative utopia that is at once ineffable, uncanny and alive.

## **Conclusion**

Radulescu’s listening was not limited to the ears alone but rather informed and sustained his entire conceptual attitude towards composition. He not only listened as a composer but approached composition as a listening subject embedded in a sonorous reality. What is remarkable here is that in approaching sound oto-centrally, the employment of an aural paradigm to music should stand out as being so unorthodox. But the ostensive eccentricity of Radulescu’s output highlights how deeply ingrained ocular-centrism can be even in an aural art form and how estranged music can become from a listening-orientated perspective.

*Sound Plasma* provides us with an intriguing, perplexing example of oto-centrism applied to notation and composition. The text’s non-linear structure, its overlapping, both conceptually and literally, of theory and poetry and its conflating of binary oppositions parallels the oscillating quality of utopia. The piece is representative of Radulescu’s music as a whole and evokes the notion of sound as both an animate foundation of reality and a catalyst for the experience of a utopia that is non-localizable as a place, indeed remains a no-place. But as such, paralleling the radically transformed notion of spatiality that describes the subversion of the subject / object divide, this oto-utopia subsists in the multivalent rapport between resonating listener and living, plasmodic sound.

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