Technologies of Dismemberment

Orpheus, Fascination, and Bulgarian Etnodzhaz

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Ukrainian-born saxophonist Anatoli Vapirov was one of the best-known musicians from Leningrad’s burgeoning jazz scene at the time of his move to Bulgaria in 1986. His decision to leave was ultimately not the result of either the changing atmosphere for jazz in the USSR during perestroika, or his brief imprisonment on charges of price speculation while teaching saxophone and directing the jazz ensemble at the Leningrad Conservatory (Starr 1994:317). Rather, he left after learning that his father (who died prior to Vapirov’s second birthday) was a Bulgarian who served in the Soviet army during World War II. Vapirov is best known in Bulgaria as founder and director of the Varna Summer Jazz Festival, which has melded the small but vibrant Bulgarian jazz circle together with international talent every August since 1992. Musically, however, Vapirov has undertaken a more fervent approach. Particularly notable is his use of jazz performance practice as a means to create a pan-Slavic style linking his northern and southern Slavic ancestry, a pervasive quest throughout his career. The first of these was a piece titled “Bolgarskoe Rondo” (Bulgarian Rondo) on his 1976 debut album Leningrads’ki Dzhab Ansambli pod Upravleniem A. Vapirova (Leningrad Jazz Ensemble under the Direction of A. Vapirov) for Melodiya, the Soviet state label. Later releases include the 1981 album Forgotten Ritual with Russian avantgarde pianist Sergei Kuryokhin (1954–1996) and Slavonic Mystery from 2000, featuring the Bulgarian State Radio and Television Female Vocal Choir popularized in the late 1980s by the Le Mystère de Voix Bulgares (Mysterious Voices of Bulgaria) recording series.

Given his predilection for exploring the bounds of his cultural influences, Vapirov has been quick to point out what he considers a lack of similar commitment in the work of his contemporaries. “Other people might just ‘quote’ folklore,” he states in an interview:

but that’s on the surface [...] I’m not trying to criticize these people, but that’s just not my way. When I look at folklore I’m looking for something deeper, something I can identify with at any given time, something inside of me identifies with it [...] I am more interested in melodies. Because melody is right at the heart of Slavic culture and it unites a number of different countries [...] I look for what links Bulgarian and Russian culture. The old

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Bulgarian state was originally Russia, on the Volga. That was a long, long time ago, so I had to look very, very deep. Too deep. (in Minor 1995:88–89)

On one hand, Vapirov’s career locates him within broader historical arguments over Bulgaria’s place between the political and cultural spheres of Oriental and Occidental—often framed in terms of the “idle and sensuous East” and the “industrious, moral West” (Neuburger 2013:19). This dialectical imagination has become one of the defining frames of identity politics in southeastern Europe, influencing a range of perspectives from post-Communist social and economic change to works linking psychoanalytic theories of lack and disavowal with Balkan identity.¹ One gets a sense of Vapirov’s acknowledgment of these historical economies in his criticism of those who simply “quote folklore” without understanding such folklore’s meaning or context. Yet, Vapirov’s own perception of history is fraught with phantasmic projections of the folkloric as well. His conflation of Slavicism with a shared past between Russia and Bulgaria glosses over (perhaps inadvertently) the Turkic roots of the Bulgars, the group that came from the Volga region in the seventh century and combined with Slavs to form the first Bulgarian kingdom on the Danube River under Khan Asparukh (Crampton 2007:8). And his interest in melody as a unifying force mirrors the actions of other Europeans such as Béla Bartók, who searched for a rural wellspring of “Bulgarian rhythm” that accounted for regional similarities in the usage of “odd” meters in village dances (Rice 2000). Acknowledging his place in this history is perhaps why Vapirov fears that he is treading “too deep” in his own work.

Vapirov’s trepidation regarding his descent into an imagined cultural past triggers thoughts of another who braved the depths—Orpheus. Few figures with roots in pre-Homeric mythology have carried such profound interest in both Western Europe and the Thracian region shared by the present-day countries of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.² Part of this shared historical appeal lies in Orpheus’s status as a figure of superhuman power who is nonetheless subject to the personal tragedies suffered by the everyday person. These human failings become most transparent regarding the loss of his wife Eurydice through the hubris of his own gaze after using his transcendent musical skill to rescue her from death. According to myth, while playing his lyre in grief to the point of environmental catastrophe, he is assaulted and dismembered by priestesses of Dionysus (known as Maenads or Baccharites depending on the version of the myth), who resist his vocal charms by plugging their ears. After dismembering his body, they throw his still-singing head and lyre into the nearby river, where he floats toward death or salvation depending on the version of the story. In modern contexts, Orpheus’s tale of dismemberment has appeared in works of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and philosophy as a cautionary tale of the dangers of engaging with objects of desire or affection (see Hassan 1982; Badley 1995:14; Abbate 2001:1–54; Harris 2001:25–35; and Holsinger 2001:295–343). This is not to imply that Vapirov (or anyone else) fears such a morbid, dramatic end in the pursuit of such

¹. Since the decades before liberation from direct Ottoman rule in 1878, Bulgarians with a stake in a modern European identity tried to negotiate their own sense of geographical and historical isolation from the cultural heart of the West. A body of literature from the late 19th century coming from the burgeoning bourgeois classes in cities like Sofia and Varna framed these desires to become European through ruminations on their embodied self-orientalization, and the process of overcoming this state to become truly modern like their Western brethren. Such literature must be paired with another body of work coming from Western Europe: travelogues dating from the late 17th century articulating an interest in the Balkans as a gateway (or barrier) between Orient and Occident, populated by half-savage peoples from the Ottoman orbit (see Bakic–Hayden 1995; Todorova 2009; Daskalov 2001; Kiossev 2002; Neuburger 2006; Dretz and Segaert 2008; Firkatian 2008; Todorova and Gille 2010; and Bjelic 2009).

². This includes jazz as a broader cultural practice, stemming from Jean-Paul Sartre’s coining of the term “Black Orpheus” in 1948 to emphasize both the peculiar power of African American musical practices and the “descent” of their practitioners to escape the social stigmas of racism and segregation in the United States (see Sartre 1964/65; Lively 1998:35–37; Simawe 2000:xix–xxv; Fanon [1952] 2008:12–13; and Judaken 2008:31–33).
objects. However, it remains fate that, even allegorically, can still be looked at with trepidation. Very few would want to share the fate of, for example, the famous toppled statue of Vladimir Lenin, torn apart by Russian hands in 1991 for the entire world to see.

Lying beneath the surface of both men’s pursuit, whether mythical or real, is the commonly used yet oft-misunderstood word fascination. This concept has long been used to articulate bodies of desire and gaze toward objects, maintaining strong connections to magical, irrational, and premodern roots while simultaneously serving as a platform for modern forms of expression. Colloquially, it is often used to introduce the reader to the author’s interest in the topic at hand—often some variation of “I was fascinated by...”—before the inevitable unpacking. This implies a view of fascination primarily as an experiential gateway toward an object that is eventually replaced by a more rational, objective treatment. As such, many linguistic constructions of fascination favor various ontological rather than epistemological focuses.³ The result is a concept often conceptualized as pure affect, beyond the scope of understanding and existing as a space of homogeneity, undifferentiated in experience from person to person. Or, as Hans Ulrich Seeber notes, fascination relies more on “aesthetic experience [...] than the hermeneutic detection of meanings” (2010:289).

Orpheus’s dismemberment is a useful point of departure for challenging some of these orthodox notions about fascination and its relationship to cultural practices. His death has an aesthetic aspect that illuminates how subjects actually existing in the world engage with fascination in the everyday and utilize it to their own ends, as opposed to simply being encompassed by what Martin Heidegger has referred to in relation to fascination’s distant cousin boredom as a “muffling fog” ([1967] 1998:87). Establishing this public face of fascination subtly transforms it from a space of mindless allure beyond the confines of time, space, and being to a space of grounded subjective possibility within social, cultural, and historical specificity. A more specific example from my own historical and ethnographic past is the genre of etnodzhaz (ethnojazz), a term utilized by Bulgarian musicologist Claire Levy to describe a hybridized genre popular in Bulgaria starting in the 1980s by musicians who used jazz harmony and technique to modernize the sound of narodna muzika (folk music). Though the word “etnodzhaz” has limitations as a conceptual frame, I find it useful as a starting point to demonstrate ways in which human agency “dismembers” the fascinations spurred by lived social, political, and economic realities. By employing such strategies of dismemberment, these musicians operate in a conceptual space both within and outside of the very fascination they are writing through. In doing so, they embody the Orpheus allegory more broadly rather than the bard himself; being fascinating and fascinated, they dismember themselves as they are simultaneously dismembering other cultural presences through their actions.

Orpheus between Western Europe and the Balkans

Orpheus has intrigued a wide range of aesthetes including Ovid, Claudio Monteverdi, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Camus—each of whom had a unique interpretation of the figure. The practice of transforming Orpheus in this way has been so historically common that W.K.C. Guthrie casually noted that storytellers would mold the Orpheus myth toward their own interests without deference to “the preservation of a consistent tradition or the aching head of a twentieth-century mythologist” (1952:25). His mythical death and dismemberment are no

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3. The English verb “to fascinate” has long been used to describe an object or action that garners specialized attention or desire on the part of the person or persons engaged with said object. The word most generally associated with fascination in Bulgarian (ucharovanie) stems from the verb ucharovam (to ravish or charm). The root noun of both word forms, char (charm) reinforces these magical and seductive connections. The same is true of other Slavic words related to fascination, a group that includes obaianie (lure), interes (interest), omagosvane (enchantment), and plenit (capture) and Russian words like volkhovstvo (magic/sorcery) and effektmost (glamour).
exception. In one of the earliest accounts, Aeschylus held that Orpheus was attacked by order of Dionysus in response to the bard’s favoring of Apollo. Plato, in the Republic, saw Orpheus’s fate as a cowardly end for one who refused to die for his love of Eurydice, instead attempting a clever ruse against the gods. Later versions (most notably Ovid’s) held that his dismemberment was solely the idea of the female followers of Dionysus in response to his predilection for young men in the wake of Eurydice’s death (Johnson 2008:103). One of the few constant tropes in these stories is the relationship between the affective power of his musical gestures and their effect on the natural world. The idea that Orpheus’s sonic power is organically tied to the nature that it controls creates a hint of universalism, allowing him to be more easily melded and shaped to the various needs and experiences of writers. “What [Orpheus] is doing [through music]” argues Elisabeth Henry, “is not controlling the natural world by magic, but playing and singing music so powerfully expressive that the whole of creation responds to it” (1992:1).

This historical heterogeneity is precisely what makes Orpheus such a powerful allegory for the cross-imagination between Western Europe and the Balkans that has long influenced ideas about musical culture and practice in Bulgaria. Competing interests and discourses on this front have, in the spirit of Guthrie, forced an “aching head” for many an ethnomusicologist since the first half of the 20th century. On the one hand is the cosmopolitan, multicultural history of music from both urban and rural spaces, which carries the influence of non-Slavic and non-European minority populations (Turks, Greeks, Armenians, the Romani) that were part of the economic and social structures of the Ottoman Empire and later the independent Bulgarian state. On the other hand are the efforts, often fueled by ethnically based nationalist sentiments and state interest in identity politics, to cleanse such perceived Turkic and other non-Slavic influences in order to draw out the true “essence” of a Bulgarian sound. Intertwined at the heart of this dialectic are actions of fetish and disavowal perpetuated by individuals and communities with something at stake on one side or the other, many of which occur simultaneously and were in direct competition with each other for influence. For example, while Bartók was searching for his “Bulgarian rhythm,” late-19th-century Bulgarian Romantic-era nationalists were printing song collections for the purpose of “showing Europe that Bulgarians exist” apart from their political status as Ottoman citizens (Hranova and Kiossev 2007:326).

Similarly, a divergence emerges in the various utilizations of the Orpheus myth. While many interpretations in the Western imagination have often revolved around philosophical arguments about the feminized voice and performing body, Bulgarians have more specifically employed Orpheus as a symbol for pre-Ottoman cultural purity revolving around his Thracian connections. Though this may seem historically suspect given the long relationship between Orphic narratives and Hellenic Greece, there has been a practice of framing Orpheus as a Thracian who, like Dionysius, was only later absorbed into the Greek yoke (MacDermott 1998:16). Many who subscribe to Orpheus’s Thracian origins point to the geographical importance of the Rhodope Mountains, a prominent range in Bulgarian Thrace that has long been thought to be both the birthplace of Orpheus and the location of the cavern through which he descended into the underworld to rescue Eurydice. Connecting Orpheus to articulations of this Rhodope locality has been common in Bulgaria since the late 19th century. Tourist brochures and catalogues freely cast the mountains as Orpheus’s birthplace and the cradle of Thracian musical heritage, connections emphasized by Todor Zhivkov, the communist head of state from 1954 to 1989, in various speeches throughout his time in power (Buchanan 2006:286–88). The cave known as Dyavolskoto garlo (The Devil’s Throat), located near the village of Trigrad, has been earmarked as the precise cave of Orpheus’s descent by locals for centuries and remains a popular tourist destination. The association even melded into communist-era popular culture, evident in calling the yearly pop song competition started in 1965 the Zlatna Orfeiya (Golden Orpheus).

Fascination becomes one means to articulate the shared historical connections between Western Europe and the Balkans through the symbolic capital of Orpheus. These connections are themselves subject to individual and collective desires as reflected in the way Orpheus’s
mythical power to alter space, place, and ideas has influenced writers, artists, musicians, and politicians in both Western Europe and the Balkans. In a way, the modal, discursive Orpheus of aesthetic practice serves as a means to challenge orthodox notions of a dichotomy between Balkan and European, substituting a more nuanced picture that engages with the relatively humanist idea of lived experience. Moreover, thinking of this Orphic entanglement in terms of fascination further emphasizes the phantasmic nature of these desires in empirical terms, whether it is the Bulgarian desire to grasp the rational subjectivity of Western metaphysics denied by years of Ottoman control, or the Western desire to grasp the alluring otherness perceived at the heart of Bulgarian culture. Casting such desires as ungraspable objects does little to lessen the power of their allure. On the contrary, the allure is heightened because, much like Orpheus himself, these objects become malleable and mobile to the shaping of the subjective or collective gaze. The integral role of fascination as a concept in these entanglements is that it shows how much of that perceived power lacks the permanence of truth often desired by the fascinated.

Fascination and the Descent of Orpheus

The complex conceptual history surrounding fascination is grounded in its associations with magic that stretch back into pre-antiquity. Throughout Greece, Rome, and premodern Europe, the word often referred to someone being affected by magic spells, sometimes more specifically charmed by the eyes of a snake, a demon, or a woman. In fact, two of the ancient world's most powerful myths incorporating fascination tie into a misogynistic history of equating women with a demonic otherness: the gaze of the gorgon Medusa turning men who look into her eyes into stone, and the Sirens' song luring wayward sailors to turn their ships toward them and crash into the surrounding rocks (see, for example, Vermeule 1979:137–41 and 201–05; Vernant 1991:95–110; and Turner 2016:155–60). Both would maintain strong associations with thought on fascination well into the 20th century, as seen in respective writings by Sigmund Freud ([1922] 1992:272–73) and Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 2002:35–62) that reference
the continuing power of these mythical women in allegorical terms. In fact, most of fascination’s modern incarnations have parsed through various dialectics between magic and reason, including (but not limited to) the performance of magic tricks, and the 19th-century industry of medical hypnosis (see Newman 1847; Atkinson 1908; Lévi-Strauss 1963; During 2002:1–6). All of these incarnations of fascination share a common trait: the subject desiring knowledge of (or intimacy with) the fascinating object but falling short of grasping precisely what makes that object fascinating. While “falling short” in antiquity usually meant certain death, whether from the Sirens’ voices or Medusa’s gaze, the stakes for the modern subject are somewhat subtler. Nevertheless, the vain attempt to gain understanding is usually associated with the act of vision, reinforcing Western orthodox sensorial hierarchies in the accumulation of knowledge. Indeed, the use of words like illumination, light, and blinding in these narratives simultaneously emphasizes both the preponderance of visual acuity, and how those hierarchies of the senses fail to elicit desired knowledge and collapse in the moment of fascination. Perhaps the best way, then, to describe the classically conceived experience of fascination is in colloquial terms. Imagine a high-intensity light from a distant object blinding your eyes, so much so that there seems to be no other alternative than to engage with it directly. The closer you move toward the object, the more intense the light becomes, to the point that distance in space no longer becomes relevant to the process of knowing and ascertaining. The object remains fascinating precisely because it cannot be directly intuited by the mind or the eye, but its presence is felt nonetheless through the physicality of the light shining in your eyes. In epistemological terms, this fascination persists into perpetuity, since the blindness is spatial rather than temporal, and thus never weakens and subsides. The nature of the allure precludes deviation or escape. Worse yet, as Slavoj Žižek notes, fascination can also “blind us to the fact that the other is already gazing at us,” further entrenching the retreat of subjective autonomy by giving the object all power of movement and perspective (1991:114).

A key figure in developing a modern alternative to these orthodox conceptualizations of fascination was French writer/literary theorist Maurice Blanchot. One of the most unique and under-acclaimed thinkers in postwar Europe, Blanchot’s ideas about the crisis of modern subjectivity influenced a wide range of French thinkers from Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. More than anyone, Blanchot tied together fascination with Orpheus, turning the famed descent and dismemberment from mere myth into his own darkened mirror image of the Platonic cave allegory. Among his writings that reference Orpheus are several essays I reference below, as well as an Orphic modernist novel titled Thomas l’Obscur (Thomas the Obscure, 1941). This body of work is significant enough for Foucault to remark in his essay on Blanchot that the Thracian bard was “profoundly interwoven” into the Frenchman’s worldview (1987:44).

The closest that Blanchot comes to providing a working definition of fascination is found in the 1955 essay “The Essential Solitude,” which deals with issues of writing, authorship, and the nature of the work ([1955] 1981). Blanchot conceived of writing not as a purely subjective act, but as a space of creation that arrests time, space, and location and subsumes the writer as subject into a third-person status. Thus, a subject is no longer one who possesses a coherent sense of “I,” but becomes what Deleuze and Guattari call an “assemblage of a haecceity type”—an individual defined by its state of timeless fracture ([1980] 2005:265). It is within this state that fascination would have its greatest effect on the individual, since the object manifests as coherent in a way that the subject is lacking. However, what actually constitutes the state of fascination is something very different for Blanchot than for others. For him, fascination is not

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4. Blanchot spent much of the 1930s as a journalist for various French nationalist and anti-Nazi publications, spurred on in part by his friendship with Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Reinventing himself as a novelist prior to WWII, Blanchot devoted his writing to novels and critical essays until his death in 2003. His work from the 1940s, especially L’Arrêt de mort (Death Sentence [1948] 1978), has been of great interest to scholars of French literary criticism. For a more detailed biographical sketch of Blanchot, see Haase and Large (2001).
something experienced because the object of desire emits an alluring energy on the subject that overwhelms its rational faculties. Rather, it is formed from the perspective of the subject, engaging with an object and pulling itself closer in the futile attempt to ascertain its uncanny and unknowable qualities. This is a state for Blanchot in which, as he famously stated, “blindness is still vision, vision that is no longer the possibility of seeing but the impossibility of not seeing” ([1955] 1981:75). In other words, the “shining light” for the colloquial description of fascination referenced earlier would have been emanating from the subject, and reflected by the object back into the subject’s eyes, creating a sort of causality loop. The trap of fascination is that since the absent object is actually the reflection of the subject, the perceived form of the object of fascination is a mere construction of the subject’s imagination, a state that exposes the self in its state of flux and assemblage. That which is fascinating can never be a perceived object, but merely a construction of desires—the powerful magic of the subjective mind.

Orpheus served as both model and cautionary tale for how such a fractured self manifests in the world, what its ontological dynamics are, and how aesthetic acts like writing and musical composition become key components in the performance of such a self. Blanchot’s 1952 essay, “The Gaze of Orpheus,” casts the mythical journey into the underworld as an aesthetic quest—giving “form, figure, and reality” to Eurydice’s phantasmic body in the light of day ([1952] 1981:99). However, Orpheus’s desire to create his object of fascination (Eurydice) as something tangible was seen by Blanchot as a transgression of the logic that knowledge of such an object is impossible. In fact, Orpheus violates this logic twice: once in choosing to make his descent and broaching the boundary of life and death, and a second time when he turns to look at Eurydice after expressly being forbidden from doing so. Thus, he is destroyed by the terms of his own desire, in the process fulfilling his traditional role as allegory for the destructive potential of fascination itself.

Blanchot, however, cleverly twists more orthodox interpretations of the Orpheus myth by declaring that “[he] has actually been turned towards Eurydice all along” ([1952] 1981:100). In other words, Orpheus was not lured into transgression by the object of his desire—transgression was at the heart of his actions from the very start. Furthermore, this predetermined act is framed by Blanchot as a form of writing, cementing Orpheus as an active subject in the unfolding of his own fascination toward the phantasmic Eurydice. “The act of writing begins with Orpheus’s gaze,” Blanchot concludes, “but Orpheus already needs the power of art in order to descend to that instant [...] In order to write one must already be writing” (104). Identifying the deconstructive act of writing as the action at the heart of Orpheus’s desire articulates one of Blanchot’s most important contributions to the discourse on fascination. Orpheus is not simply a magical, premodern other who is ensnared by a desire beyond his control. He is a modern subject who is a willing and able participant in the making, unfolding, and breaking of this desire. In essence, Blanchot shows a way to think about fascination beyond the limitless trap of stony gazes and subjective disintegration. Instead, fascination becomes a space where the mediating actions of the fascinated subject are integral to the complete picture. Blanchot’s Orpheus becomes more than simply an allegory for the dangers of fascination—he stands as a model for the modern subject within similar circumstances.

Embedded within Blanchot’s modern ideal of Orpheus are two further considerations for thinking about fascination in terms beyond its philosophical manifestation. The first is the role that sound plays in the construction of Orpheus’s newfound modernity. While Orpheus’s musicality has been cast as one of the most magical and unmodern of his attributes, the recourse

5. Blanchot owes much here to Jacques Lacan, who was one of the first to postulate that the fascinating absence was linked to the unattainable nature of the object of desire, and the absence is felt as a repetition of nothingness that draws attention to itself, becoming fascinating by the very nature of being nothing at all (see Lacan [1981] 1998). The connection between Lacan and Blanchot is more thoroughly explored in Harris (2003b:18–20).
to writing as the modern means by which he negotiates his own fascination creates other possibilities. Klaus Theweleit, for one, presents a compelling example in this vein, where the act of Orpheus “imprinting” his song onto Eurydice’s dead soul in Claudio Monteverdi’s opera *L’Orfeo* (1607) is the first example of the mechanical reproduction of sound (1993:166–76). Nor are these tactics of sounding unique to Orpheus himself: the Maenads/Baccharites utilized sound as a tactical mechanism to overpower the magic of Orpheus’s voice and lyre. In a more modern context, Roland Barthes articulated a similar phenomenon when he argued that the typically unobtrusive repetition of sound in cinema only ruptures the fascination of the visual image when it is “displaced or magnified [...] by the grain of a voice milled in our ear-drums” (1986:347). Sound technology becomes a key device in a mobile subjectivity that weaves through and deconstructs fascination on some.

The second consideration involves the space of absence beyond fascination that was termed by Blanchot as “the outside” (*le dehors*). It is, in essence, the field created by the object of fascination, “neutral” and “irreducible to the phenomenal world” (Clark 1992:59). For Blanchot, the outside is an ungraspable space, void of being, desire, intimacy, and knowledge — neutral in its nihilism, foreboding in its emptiness. As the dark face opposite the blinding desire of fascination, the outside gives credence to the idea that the subject would stay within the relative intimacy of fascination even as the sense of “I” begins to dissipate into the abstract assemblage of the third person (better the devil you know than the one you don’t). But in the spirit of Blanchot’s more modern, subjectively written fascination, I want to propose a different possibility for an outside beyond fascination. What if the fascinated subject’s empty outside can also be thought of as a vessel through which the un-fascinated can view the fascinated in their state of fascination? What may appear empty to the blinded eyes of the fascinated is full of the unseen histories, ideologies, social codes, and cultural tropes that surround them. The radiance of fascination into the empty space of the outside draws the attention of others who are not the other that live within these moments. Thus, the illumination provided by the fascinating relationship gives those on the outside ample recourse and opportunities not only to witness, but actively critique, manipulate, and reshape that fascination to their own ends.

In fact, I would argue that the specific social, historical, and cultural specificities that perpetuate fascination are essential components to its enactment through desire — as much as the already outlined relationship between subject and object. Derrida reminds us that Heidegger’s concept of Being — which is so central to the construction of the *nothing* that Blanchot sees as inhabiting the outside — is still grounded within the functions of language and significance ([1967] 1997:23). If a concept of Being is rooted so firmly within language and context, then an outside and the fascinations within must be grounded within those same aspects. Most importantly, opening *fascination* up to this litany of the analytical possibilities in relationships among agency, desire, and artistry provides a vehicle for multiple fascinations (as opposed to a single, unifying fascination) that intersect in various spheres. Indeed, several contemporary theorists have started to look at fascination in this way from a variety of historical and sociocultural perspectives (see Harris 2003a:3–24; Hayes 2003:159; Tomlinson 1999:3–4). Thought of in Deleuzian terms, those who are becoming-Orpheus are also becoming-Maenads/Baccharites, mediating and transforming the seductive power of fascination to create different avenues of expression utilizing the very mobility of the assembled and affective subject position that fascination provides.

**Apparatuses of Dismemberment and Bulgarian Etnodzhaz**

This recourse to context brings us back to Bulgaria — the interweaving fascination(s) that are part of the everyday Bulgarian experience, and the specific types of musical dismemberment practiced by jazz musicians in Bulgaria, such as Vapirov. First, though, it is helpful to examine the history of how and why Bulgarian narodna muzika became a potent source for jazz musi-
cientists. In the early 1960s, a young Bulgarian pianist and composer from the city of Plovdiv named Milcho Leviev became instrumental in defining the tenets of what would be called folk-jazz, more commonly referred to in later years as etnodzhaz.6 His aesthetic vision was in part spurred by various political and social factors present in Bulgaria at that time. Foremost among these was a new vision of an ethically socialist popular music designed to compete with the decadent pop and jazz imported from the capitalist West. Zhivkov’s vision of highly trained professional musicians tapping into the “inexhaustible richness” of Bulgarian folklore resulted in the creation of performance standards for vocalists and instrumentalists and a myriad of state-run ensembles with which to employ them (Gadzhev 2010:207). Leviev used this ostensibly philosophical bent to incorporate stylistic traits from narodna muzika into his compositions for the Estraden Orkestar na Balgarskoto Natsionalno Radio i Televisiya (The Bulgarian National Radio and Television Popular Music Orchestra), of which he served as ensemble director from 1962 to 1966 (see Levy 2007a:39; Gadzhev 2010:183–86; McCormack 2011:199–217). The success of his compositions like “Studiya” (Study) and “Blus v 9” (Blues in 9) opened up opportunities for a myriad of smaller Bulgarian folk-jazz groups throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Leviev’s own quartet Focus ’65 (with flutist Simeon Shterev), and saxophonist Vesselin Nikolov’s group, Cherni, Byali, i Zeleni (Red, White, and Green).

By the early 1980s, etnodzhaz had become a more ideologically palatable alternative to Romani clarinetist Ivo Papasov’s uniquely cosmopolitan and technically virtuosic svatbarska muzika (wedding music), a genre whose practitioners resisted attempts by the state to control it.7 This atmosphere led to a host of experimental ensembles seeking to push the boundaries of technique and improvisational style on local instruments long associated with the performance of narodna muzika. Among this group of young musicians was kavaladzhiya (kaval player) Theodosii Spassov, who developed a litany of influential techniques on the instrument during this period. The kaval—a wooden end-blown flute that traditionally had been used by Bulgarian shepherds to pass the time while tending flocks—had long been incorporated into various urban and rural bands for social events since the early 19th century, and were later incorporated into the state-sponsored naroden ensembles of the communist period. Spassov’s innovations included blowing through the aperture from the side of the mouth to create greater control of timbre and articulation, and utilizing increased chromaticism in his playing to emulate the improvisational style of bebop and other Western jazz genres (Buchanan 2006:319). These technical innovations were profoundly influential on kavaladzhii in professional folk ensembles and music academies, as well as a group of younger jazz kavaladzhii currently active in Bulgaria, including Nedyalko Nedyalkov (from the group Ikadem) and Sylvester Mateev (of Silver Beat Collective). It also created a market for Spassov outside of Bulgaria, and he has spent the bulk of his career performing through the world with musicians ranging from drummer Billy Cobham to the ensemble for the popular Irish Riverdance show.

Performers engaging with etnodzhaz share a means of making music that Claire Levy identifies as being beyond “canon[s]” or “particular institution[s]” (2007b:167). Its position outside of the canon, I argue, is what makes the genre such a significant platform for musicians

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7. For a more detailed account of Ivo Papasov and svatbarska muzika, see Rice (1994:240–50); Buchanan (1996:200–30); and Silverman (2012:130–37). Also of importance was the rise of the intellectual circle of Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of the Prime Minister and head of the Committee for Art and Culture, who was in the midst of enacting programs emphasizing humanistic endeavors designed to counter the narrative of Bulgaria’s “shameful identity,” especially championing the peaks of the Thracian and pre-Ottoman kingdom’s past (see Atanasova [2004:298–302]).
to work through the various fascinations they may hold or encounter in the world. More conventional jazz performers like Leiviev and Shterev thus inhabit the same kind of historical and social space as Spassov (who has toured in the US billed as the “Bulgarian Orpheus”) or the band OM, formed in 1991 by Nikolai Ivanov to play a mix of jazz, new age, and Steve Reich-inspired minimalism on traditional instruments. In spite of differences in background, pedagogical training, and artistic philosophy, all of these performers bring together a notion that jazz improvisation serves as a modernizing influence on various forms of narodna muzika. However, each artist simultaneously maintains an individual conception of the balance between modern jazz and traditional naroden, and how listeners should perceive this balance. Naturally, the resonance of these competing perspectives is never guaranteed. Take, for example, this excerpt from producer and promoter Viktor Lilov’s description of violinist Georgi Yanev’s Orkestar Orfei (Orpheus Orchestra) that appears on the website for Lilov’s management company, Messechina Music:

There is no doubt that Georgi Yanev is one of the leading virtuosos and innovators in the role of the violin in Bulgarian traditional music. Jazz phrasing is only part of the wealth of his music, with which he experiments in the framework of traditional musical idioms, but considerably more frequently than, say, Ivo Papazov, with whom Yanev is compared. This is doubtless due to the fact that Bulgarian music, with its complex rhythms and the Dionysian character of the improvisation, is often taken by Western jazz intellectuals as jazz, though it never diverged very far from its traditions. (Messechina 2006)

Lilov’s description of Yanev’s musical approach is an excellent example of the many fascinations at play even in the milieu of an individual musician. Among those fascinations are: the Apollonian legacy of Orpheus; the attractive difference of “Bulgarian rhythm”; the “Western intellectual” connecting etnodzhaz to jazz orthodoxy through shared improvisational practices; the historical fetishization of the magical qualities of Romani instrumental virtuosity; and the performance of being modern in the context of Balkan subjectivity. Yanev himself uses Orpheus to embody a series of authentic connections and locate himself within a perceived musical tradition. Lilov’s attempts to reinforce this perspective by characterizing the improvisational nature of Yanev’s music as Dionysian, but the effort is far more complex than it first appears. On one hand, the statement further entrenches Yanev’s practice within the context of Orpheus’s history as a marker of both local authenticity and creative inventiveness. At the same time, the Dionysian tag also references the dismembering fury of the Maenads/Baccharites, chopping up and recombining Orpheus in the performance of his symbolic role. This simultaneously marks both the traditional and modern aspects of Yanev’s performing self, actualized tactically and discursively depending on the situation. Lilov, in essence, attempts to write Yanev and his music outside of these alluring mechanisms where they can both — like Barthes’s sound editor — carve up the absent objects of fascination and recombine them into avenues of expression that create webs of interrelation and significance framing the core of an artistic self. The group name Orkestar Orfei is not just an identity, but a technology — an apparatus of dismemberment — through which Yanev can be both “experiment[al] in the framework of traditional idioms” and “never [diverge] very far from its traditions.” Dismemberment and suture become more than just allegorical: they become real, expressive acts that key a powerful form of self-expression and subjective action, drawing upon and critiquing a phantasmagoria of intertwining modernisms and authenticities.

For my last example, I want to further emphasize the essential role of technology and machinery as an apparatus of dismemberment in moments of performance. As Orpheus wielded the technologies of his voice and lyre and the Maenads/Baccharites plug their ears, others use apparatuses of sound reproduction and editing. Equally important is the technology of the performing hand, which uses techniques and mechanisms to break apart and recombine objects as readily as any sequencer or tape deck. Pianist Dimitar Bodurov (b. 1979) employs both with great skill. He belongs to the younger generation of jazz musicians com-
ing of age after the fall of Zhivkov and the Bulgarian Communist Party, having spent most of his career in the Netherlands leading his own piano trio and working on various side projects. His most recent albums with this trio (Stamps from Bulgaria [2008] and Seven Stamps [2013]) show Bodurov sporting a veritable tool kit of dismembering apparatuses. In lieu of breaking down these techniques within the albums themselves, I’ll simply refer to his 2009 appearance on the music program Vrije Geluiden (Free Sounds) on the station Netherland 1, where his musical vision for the trio is reinforced in the discursive and visual realm. After a brief interview with host Hans Flupsen establishing his background and education, they begin to talk about Bodurov’s composition that the trio had just finished, entitled “Dobro” (Good), based on a song from the Strandzha region of Bulgaria, which has a distinct sound that particularly appeals to Bodurov. He uses this as a launch point to elucidate his entire philosophy of engaging with narodna muzika:

[S]tamps from Bulgaria] is about songs and dance from Bulgaria, and I take them apart, assemble them in a new way. So I treat the song, the material, like any other compositional material, which would be a major triad or a rhythmic element…that’s what you do in composition. So, uh…this is my way of creating these songs. I wanted to keep the history of the song, which is fading away. (Dimitar Bodurov 2009)

Bodurov states what amounts to the strongest case for dismembering Orpheus: the preservation of fading songs by taking them apart and reassembling them. Exactly how Bodurov accomplishes this becomes clear during the next part of the interview, when he discusses another composition from Stamps entitled “Doncho.” The song starts with a sample of an ethnographic recording of a women’s village choir played from a laptop sitting on Bodurov’s piano. When asked by Flupsen why he used the recording instead of a live singer, Bodurov admits that “the recording has a special atmosphere already, and the modern Bulgarian folklore singers, they don’t have that quality in their voices anymore, because these are unprofessional voices from the village” (2009).

The performance begins with Bodurov cueing the sample on his laptop. The recording of the choir stands alone for four notes (as an introduction) before the trio enters. What the trio plays upon its entrance amounts to the landscaping of a musical outside: the rhythmic articulation finely mirrors the recording, but the framing range and harmony are carved out of extremes. Bodurov sharply outlines wide intervals on the high and low ends of the piano. Drummer Jens Düeppe devotes his attention primarily to a crash cymbal and the snare drum, creating a resonating, blended racket. Bassist Mihail Ivanov melds into the notes played by Bodurov’s left hand, reinforcing the lower end of the extreme range. This movement is all in contrast to the recording, which draws upon the limited polyphonic range of Rhodope-style singing that has drawn local and global connections to Orpheus himself. The sample runs through five phrases, with Bodurov’s hands moving closer together (and slightly altering the harmony) with each successive phrase. On the recorded version, the song continues with just the trio. For Vrije Geluiden, they stop at the sample’s conclusion. After a moment, Flupsen compliments the song for its wonderful “energy,” a word Bodurov readily accepts. However, he is also quick to comment on the role of the sample itself: “the choir,” Bodurov emphasizes with his hands in front of him outlining the shape of a large object, “gives energy” (2009).

Martin Stokes has noted how collaborations between individuals or groups often become a “space of tension, of competing and antagonistic claims” (2010:32). The long promise of Hegelian dialecticism has been the potential to work through those claims, to create something different and more modern, cleansed of fascination’s precise kind of perverse magic. Bodurov’s performance on Vrije Geluiden shows how a consideration for the mechanisms of fascination problematizes this idea in persistently fascinating ways. For one, Bodurov carries some of the same fascinations that his performance critiques. These fascinations are evident in his nostalgia for the vanishing aesthetic of the Strandzha choir — an attitude eerily reminiscent of Mirjana
Laušević’s concept of “Balkan fascination” (2007). Clearly, the awareness of other fascinations that permeate an object doesn’t absolve one’s own, not even if one’s fascination is channeled through an act of modern musicality like sampling or jazz improvisation. But Bodurov’s fascination isn’t a transgression of narodna muzika that needs forgiveness. Instead, it can be seen as an act of playful, affectionate violence. The sample is torn apart by Bodurov’s computer and musical hands, but is ultimately reconstructed into a new object at the moment of performance. Captured by other machines (sound and television recording), the re-membered object moves and disseminates down the discursive river, until it gains the fascination of others, like myself. From there, it is again dismembered by my own computer and typing hands, until it is captured yet again by someone else, and the process starts over—a process of creating “intermundanes” continuing ad infinitum (Stanyek and Piekut 2010:14).

Fascination, then, is not an end of the performativity of the subject as has typically been held, but a beginning. Central to this notion is that no two forms of dismemberment and suture are alike; just as no two fascinations are the same. Some define an entire career, musical aesthetic, or improvisational philosophy, as with Vapirov’s pan-Slavic desires, or Lilov’s tactical description of Yanev. Others are fleeting, momentary acknowledgments or gestures, as with Bodurov’s performance on Vrije Geluiden. Though these musicians come from different experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, and philosophies, they share an ability to weave through fascinations both distinct and shared through their own artistry. Their actions also reinforce the place of Blanchot’s modern Orpheus, producing an entirely different kind of Orphic performance than, for example, Kimberly Benston attributes to John Coltrane’s late avantgarde performances. “Divorced from the enveloping society,” Benston argues, “[Coltrane] sets out on a fresh journey into the uncharted spaces of the self” (1977:772). Fascination is impossible to divorce from the enveloping social forces that its participants inhabit. Rather, its power lies in the ways it takes us through cultural territory that has been charted before and gives it a different landscape. We are relatively free to dismember that territory in ways we may see fit, so long as there is a willingness to become dismembered at some point ourselves. Orpheus’s death is no longer a dire fate, but an expressive opportunity.

References

8. Laušević coined this term to describe the juxtaposition of antiquity and newness regarding cultural practices from the Balkans, particularly when these practices are engaged with by American fans of Balkan dancing. The juxtaposition is most noticeable, she notes, in the objectification of a mythical past in which folk dances create an ontological bridge to a pristine Balkan village uncorrupted by the mechanizations of modernity. In essence, the fascination with Balkan dancing among American practitioners reveals both subjective and collective desires to capture “the Balkans” as a pristine series of historically static images, sounds, and practices. Sharing these desires creates a sense of intimacy and continuity within the community, yet simultaneously leaves open the possibility of criticism regarding fetishization from outside of the group (Laušević 2007:56–68). Laušević’s concept of “Balkan fascination” has been more recently explored by Ian MacMillen (2015) in the context of the Koprivshtitsa Folk Festival, a popular Bulgarian music and dance celebration that takes place in the mountain village where a famous uprising against the Ottomans took place in 1876.


