

Yeah Yeah Yeahs: a philosophical praxis of nostalgia

HÉCTOR CAVALLARO

Currently works as a PhD researcher/composer in Musicology for the École Doctorale Esthétique, Sciences et Technologies des Arts (Lab. MUSIDANSE) at the Université Paris 8. His academic work deals with aesthetics and philosophy of music subjects, focusing mainly in non-teleological, i.e., non-linear music of the XX century. hectorcavallaro@yahoo.com

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To Adrián Trujillo Giommi, who loved the Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Introduction:

The next pages are narrated by Elizabeth in the fall of 2039. This story is about her. And Mr. Catinella. And the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

Elizabeth (39): When I was invited to write an essay on the subject of *nostalgia* at the request of dear and admired colleagues for this collective book, I decided to try an experiment: instead of theorizing philosophically the notion of nostalgia – from the Greek words *nóstos*, meaning “homecoming” and *álgos*, meaning “pain” – I will rather proceed to “carve” by praxis, and hopefully eventually “sculpt”, the phenomenon of nostalgia itself by submerging into what I consider to be a particularly rich (and nostalgic, for that matter) situation from almost twenty years ago.

The “20-Year rule of nostalgia” states that it takes twenty years for an art object, usually pop music, to re-emerge as a nostalgic phenomenon.¹

When I was enrolled in the Master of Arts in Philosophy program at The New School, back in 2020, I followed the “aesthetics of sounds” seminar. The professor was Mr. Cavallaro Catinella, a long-time Cuban exiled, half-Italian, musicologist. The seminar was known for embarking on strange topics in a peculiar philosophical way. At the time it all seemed rubbish and full of post-Marxist dialectical pretentiousness². Now, almost twenty years later, I rediscover my class-notes and recordings from Catinella’s seminar and cannot help but laugh, fascinated by the abstraction of them:

- “The *zero* years as a category of the experience: notes on the World Trade Center.”

- “The Yeah Yeah Yeahs and tonality as a building in ruins.”

¹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

² I considered myself, and still do, in some sense, a non-dialectical (I was essentially into Queer theory and Deleuze & Guattari stuff and back then there was a stupid “pro” vs. “anti” dialectics environment between philosophy students of my generation).

- "The Yeah Yeah Yeahs against the avant-garde: Noise as emancipation from expression (modernity). Noise *as* expression (postmodernity)."

- "Postmodernity as a Negation of the Negation. On dialectics vs. negative dialectics. Towards a third negation (Yeah Yeah Yeahs)."

That year, like every other year, Catinella's seminar revolved around a theme, which would become both the soundtrack and the object of analysis. The theme was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the New-York indie rock group the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. The scope was basically sound and music history, but it was always mixed with more abstract aesthetics (the philosophy of works of art), Marxist aesthetics, French theory, pop culture, etc. – an eclectic postmodern cocktail, in a good way, or, not in an entirely bad way. And even if the particular choice of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs was never crystal clear – he did address the question in different manners throughout the semester, by saying something like "so why the Yeah Yeah Yeahs? Well, why not?" –, for all I know, the twenty-year distance from their birth did seem to evoke a bigger issue that concerns us here and now: the "20-Year rule of nostalgia", as we may call it. In his *Retromania*, English musicologist Simon Reynolds suggests that it takes twenty years for an art object, usually pop music, to re-emerge as a nostalgic phenomenon. This must be why I'm turning back to my class notes, to grasp something from their essence through the prism of nostalgia and dig, with the inevitable weight of experience, into them, and hopefully portray in real-time the "re-emergence" of the nostalgia phenomenon itself.

In addition, the idea of a "philosophical praxis" has led me to write a rather "experimental essay" in the form of a collage which constantly mixes three textual levels, sort of like "diary entries". Firstly, some of my personal class notes; secondly, a few audio recordings consisting, mainly, but not only, of Catinella speaking; and thirdly, some more explanatory notes written in the present time.

1. The zero years as a category of the experience: notes on the World Trade Center

With every breath I breathe I'm making history³

September 21st, 2039, 09:00

Hard to forget my first class with Catinella. When I entered the classroom, something resembling a poem was already written on the blackboard. Later we would get used to this recurrent practice of Mr. Catinella, which consisted in writing a "Nietzschean" phrase and asking the class whether it belonged to Nietzsche or any given pop-music artist of his choice that day. "Is it Nietzsche or is it Morrissey?" he solemnly asked,

³ Yeah Yeah Yeahs, "Wedding Song," *Mosquito* (Interscope, 2013).

giving us his 'challenging look', expecting someone to raise their hand, as he added "And please tell me why?":

I am the son
And the heir
Of a shyness that is criminally vulgar
I am the son and heir
Of nothing in particular
You shut your mouth
How can you say
I go about things the wrong way?

"I would say...Morrisey?" said a punkish hipster by the first rows. "Ok, you don't look so sure" said Mr. Catinella, as nervous laughs coloured the classroom. "I don't know, I'm guessing it's sort of like a trap-question..., and also it would be cool if it were Morrisey, I guess". I remember a few *Nietzschean* colleagues – or *nietzschesque*, should I say, since most philosophy students are more attracted to Nietzsche's figure than to his texts – tried to justify why the fragment belonged, probably, to *Human all too human*, or to *Beyond Good and Evil*, in that order. Mr Catinella would then play along by complementing their arguments: "The idea of a 'shyness that is criminally vulgar' certainly matches Nietzsche's rapid syllogisms portraying an obsolete morality, typical of the *Beyond Good and Evil* period. Furthermore, the repeated verse 'I am the son and the heir' could very well be taken from one of *Zarathustra's* paragraphs, although not in an aphoristic style." I remember him suggesting that if the "of nothing in particular" part made us think of Nietzsche, then we were reinforcing the "nihilistic" cliché, which "probably originated from The Allies misinterpretation of the Nazi's own misinterpretation of Nietzsche". Very few people laughed, I did. Then, Catinella started to sing: *You shut your mouth, how can you say, nananana...* – kind of mumbling the lyrics as the melody became slightly familiar – *I am human and I need to belong* – some of us began to awkwardly join him almost as in a choir, and without necessarily recognizing the song, singing in unison the last words – *Just like everybody else does!* – The verses belonged to Morrisey, or... actually, to Morrisey's most known band from the 80's, The Smiths, specifically to the song *How Soon Is Now* from their 1984 album 'Hatful of Hollow'. That's how the "aesthetics of sounds" seminar started.

As a key notion for the seminar, Catinella suggested that we think about the early 2000s – or the *zero years* as he called them – as a particular "category of the experience". Inspired by Walter Benjamin's thinking, the category of the experience was associated with big-change moments in history, such as World War I, where big

war machines crushing fragile human bodies renewed the notion of experience itself.⁴ The *zero* years, of course, also happened to give birth to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

I, too, was born then, on the 25th August of the year 2000. The band's debut performance would take place a month later, on the 24th of September.

The *zero* years, and especially 9/11 represented a change of paradigm at several levels, said Catinella. He was a defender of dialectical materialism. In other words, he was philosophically a Marxist. As for me, I preferred Benjamin – the coolest Marxist, not to say the only one, probably by virtue of his pessimism and his melancholy – for his idea of experience is not a fixed value predicated on the capacity of humans to *perceive* the world, but rather a “category” which is just as much of a ‘construction’ of the historical processes as, let's say, culture, architecture, religion or the notion of God.

.09082020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class1.mp3

[...] “experience has fallen”, wrote Walter Benjamin, as he pointed us to the shock that the 1914-1918 War represented Benjamin's notion of the experience is formed by two dialectical things: the technical material means of the time and the human psyche of the time, both modelling each other. Firstly, as a result of the techno-scientific progress, modern war machinery meant not only more destruction, but also, and more precisely, an *incomprehensible* dimension of destruction unknown so far. Secondly, the turning point happens to a generation that one day went to school in horse-drawn streetcars, then, the next day, finds itself in a landscape in which nothing is the same “except the clouds, and, at its center, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body”, as Benjamin put it. So, it's the very notion of the human experience, as a constructed category, that changes through History. This is why I think it's useful to think about the early 2000s, the zero years, as a particular category of the experience defined by the shock of 9/11. On the one hand, you have the unseen terrorist – and terrifying! – acrobacy of planes crashing into the World Trade Center; the symbolic ideological “heart” of American Capitalism – remember that planes, as so many technologies, evolved, at least partly, thanks to techno-scientific progress related to war. On the other hand, you have the images of that scene, broadcasted worldwide in almost every TV, and our traumatic assimilation of them – at least for those of us who were there.

September 21st, 2039, 11:26

At the time I couldn't understand why the category of the experience was supposed to be linked to the dialectical view of History. I've always found the very notion of

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 2.2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 731–36.

Marxist or Hegelian “history” to be problematic. It seems to me that Hegel, thus Marx, thus Benjamin, saw “History” (with a capital “H”) as one complex interdimensional substance intersected by multiple processes and human exchanges in which we ought to dig in order to unveil the truth. Yet, it’s always one truth, since History, for complex and deep as it may be, is always one. The next audio file I had from that day consisted of a recording I made on the streets.

VoiceNote.09082020.crazy_streetpreacherNYC.mp3

...but truth ain’t one thing but a spectrum! Truth ain’t one but a spectrum! Truth ain’t one [...]

September 21st, 2039, 11:39

You could say that post-truth was on the radar those days. Curiously enough, this is the area that Deleuze & Guattari rhizomes (and in parallel, Queer theory) would reinvest in by unrooting the one (the identical, the closed, the norm) and therefore “collapsing” or breaking the “substance” (in Spinoza’s terms) into an infinite variety of factualities, indeed, like a spectrum. I remember reading a lot of Butler and Preciado at the time and seeing the idea of the “category of the experience” as a reductive normative concept. Or maybe I was reluctant to see the zero years as a “category of the experience” because I didn’t experience it myself. The Covid-19 pandemic was the first historical event in my lifetime where I felt like humanity was at a turning-point. The second one would be when SpaceX landed a human crew on Mars, in 2029. Somehow, the idea of a renewable category of the experience, now that I think of it, seems true but also incomplete in its own logic.

In a certain way, I think the “category of the experience” shouldn’t be understood as something that “crystallizes” itself into a fixed substance. Instead, I would propose to think of it as a composed “molecular” substance, defined from the inside by its “particles”, its particularities, which are in constant movement, in constant becoming. In other words, there is no such thing as the experience, but rather multiple lines of singular and sensitive subjectivities headed to infinity. Experience in this sense would be more like a “supernova” composed of individual subjectivities colliding.

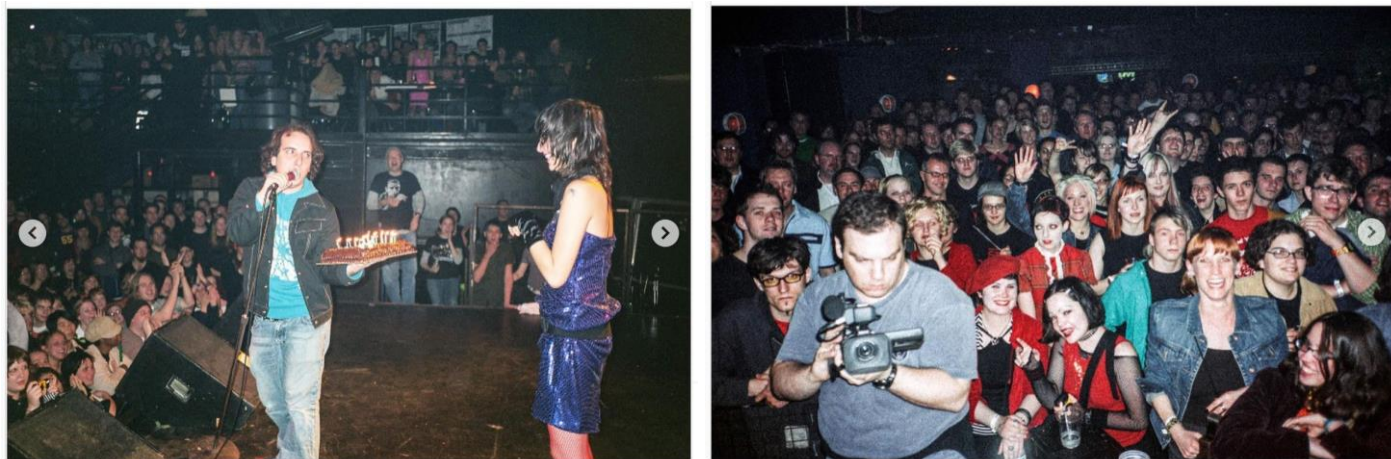


Fig. 1: 20th May, 2020, Instagram post by Karen O with the caption: “In the weeks after 9/11 yeah yeah yeahs hit the stage of clubs all around the city, what came out of us wasn’t just music it was medicine for the grief and fear that blanketed the city, we played like there might not be a tomorrow and it got us through the trauma. [...]”

I would in this sense love to ask Mr. Catinella rhetorically: what if the *zero* years as a renewed “category of the experience” meant rather an heterogenous cataclysm of an almost infinite number of human experiences, changing one at a time, as an atomic-bomb’s inner exponential energy when triggered? What about the horrible sensitive experience of each and every one of those bodies falling? Furthermore, beyond anthropocentrism, what about the renewed category of the experience for each and every window breaking, for each and every piece of concrete vanishing?

In any case, I wonder what the sensitive subjectivity of Catinella towards the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the *zero* years was? Could it be a nostalgic element? Nostalgia: *nóstos*, “homecoming”, and *álgos*, “pain”. The 9/11 events had definitely been painful, but “homecoming”? Where to?

2. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs and tonality as a building in ruins

We’re all on the edge, there’s nothing to fear⁵

October 2nd, 2020

Mr. Catinella is drawing a building. Next to it, he writes the words “tonality”, “crippled” and “heritage”, one on top of the other. One major issue that constantly emerges in his seminar is the role of tonality as a historically constructed syntax, with its codes and complex idiomatic musical principles. These codes have defined several

⁵ Yeah Yeah Yeahs, “Despair,” *Mosquito* (Interscope, 2013)

centuries of western musical praxis. Essentially, the tonal system as a historical syntax can be framed inside what Walter Piston called “the common practice period”, to refer to mostly European music written somewhere inside the grey margins of 1650 to 1900.

Mr. Catinella says that “tonality’s ‘crippled heritage’ found its way into recorded pop music in the 20th and 21st centuries”. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs would offer some revealing examples to address this question.

September 29th 2039, 12:04

Note to self: nostalgia is the time-space fragmented seizure – *la saisie* – of a “crippled heritage”. (*La saisie*, in french, as “to seize”, or “to grasp”).

VoiceNote.10022020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class4.mp3

Tonality as syntax in written music met its decline towards the fin-de-siècle period. The Second School of Vienna, gathered around the figure of Schoenberg in the early 1900s, marked the rupture with idiomatic classical-romantic grammar, thus opening the way for the twelve-note dodecaphony technique and serialism.

September 29th, 2039, 12:08

I might be oversimplifying but what I found to be the most relevant aspect of tonality’s history wasn’t so much its exhaustion as a system in written music but the fact that it would “find refuge” in recorded music, in other words, in pop music.⁶ For this hypothesis, Catinella would associate written classical music with painting, on one side, and on the other side, recorded music (pop music as an artform) with photography.

October 2nd, 2020

The main difference between written music and recorded music (or between painting and photography) is an ontological one, according to Mr. Catinella. Written music, similar to painting, emerges from the ink as an “intellectualized trace”. An ontological aspect of written music is that it relies on a score or sheet the way painting relies on a canvas. An ontological aspect of recorded music is that it “captures” sound frequencies the way photography captures light.

September 29th, 2039, 13:28

But this ontological difference also happens to determine how these different artforms relate to their “material” or “subject matter” – *matériau*, in French. The “material” is this fascinating concept attributable to Theodor W. Adorno who proposed a

⁶ Agnès Gayraud refers to pop music in the broad sense of recorded music, as opposed to written music, in *Dialectique de la pop* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018).

materialist approach to the subject matter in art. Aesthetics does seem to owe something to dialectical materialism, which is the awareness that art was never a merely “subjective” phenomenon that admits infinite interpretations and no single “truth”, but rather an essentially “objective” phenomenon, made by aesthetical matter: a singular pigment, a unique chord. I retained some beautiful definitions of the concept of “material” like the one proposed by French philosopher David Lapoujade in which he insists on the difference (more subtle in French) of the pure “matter” (*matière*) and the “material” (*matériau*): *le matériau, c'est la matière qui devient esprit*; “the material is a matter that becomes spirit”⁷. Additionally, also referring to the spirit, I think of one by Adorno himself where the material is “the sediment of spirit [Geist]”⁸ – the “sediments”, of course, relating to the Marxist materialist view of History as a set of complex processes settling like layers of human experience. In any case, recorded music and photography, as artforms concerned with “capturing” or “freezing” frequencies (be it light or sound) would hold, according to Mr. Catinella, a totally new relationship with its “material”.

VoiceNote.10092020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class5.mp3

Similar to photography, in recorded music, the relationship with the material, in other words, the “access” to the material, takes the form of a “capture” within the layers that compose the history of sound. Thanks to recorded music, our perception of musical history monuments has also been modified. In a way, they’re no longer monuments, since sounds are now “capturable” in miniature and “reproducible”, “sampleable”. This is probably why tonality, the tonal system – historically exhausted in written music since Schoenberg – found a refuge in pop music [...] because there, its existence can manifest itself as the fragments in ruin of these monuments.

September 29th 2039, 14:52

Yeah Yeah Yeahs song (and video) “Despair”, from their 2013 album “Mosquito”, illustrated this idea perfectly (although, Catinella insisted that we were dealing with an “archetype” behaviour, present – if you look for it carefully – in pop music in general). “Despair” begins with Karen O singing a cappella, apparently careless and slightly out of tune. In the video we can see her sort of waking up after a party night at what seems to be a karaoke bar – image montage alternates images of her and fellow band members Brian Chase (drums) and Nick Zinner (guitar), each by themselves in a different lonely frame: on the backseat of a taxi, sitting alone in the metro, etc. The a cappella part ends when the music arises, coinciding with the appearance of the band

⁷ David Lapoujade, *Les existences moindres* (Paris: Minuit, 2017), p. 45.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie de La Nouvelle Musique*, trans. Hans Hildenbrand and Alex Lindenberg (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 45.

at the top of the Empire State Building from where they play until the sun comes up, embraced from the heights by the whole city. Curiously enough, the band that was born in the zero years (defined by the singular “category of the experience” that the 9/11 attacks meant) is at the highest point of the city at that moment⁹.

So, maybe I am forcing a few elements, in the manner that memories fill the gaps of logic, but, according to Mr. Catinella, in a way, Karen O’s fragile and “naked” melody, followed by a particular harmonic design on the guitar playing as the band is being immortalized at the Empire State Building, was a strong metaphor for tonality’s material “status” in the beginning of the 21st century.

VoiceNote.10162020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class6.mp3

Ok now let’s ask ourselves what would be the status of the “material” in recorded music – specifically in 21st century pop music? I think the song “Despair” is a perfect example. Remember our dictum *Tonalität ist tot* [“tonality is dead”]. Well, I’m not sure that tonality is dead, but I am sure that there was a murder attempt, in a sense. But almost at the exact same time in history when Schoenberg decided to destroy tonal syntax in written music – for it was historically necessary to do so; *tout en chérissant l’objet que l’on détruit*, as Boulez would say –, the techno-scientific progress delivered us the capacity to record music the way photography was now able to photograph ancient paintings and architecture. In “Despair”, Karen O sings a very basic, almost childish, arpeggio of a tonic chord followed by a dominant chord. So, you have the structural columns of the tonal system. She sings these chords in a careless yet nostalgic manner, it’s kind of like looking at a postal card. Then the guitar smashes with those two fundamental notes: A and E both on open strings, the root of tonality’s more basic triads. There’s no more brutal and raw way to play the guitar than this (almost as you would expect some human from a future civilization would play an electric guitar when discovering it). The harmonic thirds start to appear, defining the chords into major chords, while the drum hits with strength and a massive tribal rhythm. [...] The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and pop music in general, approaches the “material” as a monument in ruins. For tonality is nothing but a building in ruins [...] [Indistinct noises, somebody interrupts Mr. Catinella]

⁹ As the musical magazine *SPIN* would highlight: “The Empire State Building hasn’t been the tallest building in the world since before Karen O was born. For a brief time, though, from the fall of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, to the rise of One World Trade Center last year, it was again the tallest in New York City. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs became the first act ever to shoot a music video on top of the Empire State Building [...]” Marc Hogan, “Watch Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ Towering ‘Despair’ Video, Shot Atop the Empire State Building,” *SPIN*, June 24, 2013, <https://www.spin.com/2013/06/yeah-yeah-yeahs-despair-mosquito-video-empire-state-building/>.

September 30, 2039, 11:02

If I remember well, somebody interrupted Catinella by sort of pushing the question of the analogy: “sort of like the World Trade Center...?”. Unfortunately, my cell phone didn’t capture the exact answer Catinella gave but I think it was something like “well you know what I am talking about / it’s up to you to grab the metaphors / metaphors are already there...” etc. I do remember, though, Mr. Catinella finishing his analysis of “Despair” by saying that “there might be some hope, though!”. He had stopped talking and turned up the volume of the song that had been played on a loop for a while now. I can almost picture the scene, with all of us softly banging our heads, as if we were agreeing with the final verses:

Some sun has got to rise
My sun is your sun (x3)
Your sun is our sun (x3)
Some sun has got to rise (x2)

September 30, 2039, 11:15

Note to self: Nostalgia is the time-space fragmented seizure – *la saisie* – of a heritage in disintegration.



Fig. 2: New York City’s skyline with and without the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers, photograph: unknown¹⁰.

¹⁰ Tom Brokaw, “Lessons We Must Never Forget,” *Parade*, September 11, 2012, <https://parade.com/49077/tombrokaw/tom-brokaw-lessons-we-must-never-forget/>.

3. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs against the avant-garde: Noise as emancipation from expression (modernity). Noise *as* expression (postmodernity)
Sometimes I think that I'm bigger than the sound¹¹

Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020

Mr. Catinella is wearing an Arthur Russell t-shirt and a "go Bernie" mask. I'm tired of wearing a mask but I'm also getting used to it. There's tension, it's presidential election day. I've seen him at least twice with that t-shirt. He's a hipster in his 40s, the kind that would love to be less straight but cannot fight his heterosexuality. Arthur Russell was gay, Mr. Catinella isn't. They say Trump won't recognize the results in case of losing.

Gérard Grisey's "Périodes" is playing. Another teacher, presumably a law teacher, knocks on the open door and complains about for the loud noises.

VoiceNote.11032020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class8.mp3

[Knock on door]

Listen I don't mind if you're watching a movie, but could you turn it down a little?

Oh, sorry, we'll turn it down.

[Door closes]

Well, that's the effect of Spectral music [laughs]. People think it's from a motion picture. But it's not, these are the most natural noises that you can find within sound itself. Actually, one can argue that, musically, the 20th century is not only a history of sounds, but also a history of noises.

Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020

We've been talking about contemporary classical music, or, more precisely, about the avant-gardes that evolved in the 20th century in the classical written-music world. The idea is to highlight some particular sonic discourses in the Yeah Yeah Yeahs that could be read as a "response" to some aesthetics issues raised by the currents of the avant-garde of written music. Catinella says "response", I guess, as the "response" from one "tribune" to another, for recorded popular music and written music sometimes seem to have crafted two different historical paths.

October 2nd, 2039, 14:43

Personally, I think musicologists are to blame for "drawing the line" between the two.

Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020

¹¹ Yeah Yeah Yeahs, "Cheated Hearts," *Show Your Bones* (Interscope, 2006).

We're listening to Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies*. Two blurry Major 7th chords are floating in the most peculiar way. It's nebulous, like a Monet's painting. We went through Edgar Varèse's works, as well as his ideas, some of which are reflected in his "Liberation of Sound", a sort of manifesto embracing the arrival of "both ugly sounds and beautiful noises", as Mr. Catinella puts it.¹² We talked about Schoenberg & Co.'s first serialism as a "murder attempt" of tonality. We talked about French spectralism, characterized by composers fascinated with the natural "interiority" of sound (its spectrum and its complexity), perceived as a molecule through a microscope, reacting in a curious manner.

October 2nd, 2039, 17:01

In a broad sense, for the general public or non-musicologists, like me, it seems that one of the historical achievements of 20th century contemporary music consisted of enlarging the sound palette from the traditional consonance-dissonance paradigm into an infinity of sound sources and combinations no longer restrained to the tonal system. It is this process of "emancipation", if we may call it so, that opened the door for a traditionally "anti-musical" category in written music: noise.

VoiceNote.11032020.aesthetics_of_sounds_class8.mp3

For modern 1900s music, like Edgar Varèse, noise represents an emancipation – and why not, an "empowerment" – from classical-romantic expressivity and maybe even from expression itself. So, you have the idea of "Noise as an emancipation from expression", as one of Modernity's principles. Postmodernity, though, would propose, on the contrary, the idea of "noise as expression". The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, in the punk tradition, are an example of the latter

October 2nd, 2039, 17:44

Indeed, Yeah Yeah Yeahs' punkish guitar noises and onomatopoeic screams played a role analogous to ornaments in baroque music. The perfect example for this is the song Pin, with its savage guitar riff, charged plenty with left and right-hand noises, pedal noises, dirty harmonic noises, etc. The whole combined with Karen O's signature vocals, which go from whispered and sweet subtle noises to the wild and almost tribal screams and non-words, as in that powerful repetitive chorus:

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam
Duhduh, duhduh, duhduh, duhduh (x2)

¹² Edgard Varèse and Chou Wen-chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966): 11-19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/832385>.

Although Catinella didn't mention it, there is another Yeah Yeah Yeahs' "response" to the avant-garde that is more striking to me, now that I am going through their songs again. Since I'm not a musicologist, I probably gravitate more easily towards words and lyrics to find aesthetical meaning. I'm thinking of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs lyrics to the song *Cheated Hearts* from their 2006 album *Show Your Bones*. The conflict has to do with the "naturalist" regard advocated by French spectralism. It seems to me that French spectral composers proposed thinking of sound as a natural self-sufficient entity, since everything is already deposited in the interior of sound: harmonic spectrum, colour, time, etc. This nourishes a common attitude in modern art capable of deriving into a fetichism of nature; that the fact that an art-object is based on "natural" principles would be enough to somehow legitimize it. In this paradigm, not only the (very complex) question of where we draw the fine line between nature and human nature is avoided, but it is also, at the same time, neutralized. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs' "response" to this is in "Cheated Hearts" as it goes - apparently irrationally - "Sometimes, I think that I'm bigger than the sound / Well, I think that I'm bigger than the sound". And in those simple verses from 2006 I find a deeply humanistic answer to this question. The self-awareness of our anthropocentric prison is the first key to opening its gates.

4. Epilogue

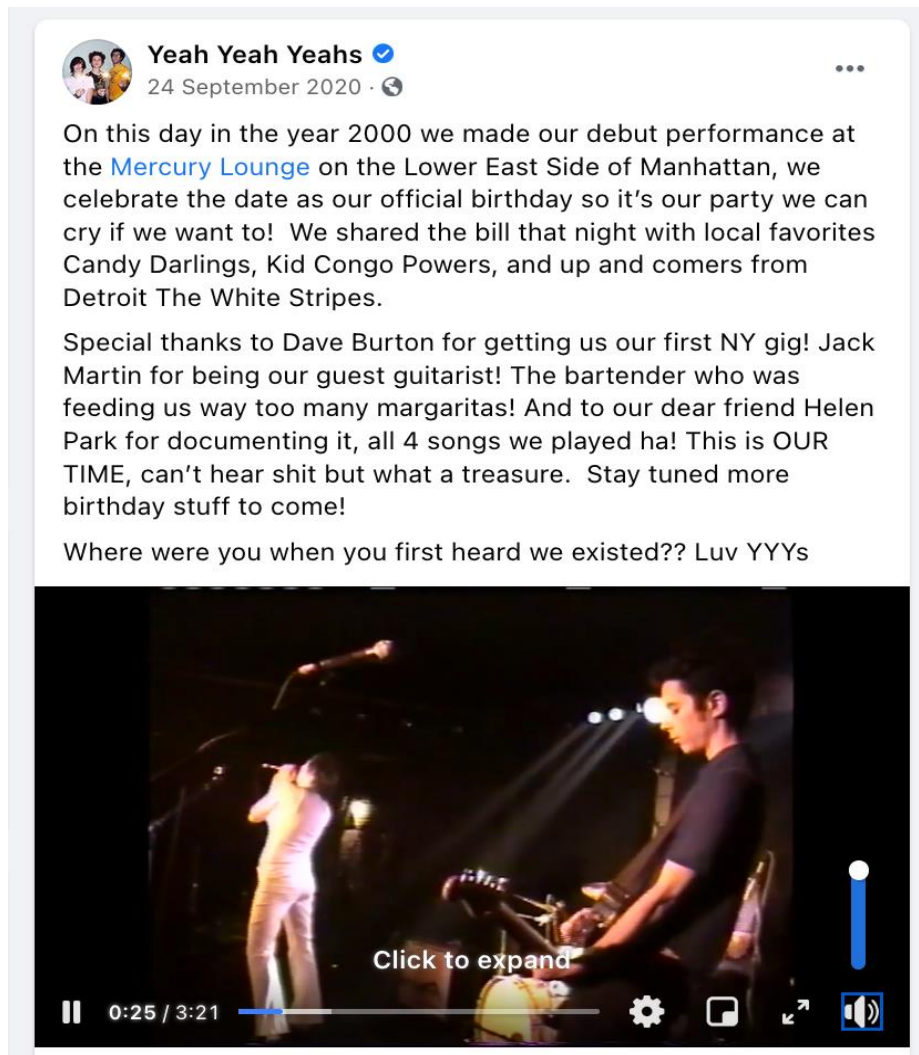


Fig. 3: post on Facebook on the 24th September, 2020 by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

It's our time, sweet babe
To break on through
It's the year to be hated
So glad that we made it¹³

October 10th, 2039, 10:04

It's been almost twenty years since the "aesthetics of sounds" seminar that celebrated the twenty-year nostalgic gap of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' debut. A lot has happened since. I pursued a career in philosophy, my dissertation became my first book

¹³Yeah Yeah Yeahs, "Our Time, *Yeah Yeah Yeahs* (Shifty, 2001).

(*Ontology of the bodies: Deleuze, Butler, Zizek*) I ended up working as a philosopher-researcher, proving my 10-year-old self wrong for believing that a philosopher was essentially a Greek-speaking white straight male with a beard. Mr. Catinella continued his intellectual and academic endeavours as the postmodern Italo-Cuban pop-philosopher that he is, until the internet blackout of 2031¹⁴, when he began to be associated with the “Two Degrees” group¹⁵, hence moving away from university and the public sphere altogether. As I was doing research for this experimental essay, I found an old interview that he gave shortly after our seminar, in 2023. It was part of a special issue of the magazine *Volume!*, dedicated to the American ambient-music composer, William Basinski. The French pop-music magazine featured Catinella with a rather intimate and yet sociological testimony entitled “Musical memories from 9/11”. Basinski’s cult piece, *The Disintegration Loops*, was at the core of several of the other essays, and no wonder: To think of a piece of music resulting from the reproduction of these beautiful melodic-harmonic tape loops disintegrating due to the dust in the tape players... and its emotional impact, attached to the fact that it was created during the hours of the September 11th, 2001, attacks, as the composer recalls:

...by the time I got up, it had already started, and we watched the whole thing happen in stunned disbelief and then went through what everybody in New York went through. We all collapsed in our own way and disintegrated. ... We listened to the music in our stunned disbelief that afternoon outside the windows, sitting on the roof, looking at the smoke... and I recorded a video of the smoke at dusk. The next morning, I put it with “Disintegration Loops 1.1” and I thought ‘Oh my God, this has to be an elegy!’¹⁶

In his “Musical memories from 9/11”, Catinella takes Basinski’s experience and extends it to his own, as a young immigrant going to the underground concerts of the time, in New York. And there I found what seems to be the testimony of Catinella’s sensitive subjective experience that, next to Basinski’s (and an ocean of some other

¹⁴ For at least seventeen days in a row (and extending to two or three months in some regions), starting on February 28th of 2031, the entire world met a total internet blackout. The multiple crisis that this event detonated was rapidly (and tendentiously) baptized by the media as the “Digital Depression”.

¹⁵ The “Two Degrees” is a group of activists and intellectuals sympathizing with post-capitalism and post-ecology. They advocate for an accelerationist project “by which Capitalism would go beyond itself by its own means”. Among many questionable ideas, they defend that humanity will find a new concept of techno-ecological stability even (or precisely when) global warming will cause the inevitable gain of two degrees Celsius of the Earth’s temperature.

¹⁶ Pascal Savy, “Memories Are Loops: A Conversation with William Basinski,” *Fluid Radio*, May 23, 2013, World, <https://www.fluid-radio.co.uk/2013/05/memories-are-loops-a-conversation-with-william-basinski/>.

infinite experiences), would collide and compose the “supernova” that is the particular “category of the experience” of the *zero* years:

Volume!Agust2023_Catinella_Interview.mp3

I had just arrived in New York and the underground scene was, at least to me, completely mind-blowing. Everyone around me at the time referred to it as a sort of a “renaissance” period of the art-punk of the 70s (with Lou Reed, Nico, and the Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, La Monte Young...) I didn’t get that “renaissance” feeling for it was a complete “naissance” to me. On September 24th, 2000, I was working as a replacement bartender at an underground venue at the Mercury Lounge in Lower East Manhattan in which The White Stripes, the Candy Darlings and Kid Congo Powers were playing; it was also the debut performance of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Before the YYYs got on stage, I was serving a few margaritas to Karen O. We chatted, she mocked my accent, and I remember asking her: “how can I sing along with you when you’re on stage if I don’t know any of your lyrics?” Her answer was: “there’s an easy one, it’s called ‘Our Time’, so you just sing ‘it’s our time, our time, our time’ a bunch of times!”. When they played it, I remember thinking it sounded like a punk version of Velvet Underground’s famous “Sunday Morning”, from 1967, by using the same I-IV chord progression – I came from the Italian conservatory. “Sunday Morning” was the kind of song my Cuban parents listened to when they left Cuba, in the 60s. I felt like I was witnessing a nostalgic resignification of Nico and the Velvets in Karen O’s voice and the YYYs style. Of course, I sang the chorus along with Karen, from the bar: “It’s our time, our time, our time...”. I was the only one who knew the lyrics. Next summer their first LP was out. The song “Our Time” was in it: I heard it repeatedly for months. It was the album I was listening to when the 9/11 attacks happened.

October 10th, 2039, 12:30

To my surprise, this seemed actually to be Catinella’s subjective answer to the question “so why the Yeah Yeah Yeahs?”. One of the multiple lines of singular and sensitive subjectivity leaning to infinity and composing the heterogeneous substance of the *zero* years as a category of the experience. In his particular case, I imagine this infinite sensitive line as being composed by the unique experience he had with the song “Our Time” at the debut performance of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, but also by his Cuban parents listening to the Velvet Underground when exiled from Cuba, and who knows, maybe his Italian grandfather humbling to Puccini’s “O mio babbino caro” when leaving Italy for Cuba during WW2, and so on. The objective answer, though, was somehow suggested in his “why not?”. And it has to do with the Adornian view

of works of arts that influenced Catinella deeply, radically, I'd dare to say. For Adorno, a materialist aesthetic must interpret artwork "as an immanent, crystallized process at a standstill"¹⁷, in other words as an autonomous self-sufficient object.

This is, I think, the most global lesson Catinella was transmitting to us: that be it the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Basinski or Michael Mulhern's paintings from those years¹⁸, or even Picasso's *Guernica*, Beethoven's 7th or Caravaggio's *Ecce Homo*; artworks embody the immanence of their exterior. So, when Catinella's answers "why not?" to the question of "why the Yeah Yeah Yeahs?" what he's saying is that he could have taken any other phenomenon or aesthetic "nucleus" in order to excavate Nietzsche, the World Trade Center, Fukuyama's *The End of History* as well as the *Death of Art*. For everything is contained within the artwork's material, or, as Adorno would say about music, that "each chord bears in itself the whole, indeed the whole of history."¹⁹

Nostalgia could well be seen as a mix of both subjectivity and objectivity, not as a synthesis, but rather as a "pixelated" image of a far-away constellation containing elements of both of them colliding. Nostalgia is the nebulous experience of receiving with delay the traces of that collision. Once it arrives to us, it crystallizes into sense, delimiting itself, taking a solid form that makes its meaning clearer. At that moment we introduce it as a brick in the wall of historical processes, where it completes its sense. Nostalgia: *nóstos* and *álgos*. Subjective is the "pain", *álgos*, as a singular sensitive experience. Objective is the "homecoming", *nóstos*, as the "returning" to the immanent concrete specificity of materials. Nostalgia is "to realize", as if one could objectively *realize* the back and forth traveling from that far-away constellation to ours, as in a tunnel. Nostalgia is the tunnel itself.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁸ "Ash Road 14-45th, 2002-2003, by Michael Mulhern, is one of two paintings started before the attack, and altered after he was affected by the dust and smoke that filled his apartment, incorporating ash from the site. Mulhern died in 2012." from "Artistic Responses to the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks - in Pictures," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/gallery/2016/sep/02/september-11-art-photos>.

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 33.

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