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In love: performances of the (post) political

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Abstract. *Following a brief questioning of the notion of ‘context’ vis-à-vis ‘ambiance’ as an analytical category which has so far attracted limited attention in music scholarship, the paper explores the ambiances of love in popular song as spheres of affective subjectification and embodied knowledge. It focuses on the exploration of the political concept of love in the work of the singer-poet-musician Yiannis Angelakas, one of the most prominent figures of popular music in Greece. Angelakas’ politics of love, are interpreted here in the light of recent philosophical thinking on love as a political concept, as it has been addressed in the writings of Alain Badiou, Roland Barthes, Michael Hardt and Laurent Berlant. In the sonic-lyrical world of two of his most popular songs, ‘Akouo tin Agapi’ (‘I Listen to Love’) and ‘Giorti’ (‘The Fest’), the sentimental subject risks entering a regime of relationality, which becomes an ontologically constitutive process providing the means for collective transformation. Love thus materialises the pending desire of the ever dispossessed lover for radical transformation, even if loss is a constitutive part of this process.*

Keywords: *music, love, relationality, politics, neoliberalism*

Introduction: Music, context, ambiance

Music scholarship have so far exhibited a rather limited interest in employing the notion of ‘ambiance’, despite the close relationship between sound and ambiance, as it has been highlighted, for instance, by Thibeaud (2011). Ethnomusicology, a field which pioneered the study of music as a cultural phenomenon, has traditionally been attached to the notion of ‘context’ (borrowed from anthropological theory via linguistics) that has been imagined as the social, historical, political site where music happens. Music is thus understood to be the text that is materialised ‘in context’ that is conventionally interpreted as the framework defining the production of its meanings, modes of subjectification and the poetics of its experience and performativities. In the present paper ‘ambiance’ is used as an analytical category that could perhaps suggest a reconsideration of the culturalist determinations and confinements of the notion of ‘context’. As a notion that gives primacy to the multisensory emergence of time and space, to the relationality and contingency of subjective aesthetic experience, ‘musical ambiance’ invites us to think of musical performances as spatio-temporal intersections of bodies, stories, practices and imaginational probing the representational objectifications of the ‘context’. Following Thibeaud, ‘if sound and ambiance are so closely related, it is because they both question the idea of a clear distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, the

subject and the object, the inside and the outside, the individual and the world' (ibid.). On this basis, the present paper explores the ambiances of love becoming in the performances of the Greek popular musician-poet-singer, Yiannis Angelakas, as spheres of affective subjectification and embodied knowledge within the politics of love. As Michael Hardt recently stressed, love is 'always a risk in which we abandon some of our attachments to this world in the hope of creating another, better one. I consider these qualities the primarily pillars of a research agenda for discovering today a political concept of love' (Hardt, 2011: 678).

Listening to love

So, why love? Why love matters? Are love songs only about romantic feelings, or could we perhaps reconsider them as ambiances of subjective transformation? In what ways could the recent philosophical explorations of the political concept of love inspire interpretations of the experience of love in popular music? Questions as such have driven my interest in exploring the topic of love in Yiannis Angelakas popular songs, which is part of a research project in which I have been involved since 2014. For those who are not familiar, he is one of the most popular figures in Greek music scene, a singer-poet-composer, who became memorable as the front-man of the by now legendary punk-rock group 'Trypes', one of the most influential groups in Greece throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s, following the breaking up of the group, Angelakas revised the punk-rock genre and has been experimenting with various cross-genre projects having collaborated with musicians coming from diverse scenes, such as the art-song, electronica, rebetiko, experimental, dub, Cretan traditional, funk, among others.

In 1996 'Trypes' recorded the song 'Akouo tin Agapi' ('I Listen to Love') which was included in the album *Kefali Yemato Hrysafi* ('Head Full of Gold', Virgin, 1996) and gained a viral popularity ever since.¹⁴ Yiannis Angelakas still performs the song in his concerts throughout Greece often at the audience's request. 'I Listen to Love' transcended any perceived periodisation of popular music's eras - the kind of genealogies often organised in decades known as the 1980s, the 1990s, and so on. It moved beyond the disciplinary taxonomies of popular music historiography, defying the boundaries of time, constantly creating its own time, while gaining a translatability within diverse historical moments and performative contexts. The song has the form of a poem recitation orchestrated with punk-rock electrifying guitars, stormy drum beats and nervous bass lines, which form the aesthetic regime where the reciting voice is becoming. It is the delirious voice of the lover who is listening to the body of the beloved other. He has access to the body's ambiance, because he is in love. The lyrics narrate the experience of listening to the other body as a practice of love:

Ακούω την Αγάπη

Ακούω τις θάλασσες και τα ποτάμια σου
ακούω το γέλιο σου ακούω το κλάμα σου
τις μελωδίες που γεννιούνται στα σπλάχνα σου

1. The song's video clip is available at <https://vimeo.com/23038121>.

τις πολιτείες και τους ανθρώπους
που ταξιδεύουν κάτω απ' το δέρμα σου
ακούω την αλήθεια σου κι ακούω το ψέμα
και μια μικρή ζεστή αγωνία μου γλυκαίνει το αίμα

I Listen to Love (translation)¹⁵

I listen to your seas and your rivers
I listen to your laughter I listen to your crying
the melodies that are born inside your innards
the cities and the humans
who travel under your skin
I listen to your truth and I listen to the lie
and a little warm agony sweetens my blood

As a kind of a fragment of a lover's discourse, in Roland Barthes' terms, 'I listen' becomes a repetitive figure, a choreographic 'gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose... The figure is the lover at work' (Barthes, 2002:4). Barthes describes such figures as Erinyes, the Greek mythical chthonic deities chasing those who committed crimes that offended the moral order of the world: 'they stir, collide, subside, return, vanish with no more order than the flight of mosquitoes.' (ibid.:7). 'I listen' thus describes an affective economy of love surpassing the perception of listening, since it defines the privileged positioning of the lover whose senses are extended beyond the set boundaries of the body regulated by skin: he can perceive the inner world mediated underneath the skin of the other. The access to such a bodily ambiance is the outcome of a special relationality gained through love. The lover can listen to what everyone else cannot; he is empowered to do so because of love. He has access to the truth of the other's body - what Badiou termed as 'the truth procedure'-, because he loves. He enjoys the inner bodily landscape and describes its universe of events: the seas, the rivers, the melodies, the feelings, the cities, the hidden inhabitants of its world. Listening becomes a practice of transformation for the lover, who takes pleasure in gaining knowledge of the Other. Almost like a child who dismantles his toy, in order to understand how it works, he takes pleasure in scrutinising the body of the beloved almost in a 'process of fetishising a corpse' (Barthes, 2002:71). The beloved body is experienced as an atopia, unique and unclassifiable, a body 'of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality.' (ibid.: 34). Knowing this body is knowing the cause of his desire, as well as a celebration of desire, a modality of happiness earned in a sort of transcendental togetherness. The bodily knowledge is confessed in song - the performative ambiance of music. It is mediated in the form of acoustic mapping, that becomes the apocalypse of the wondrous inner world of the Other. Such a charismatic knowledge 'sweetens' the lover's blood with a 'little warm agony'. This is the concluding line common to both verses; an emphasis upon the intoxication of love. Amorous listening is thus an adventure in probing the limits of the self within the body of the Other. It is a struggle for re-subjectification by daring to delve inside the Other: listening to love becomes a radical action against common sense manifested in the chorus: 'I listen to love/and I don't listen to my thoughts'.

2. All lyrics are translated by the author.

Such an adventure of love reminds of Alain Badiou's philosophy of love as a deep experience of difference, where the individual abandons the narcissistic self. 'What is the world like when it is experienced, developed and lived from the point of view of difference and not identity? That is what I believe love to be.' (Badiou, 2012:22). Listening to love and ignoring the thought is therefore more than a revisiting of the modern 'affect vs reason' dichotomy; it becomes an experience of disjuncture, of the separation from the self, the dissolution of singularity: 'You have *Two*. Love involves *Two*.' (ibid.:27). Love's enemy is selfishness. Falling in love is a tenacious adventure, where life is re-invented. 'To re-invent love is to re-invent that re-invention' in Badiou's words (ibid.:33). This experience of love is distanced from the Christian sensibilities of love, the kind of passive, reverent, sacrificial love, where the love of the supreme One is offered as a reward. In this case, love is instead a struggle, a transgressive process, it involves a war. Like the Surrealist 'l' amour fou', it is the overwhelming force for existential and political transformation.

Love is a fest, love is a wound

This is the force praised in the song 'Giorti' ('The Fest') recorded in 1999 (*Mesa stin Nyhta ton Allon*, 'Inside the Night of the Others', Virgin), that has also known an immense success ever since and is still performed by Yiannis Angelakas in his concerts.¹⁶

Γιορτή (Chorus)

Βάλε φωτιά σε ό,τι σε καίει, σε ό,τι σου τρώει την ψυχή
Έξω οι δρόμοι αναπνέουν διψασμένοι, ανοιχτοί
Είναι η αγάπη ένα ταξίδι από γιορτή σε γιορτή

Βάλε φωτιά σε ό,τι σε καίει, σε ό,τι σου τρώει την ψυχή
Έξω οι δρόμοι αναπνέουν διψασμένοι, ανοιχτοί
Είναι η αγάπη ένα ταξίδι από πληγή σε πληγή

The Fest (Chorus, translation)

Put on fire whatever is burning you, whatever is eating your soul
Outside the streets are breathing thirsty and open
Love is a journey from fest to fest

Put on fire whatever is burning you. whatever is eating your soul
Outside the streets are breathing thirsty and open
Love is a journey from wound to wound

The lover's call for liberating catastrophe is a form of resistance and a response to what Badiou has described as 'the safety-first' concept of love, that is love against all risks, painless love. It is opposed to what is considered to be the exemplary successful neoliberal lover: the one who manages not to suffer, the one who is able

3. The song's video-clip is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trzb1eQEQI8>.

to protect the Self. It is opposed to a neoliberal sensibility according to which the experience of dislocation as a result of falling in love is rather acknowledged as a form of weakness, of failure to become part of modernity (see Badiou, 2012) - it is a fall after all. For Angelakas, such a sensibility is what he describes as, 'counter-love': love as a modality for personal fulfilment, egotistic love. His sonic-poetic love-worlds and their diverse performativities enact instead a politics of love, where the sentimental subject risks entering a regime of relationality, following Laurent Berlant, which is an ontologically constitutive process providing the means for collective becoming-different (see Davies and Sarlin, 2011). Falling in love becomes thus a daring withdrawal from the neoliberal autonomous self, a step into an ambiance of permanent emergency, a dangerous exposure to a contingently irreversible field of excessive experiences lived at any cost, even of losing the self. In Angelakas words, 'love involves firstly a clash with yourself... Love for me is war. It is a war for breaking myself. A war against myself. Life is a labor. To accept your own pain ... the exile to which we all in."¹⁷

The subject daring to immerse in love is therefore involved in a revolutionary action that is powerful to dissolve the subject's own self-sovereignty. This is not an easy task, however, because it demands effort. 'On one hand everyone has the anticipation to know love', Angelakas argues, 'yet, on the other hand, nobody has the will to work for it, neither to accept ... that one has to fight for it'. So, the obstacle is the inertia to follow love's truth procedure, although, as the musician suggests, 'love is the most beautiful revolution we can make'. Love is therefore impossible unless the self is put in danger, 'on fire', moving to the unknown, that is love's utopia. And, 'if utopia is not our goal at the point that we reached today', as Angelakas, explains, 'we will get lost.' 'Love is a fire, but how can you, man, keep it up inside you? How can you stay in a state of constant anticipation and self-subversion... This is something that demands practice... One has to accept that, ok, I dare.'

For Angelakas, however, putting on fire 'everything that is eaten your soul', according to the lyrics, is far from being the solution; it is the path, the journey. 'Love is a journey from fest to fest/love is a journey from wound to wound'. Falling in love involves, as the lyrics suggest, a circular movement in-between alternating conditions of dramatic contrast: a trauma, a joy, a trauma, a joy and so on. Singing about it becomes a form of realising the 'drama of love', in Angelakas' words. Song could become a regime for realising the circle 'wound-fest-wound', it could open the way for opening the circle, for moving against the loop, for liberation. One needs to experience the circle, in order to escape 'slavery'. 'Slavery', for Angelakas, corresponds to a capitalist notion of love, which is associated with the ideal of the family, that is the experience of a love-story with happy-end. As he comments in a sort of ironic-humorous tone: 'You get married, you have kids, you buy a house, and you have a lot of overloaded credit cards!'. This is how he recounts the 'mainstream', ideal of love, as a form of slavery. Freedom is therefore earned through hard work, through struggle and the risk for transformation. This is why one needs to educate the self in how to love: 'But you need to have the force inside you, the

4. All references to Angelakas' discourse are sourced from a personal conversation with Yiannis Angelakas in the context of ethnographic research (Thessaloniki, 25/4/2016).

will to leave the circle... And because people are very frightened, and because people become more frightened from one generation to the other, the way things move on, there are less people who dare. There will always be people who dare, of course - I'm not pessimistic - some people always dare, but the system struggles to have the less possible damage. It will have damage, though.'

The enactment of love as both a revolutionary and perilous force in the realm of musical performance, today and in the past, draws thus our attention to the ways passions become potentialities for non-sovereign social formations and alternative ways of organising relationality and civility (see Davies and Sarlin, 2011). If 'love makes central the role of affect within the political sphere', as Michael Hardt suggested, then we could perhaps reconsider love-songs as transformational ambiances, where the challenge of and desire for love's utopia is materialised. Thinking of love as a political concept suggests a break away from the compromising rationality of the post-political consensus that is a strategy of neoliberal governmentality and a technique of civility which disciplines love as a condition of the successful independent Self. Such a neoliberal moral order of love and safe romance becomes a regulatory mechanism of numbing the passionate love, love despite the self, since it is considered to be a precarious, imminent reality of ruptures. It is a moral order based on 'the fear of excitement', as Berlant noticed, a kind of excitement 'that is unbearable' (ibid.). The politics of love performed in Angelakas' songs mediate a vulnerable ontology engaged in the endless struggle to survive the vertigo of late capitalism, a struggle that sustains today its timeliness, as it materialises the pending desire of the ever dispossessed lover - a desire for relationalities (and ambiances) that do not exist yet, even if loss is a constitutive part of their reality.

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