

# IDEOLOGIES OF THE MUSICAL META-FACE: FROM THOMAS MANN TO HATSUNE MIKU TOWARD A POST-COMPUTATIONAL AMAZEMENT<sup>i</sup>

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**Abstract:** The paper uses the case of imaginary and virtual musicians to explore the interrelations between sound, music, body, face – or the absence of these elements – and narrative in a semiotic perspective. It proposes a typology of non-existing musicians, delves deeply into the case of the Japanese Vocaloid/teen idol Hatsune Miku, and speculates on a machinic art – including music – that may transcend human comprehension, created for and by machines. «Post-computational amazement» refers to the dissolution of the relationship between creator, performer and audience, envisioning a scenario in which machines are not employed for vicarious work, whether prosaic or aesthetic.

**Keywords:** AI-Generated Music, Post-Computational Amazement, Semiotics, Virtual Musicians.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: MUSICAL FAUSTS AND BEYOND-MUSIC

There *are* musicians who *do not exist*. As Borges might have said (if instead of ending up as the librarian, he had become the disc jockey of Babel): it suffices that a music be possible for it to exist<sup>ii</sup>. If it is possible, if it is potential, we can think of it as a melody in our minds that is already here, even if not actualized: but we can still feel as if we hear it. There *are* musicians who *do not exist*, not because their bodies (or their scores or records) exist, but because their stories exist. They exist as stories. Like Adrian Leverkühn, the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, an avant-garde composer (and fictionalized rendition of Arnold Schönberg, the inventor of twelve-tone music), who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for musical genius. We will never hear his compositions, and yet we can still feel them (thanks in part to the intervention of Adorno, who assisted Mann in the musical ekphrasis)<sup>iii</sup>.

The story of imaginary, fantastic and virtual musicians is intriguing because, in the end, it is utterly mundane. And precisely for this [end of page 383] reason, it clearly and powerfully reveals some deep mechanisms that inform our need for music. And for something I would tentatively call «beyond-music». This story tells us, in essence, what we mean by music. Even when we don't yet know it. Or when we can never fully know it.

## 2. WHICH MUSICIANS WHO DO NOT EXIST, EXIST?

They are imaginary and fantastic, like myths – musicians who have written those pieces that come to us anonymously through tradition or accident. We do not know them, they are nameless, faceless. Countless (how many people have written this traditional piece?). Timeless. These musicians cease to be musicians and become – or remain – mere stories. We still strive to imagine them. Because a musician is, after all, a story of sounds adorned with a body, along with everything that emanates from that body.

There are musicians who existed, and we continue to keep them alive even when they no longer exist. Our need for their body, for their face, has driven us to literally resurrect them as ghosts, apparitions, projections – counterpoints to the acousmatic<sup>iv</sup>. We made them interact with new performances by living musicians (who could just as easily be replaced by old recordings). It is not enough for us to listen to their records (which we know by heart), nor is it enough to rewatch their performances (which we could mimic and recreate on stage step by step). We want to re-present them before our eyes<sup>v</sup>.

This has happened with Tupac Shakur, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Frank Zappa. But also with Mina: who is not passed, rather, gone away, vanished from the stage, and yet she continues to perform, as in 2018 at the Sanremo Festival, only as an image of herself<sup>vi</sup>.

A musician can give us the mask they wear as their face. This is the case with Daft Punk or the rapper MF Doom. Or they can give us their face as a mask. Seemingly direct, yet impenetrable. Pretending to grant us access to their personal world by showing themselves uncovered, but without actually revealing anything more. Some musicians exist but do not exist: those who show us their face without us truly knowing them. Think of the mystery surrounding Robert Johnson, Buddy Bolden, Sun Ra, Buckethead, Jandek, or Aphex Twin.

There are musicians who do not exist because they are others: heteronyms. Like Blind Joe Death (alias John Fahey), Blind Boy Grunt [end of page 384] (Bob Dylan), Penguin Cafe Orchestra (Simon Jeffes), Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (David Bowie), The Dukes of Stratosphear (XTC), Marvin Pontiac (John Lurie), The Passengers (U2 with Brian Eno), Porcupine Tree (Steven Wilson), or Psychedelic Cornflakes (Edgar Neubauer). There are real bands that are fake: parody or spoof bands like The Rutles and Spinal Tap. There are what English speakers call virtual bands: non-holographic holograms. From the forerunners Alvin and the Chipmunks to Damon Albarn's Gorillaz<sup>vii</sup>.

And then, in this same hall of mirrors, we find the German band Kraftwerk, the most important electronic group of all time, who, in the early 1980s, played live without actually being on stage during their manifesto song *Die Roboter/The Robots* («Wir sind die Roboter/We are the robots»): they left the stage to mannequins that were their doppelgängers while Ralf, Florian, Karl and Wolfgang remained behind the scenes, playing.

If music exists simply by being thought of, why do we need to coat it in another material, to embody it, to reify it in a body that we know is ultimately made of words? We want not the music itself to be embodied, but the story that encompasses it. We need a face to attach to a more or less human machine that produces music. The sound's synesthetic richness, capable of evoking other sensory dimensions with surgical precision, is not enough. We need more than the sound itself; we demand that it bridge the composer, the performer and us, the listeners. We want to touch the person behind the persona, behind the musician.

Stories are powerful, even more so than what might have been conceived by those who deeply studied the principle animating them all – narrativity – whether literary theorists, narratologists or semioticians. Stories shape life; they are already a form of life: a semiotic device rooted in the body, originating from it and returning to it, coherently progressing from deep values and infusing meaning as it emerges from the most general and abstract structures to the most superficial and minute aspects of a text. The MTV show *Catfish* has shown us very clearly how some people, for years, live a genuine love story with someone they have never met in person and often have not even seen on video. These individuals bypass concepts such as symbolic efficacy (Lévi-Strauss) and linguistic performativity (Austin), and they do not so much «love the other person», but rather love *their story* – the story that binds them and casts them as protagonists together (Soro 2021). [end of page 385]

### 3. THE FIRST SOUND OF THE FUTURE

Hatsune Miku is the most famous – how should we define her? – fictional, imaginary, virtual, digital singer. In fact, as musicologist Nicholas Cook has said, «perhaps the definitive icon of music in digital culture» (Cook 2019, 12). She is not merely a virtual artist; she is a virtual idol. Her numbers are staggering. Millions of everything. Even in her name, there is a boundless forward leap that wants to be an *omen*: «the first [初, *hatsu*] sound [音, *ne*] of the future [ミク, *miku*]». Yet we know well how names, even neologisms, often hide behind their hunger for the future an actual scarcity of it. Hatsune is a cultural phenomenon of immense scope, but she is more interesting for the social dynamics at the

heart of which she stands and radiates than for her musical, sonic or even technological aspects (Yamada 2017, Zaborowski, Conner 2016, Rambarran 2021).

What is Hatsune when we look at her? She is a drawing, a cartoon and, during her concerts (Hatsune doesn't exist in the same way Michael Jackson existed, but she performs concerts like him), she is a hologram of a slender, attractive teenage girl with turquoise hair parted in the middle and two long side braids. With a Japanese school uniform, a very short skirt and an extremely long tie to match. Another Sailor Moon.

What is Hatsune when we hear her? She is the voice actress (much more than simply a dubber) Saki Fujita, born in 1984, whose voice was finely sampled and forms her molecular palette of sounds. Hatsune is, in fact, a vocaloid: a software that can transform any melodic input into song, be it a digitized score or a MIDI line. And it manages both the melody and its combination with verbal text, the words of a song. Hatsune was created in 2007 by the company Crypton Future Media, using proprietary Yamaha technology that has since been modified and updated multiple times. These are the years of intense technical and semiotic work on the voice: the years of juke/footwork music (treating the voice like Alvin and the Chipmunks), Burial (neutralizing any possible gender assignment by slowing and altering the voice), James Blake (inserting voice where it was absent in instrumental electronica). These are the years of autotune and viral Songify parodies.

So, what is Hatsune in simple terms? A deluxe karaoke machine. Usually, in karaoke, fans sing the songs of artists. Here, the artist sings [end of page 386] the songs of fans, written by fans, at the concerts these fans flock to. Hatsune has over a hundred thousand songs, because over a hundred thousand songs have been written using her, have been written in her (in that «language» that she is, in the same sense when we say a program is «written in C++»). This marks an unprecedented reversal of music production logic. And it surpasses even the prosumer model predicted by Alvin Toffler<sup>viii</sup>, where the consumer is also the producer.

Hatsune Miku's music is machine-made music. But does it talk to us about the machine, tell us its story, put it into sound? Is it, in short, the music we would expect from a machine? Is it perhaps a meta-music? «Meta-» as in the «meta-» of the science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* (1992) by Neal Stephenson, which foresaw Second Life by over ten years? «Meta-» like the «verse» Mark Zuckerberg, reviving that Metaverse and the now outdated idea of Second Life (and Fortnite), relaunched in 2021 as the utopia – again, Borgesian – of creating a 1:1 map of the empire?<sup>ix</sup>

Hatsune is a program, a procedure, an algorithm. Her appearance, her figure, is an external skin, an organ without a body, as Slavoj Žižek might say (reversing Deleuze). Jean Baudrillard would perhaps have read her as the result of a «precession of the simulacrum», a reversal of the symbolic process: saturated with representations and meanings endlessly echoed, we have directly created an empty idol<sup>x</sup>. An empty teen idol. Giorgio Agamben might see Hatsune as yet another iteration of Pulcinella's mask. After all, her secret hides nothing (Agamben 2015). She is a mask with nothing – no face – underneath. Hatsune's face is a skeuomorphism, a device that, having lost its strictly functional purpose (Hatsune would still «function» without a body and therefore without a face), retains an aesthetic and semiotic one: it is much easier for us to imagine a body that sings, rather than a machine. Hatsune, like the virtual influencers (now historical figures such as Imma, Japanese, «born» in 2018, and Rozy, Korean, «born» in 2020) (Miyake 2024), is something we would define as a form of quasi-life, a purely narrative and semiotic entity, devoid of its own intentionality, but endowed with agency: her existence and textual production have real effects.

Hatsune interprets us. Her music is not hers; it is ours. She is literally an instrument. She acts as our spokesperson. A voice that is a sequence of 0s and 1s, but wants to sound human. Like Saki Fujita's. As in certain works by Luciano Berio that play at disguising the [end of page 387] machine as body and the voice as electronics<sup>xi</sup>. So perhaps behind Hatsune's mask – the mask that Hatsune is – there is not just one face. But a mask of faces, a plurality of faces. Blurred, seen from afar. *Bokeh*. If Hatsune is other than us, an impersonal being, as Claudio Paolucci (2020) might say, this is not because she is coldly algorithmic, but rather because she is collectively human, made of a mixed, molecular, liquid humanity.

#### 4. MUSIC FROM THE MACHINE

It is often a matter of inquiry, even in strictly legal contexts, who or what should bear responsibility for works or events produced by machines. The question is almost always posed incorrectly, as machines have almost always been used as substitutes or assistants, in a servile or ancillary capacity. Like beasts of burden, slaves, surrogates for human labor. Instruments, musical and otherwise.

The portrait of Edmond de Belamy, famous for being the first artwork created by artificial intelligence (a GAN programmed by the Obvious collective) to be auctioned by Christie's (in 2018, for over four hundred thousand dollars), is just a poor imitation of Francis Bacon. This painting did not tear open the spaces that Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases did. It did not show us the shape of things in their making, as Paul Cézanne's works did. Belamy interests us because it is a painting that was not painted by a human being. But the true *acheiropoieton* – «not made by human hands» (as certain Orthodox icons or the Shroud of Turin, for believers, or the hauntological «atomic photographs» left by the victims of the Hiroshima bomb on the pavement)<sup>xii</sup> – should perhaps not even be clear to us what it represents. Nor, strictly speaking, that it is a painting. The painting auctioned for hundreds of thousands of dollars is a poor copy. And what was supposed to be Zuckerberg's fantastical virtual world is a kitsch-o-rama full of old pieces of the future that once was<sup>xiii</sup>.

A music that we could imagine as belonging to the machine – we humans who will never truly understand it (since it is impossible for us to comprehend, as philosopher Thomas Nagel would say, what it is like to be a machine)<sup>xiv</sup> – is music that works at the extreme opposite of the musical continuum from what is «familiar» and «natural» for us to hear. The earliest techno music had that still transhuman momentum [end of page 388] of integrating man and machine. Music like that of the English duo Autechre seems to be conceived for a world that is no longer human, a post-human world inhabited – proceeding from the origins to the present time of their discography, looking at the covers, the graphics, the titles, thinking about the compositional processes, the timbral results – by microorganisms, bases and acids, mineral concretions, inorganic presences, then geometric, algorithmic ones. It is a paradox, certainly deliberate, but one that cannot be ignored, that music made by two former «b-boyz» is more non-human than that produced by artificial intelligences, whose main purpose was to mimic the style of the Beatles (Sony's FlowMachine in 2016) or a classical composer (Google's Bach AI in 2019).

Music truly made by machines, for machines, something machines produce as their own music, is unlikely to be such for us: it could be music-that-go-beyond the audible spectrum (the ultra and infrasounds) (Goodman 2009, Trippett 2018), it could be music that completely abdicates from presenting itself as sound and instead reveals itself, pours into another material in a process of encoding and decoding that makes crystal clear the difference between deep structures and forms and their superficial manifestations: the same binary information can be encoded as a sound wave or as an alphanumeric and graphical sequence. Anyone who remembers what it meant to fiddle with early home music production programs will recall what it was like to «hack» a Microsoft Word document and listen to its noise version in a .wav or .mp3 file.

The idea that a machine might produce music that is not for us (even though we programmed and trained it at some point in time), but for itself, for them (the machines), is the idea of singularity: that from an artificial intelligence, what we call consciousness might eventually arise. The utopia that «words may become flesh», as Florian Cramer might say (2005). The Portuguese musician Rui Penha and designer Miguel Carvalhais tackle the boundary hypothesis of singularity – though they never use this word – by proposing the label «machinic art», an art that is truly, finally of the machine.

The problem is not whether machines will or will not develop a sense of self that leads to an eagerness to create art. The problem is that if – or when – they do, they will have such a different *Umwelt* that we will be completely unable to relate to it from our own subjective, embodied perspective. Machinic art will always lie beyond our ability to understand it [end of page 389]

because the boundaries of our comprehension – in art, as in life – are those of the human experience (Penha, Carvalhais 2019).

## 5. CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE IDEOLOGY OF THE FACE

To understand this scenario, to conceive of a HAL9000 that doesn't kill but holds in the hand it does not possess a palette and a brush, we must force ourselves to move beyond the idea of subject and identity that are assured to us by the face and by what is embodied in the face – something we seek so obsessively, especially when this face is absent. And we must seek a language that follows other rules. As it is told in *Arrival* (the 1998 short story by Ted Chiang and the 2016 film by Denis Villeneuve), where the alien is not anthropomorphized as in classic science fiction (it is a tentacled alien, the kind Donna Haraway would like)<sup>xv</sup>, the language of the creatures follows logics so different from ours that it transforms our reality, overturning its logical and ontological structure.

We must strive to escape from a conception of the mask – especially the empty one – as deception, just as we must strive to escape from the logic of the virtual as a duplicate (even if enhanced), an alternative simulation, at most an integration, extension or prosthesis. The machine must no longer surprise us only quantitatively with its computing, management or operational power, because it manages to do what we cannot; it must surprise us qualitatively because it appropriates an *Umwelt* that is uniquely its own and gives us an intuition of it, even though it does not grant us full access to it<sup>xvi</sup>. The machine must not serve as a surrogate for our impossible work and accomplish things no assembly of humans could ever achieve in eons, but it must leave us speechless because it makes it impossible for us to understand what it has produced. A post-computational amazement: the computed (machinic) that is incomputable (undecodable).

We are waiting, then, to see a face and hear a music that we will finally be unable to recognize. And perhaps not even to see or hear. We are waiting to hear a face and see a music. To listen to a string of letters and see a string of notes. Twenty years ago, David Cronenberg, the director and prophet of «the new flesh», imagined a beauty contest for the internal organs of the human body, turning our standards inside [end of page 390] out. Today, we use the most advanced artificial intelligences to create beautiful but utterly banal, plausibly top models (Bovell 2020).

We like to think that Hatsune Miku's «first sound of the future» is the last face of the past: a face that speaks to us from the past of the past. So we return to Adrian Leverkühn, a creative golem and creator, animated by a breath that is not sterilely sacred but fruitfully sacrilegious, who, by denying us his face, does not let us hear his music, but still makes us feel it.

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## ENDNOTES

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2. The reference is to the story *The Library of Babel*, published in the collection *The Garden of Forking Paths*, 1941.
3. The philosopher, sociologist and musicologist Adorno helped Mann in the conception and description of Leverkühn's compositions. Mann began writing the novel in 1943 and published it in 1947.

4. Acousma literally means «auditory hallucination». It refers to the Pythagorean practice of speaking behind a screen without being seen, and it was employed to describe the experience of listening to *musique concrète* – music made of noises, played through the speakers and conceived for pure listening, detached from its source and from any idea of live performance – by Jérôme Peignot and Pierre Schaeffer between the 1940s and the 1960s.
5. I allude here to Husserl's re-presentification (*Vergegenwärtigung*).
6. For a semiotic analysis, see Spaziante (2016).
7. See *Virtual Band*, in «Wikipedia», [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual\\_band](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_band) (entry created in 2011).
8. In the 1980 book *The Third Wave*.
9. The reference is to the story *On Exactitude in Science* from the collection *A Universal History of Infamy*, first published in 1935.
10. The reference is to *Simulacres et simulation*, from 1981.
11. For example, *Thema* (a 1958 collaboration with Umberto Eco, dedicated to Joyce's *Ulysses*) and *Visage* (1961). [end of page 391]
12. Derrida coined the French neologism *hantologie* in *Spectres de Marx*, 1993, as a wordplay alluding to a phantom ontology, the past that continues to haunt the present.
13. See Gat (2021). The idea of referencing a conception of the future elaborated in a past era was dubbed «retrofuturism» by artist and curator Lloyd Dunn in 1983.
14. Nagel wondered «what is it like to be a bat?» in a famous article of the same title published in 1974.
15. The reference is to Donna Haraway's 2016 *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.
16. The concept of *Umwelt* («environment», «world») was proposed by biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll in the early 20th century, laying one of the foundational pillars of theoretical biology and biosemiotics.

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