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Hoogstad, J.H.

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New Adventures in Low Fidelity. Towards a media-epistemic pluralism

Author: Jan Hein Hoogstad

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Abstract (E): By staging an encounter between Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* and Ralph Ellison's autobiographical story 'Living with Music', this essay makes a case for a media-epistemic pluralism. It argues that a medium does not function autonomously, but always forms a complex constellation with other media. This constellation takes shapes with the intervention of the figure of the engineer, who functions as a negotiator between media. The engineer respects the specific, expressive modalities of a certain medium and at the same time avoids the pitfalls of medium essentialism and/or determinism. This essay proposes a new kind of agency, which emerges through these negotiations between the engineer and media.

Abstract (F): En proposant une lecture du récit autobiographique 'Living with Music' de l'auteur américain Ralph Ellison à partir de *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* du critique allemand Friedrich Kittler, cet article défend une épistémologie plurielle des différentes medias. L'auteur démontre qu'un medium ne saurait fonctionner de façon autonome, mais fait toujours partie d'une constellation complexe d'autres types de media. Une telle constellation se forme grâce à l'intermédiaire de la figure de l'opérateur ou ingénieur, qui fonctionne en tant que négociateur entre les différentes media. L'opérateur/ingénieur, tout en respectant les modalités spécifiques et expressives de tel medium, essaie d'éviter les apories de l'essentialisme ou déterminisme inhérentes à une pensée de la singularité du medium. Le présent article propose un type nouveau d'action qui se crée à travers ces négociations entre le medium et l'opérateur/ingénieur.

keywords: Noise, Gramophone, Engineer Agency, Media, Music, (Auto-)Biography, Ralph Ellison, Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler

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Article

The limitations of technology can become artistic tools themselves. They can point the way." (RZA: 191)

Hardly anything ages as quickly as reflections on technology. As waves of innovation succeed each other at a pace that is hard to follow, the relevance of such texts usually vanishes overnight. Moreover, since they depend on a time-bound technical lingo, these reflections are destined to become completely illegible within a couple of decades. For these reasons, it is nothing short of amazing that Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1985) has managed to avoid this fate for a very long time. The book's renowned introduction predicts the merging of all individual media into a single digital information channel. Kittler sketches an apocalyptic and deterministic scenario in which all media strive towards their effacement. In optical fiber networks - a now obsolete term for the material infrastructure of the internet - the German media

theorist recognizes the imminent telos of this historical development. Because it translates all kinds of data flows into series of numbers that can be manipulated, this super-medium has the potential to replace all others.

With numbers everything goes. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping - a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run as an endless loop. (Kittler: 2)

Given the extremely short life cycle of the genre, Friedrich Kittler's insight should be considered as a truly untimely meditation. As I write this essay, over two decades of frantic technological innovation have strived towards the complete unification of all media but failed to completely realize this goal. Despite its extraordinary endurance, however, even *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is now finally starting to show its age. If anything, rereading the book today proves that yesterday's science fiction will be tomorrow's prehistory. "Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface.

Sense and the senses turn into eyewash. Their media-produced glamour will survive for an interim as a by-product of strategic programs." (Kittler: 1) After *Tron*, virtual reality, cyberspace, *The Matrix* and *Second Life*, the reign of digital media has become a commonplace in contemporary art, culture and theory. Nowadays, everyone seems to be convinced that computers are going to take over every aspect of everyday life; whether this is a good or a bad thing is the only remaining point of controversy. The idea of unification of all media has lost its futuristic appeal. The main response that one can expect to such a utopian / dystopian prophesy is a loud yawn. Considering this collective fatigue with regard to *digital* cyber dreams, it has become almost impossible to recall the immense promise that *analogue* media once carried. I will take this as a challenge.

Whereas the technical means to preserve memories continuously improve, the previous generations of storage media are paradoxically forgotten. Oblivion appears to be the inevitable fate of outdated technology and the necessary price that has to be paid for progress... but does it really have to be? Before sealing this Faustian deal, the underlying deterministic relation between technological progress and amnesia needs to be further interrogated. In this essay, I will therefore examine how these terms come together in the construction of biographical narratives. Obviously, technological inventions open up new expressive modalities to construct such stories. Nowadays, only a technophobe would deny that photos, videos, and audio recordings can have a surplus value over mere textual descriptions of events. Still, the possible downsides of these inventions should not be overlooked. Can and did new media destroy old possibilities to capture a life? And are there events and stories that are impossible to express within contemporary or future media? These questions are not specific to the current digital age but are recurrent throughout history. They emerge when one medial episteme is threatened to be replaced by another.

Just like *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Ralph Waldo Ellison's auto-fictional story 'Living with Music' (1955) captures such a technological shift. The story looks back upon an era in which analogue media were not yet doomed to disappear but rather possessed an immanent promise and lurking threat to take - and make - over everyday life. Ellison's personal medium of choice is the gramophone. The author describes in detail the practical, esthetic, and political rupture that the introduction of this hi-tech device inflicted upon his own life and work. Whereas the record player may have become a clumsy piece of low fidelity equipment for many, I will argue that Ellison's implicit theoretical position - which I will call *media-epistemic pluralism* - has survived the gramophone's decay. In fact, his story prefigures a complex attitude towards technological progress that manages to avoid the wearisome dichotomy between utopia and its inverse.

"In those days, it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live." (Ellison: 187)

In 'Living with Music', the narrator - let's simply call him Ralph Ellison - recalls how residing in an extremely noisy block in New York force him to rediscover a repressed musical past. He describes how the screaming and shouting of the local winos and the singing of a zealous though not overly talented neighbor interfere with his aspiration to become an author. Especially the musical attempts of the latter often bring him close to madness. Not only because her singing breaks the silence that he requires to work, but also because her lack of talent make Ellison doubt his own writing skills.

"I was forced to listen, and in listening I soon became involved to the point of identification. If she sang badly I'd hear my own futility in the windy sound; if well, I'd stare at my typewriter and despair that I should ever make my prose so sing." (Ellison: 192)

In spite of the nobility of her intentions, the singer prevents the author from materializing his own dream. His neighbor's vocal and singing exercises obstruct the acoustic and mental peace that the author needs to concentrate on his writing. There is, however, a more positive side effect that derives directly from these noisy conditions. They force Ellison to revisit times and places that he had long forgotten.

Through his singing neighbor, the struggling author involuntarily remembers his own musical background. Before he started writing, Ellison pursued a career as a trumpeter. To a middle class, African-American boy growing up in Oklahoma City at the beginning of the 20th century, however, the relation to music was never unproblematic. The narrator describes how he was continuously caught in-between two, often contradictory, discourses.

(...) that of the Negro folk music, both sacred and profane, slave song and jazz, and that of Western classical music. It was most confusing; the folk tradition demanded that I play what I heard and felt around me, while those who were seeking to teach the classical tradition in the schools insisted that I play strictly to the book and express that which I was supposed to feel. (Ellison: 190)

In adolescence, the trumpet was a constant reminder of Ellison's minoritarian position that urged him to choose between two conflicting discourses. On the one hand, he was confronted with a dominant but foreign past - here in the form of western, classical music - that forces the musician to perform but leaves little to no freedom for action in the present. On the other hand, the young musician wanted to respect the minor tradition of black folk music that calls for radical freedom, a demand that paradoxically entails cutting all ties with the past. Obviously, it was impossible to fully satisfy either one of these demands, let alone to combine them. As Ralph Ellison claims, it was this double bind that made him a bad musician.

Caught mid-range between my two traditions, where one often clashed with the other and one technique of playing was by the other opposed, I caused whole blocks of people to suffer. (Ellison: 190)

Like his singing neighbor, the trumpeter's musical efforts were far from quiet. Ellison's loud, dissonant perseverance, however, was not primarily esthetically motivated. To him, jazz and classical music represented two contradictory

stances towards historical intervention. Whereas the latter genre allows the past to determine the current condition - I will call this position productive determinism - the former denies history any right to interfere with the present - crippling freedom. Both separately, as well as together, these two attitudes obstruct agency. Productive determinism makes it possible to act by reducing the amount of options to a single one. The individual has no room to influence the course of events and is therefore not really an agent; he is quite literally subject of history. For opposite reasons, crippling freedom does not leave much room for historical intervention either. Here, however, there is an economy of abundance rather than lack at play. In this second scenario, the possibilities are infinite and therefore unpredictable. Since the outcome of his actions are fully arbitrary, the subject is stupefied and paralyzed. As a result, one cannot really claim that historical change needs an agent's intervention to take place. In the end, productive determinism and crippling freedom lead to the exactly same, unsatisfying outcome: severe limitation of agency.

Ralph Ellison's demoralizing dilemma was, according to his own testimony, the main reason to quit music altogether and to pursue a career as an author instead. The radical nature of this switch, however, indicates that it was more than a change of profession; it was a complete metamorphosis. "Yet it was ironic, for after giving up my trumpet for the typewriter I had avoided too close a contact with the very art which she recommended as balm. For I had started music early and lived with it daily, and when I broke I tried to break clean." (Ellison: 193) In 'Living with Music', music and text are conceptualized as two radically separated, though synchronically coexisting and competing epistemes. Each of these realms of knowledge is opened up by a technical medium - respectively the trumpet and the typewriter - and corresponds to a unique set of expressive modalities and limitations. Ralph Ellison's self-initiated, private epistemological rupture is motivated by the sincere hope that the *Gutenberg Galaxy* will possess more potential than music to solve his paralyzing existential dilemma.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographical Man* (1962), Marshall McLuhan provided the methodological apparatus for media theory to come. He introduced the term Gutenberg Galaxy to designate the historical era in which one particular medium, printed text, is prioritized over all others. McLuhan's theoretical innovation does not consist in the fact that he conceives this medium as a product of its age, but that he reverses this causal relation: media technology constitutes historical epistemes. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he claims that the invention of the movable type by Johannes Gutenberg around 1450 has - over the course of centuries - eventually unfolded into a hegemonic political, cultural and social order. In turn, The Gutenberg Galaxy corresponds to a specific kind of subject that McLuhan baptizes Gutenberg Man. This typographical man is a medially defined subject that is programmed to process printed texts. According to McLuhan, this has numerous implications: the typographic man reduces sense perception to visibility, trims temporality to linearity, chooses uniformity over heterogeneity, and prioritizes private over public life. By replacing the trumpet with a typewriter, Ellison subscribed to all the aforementioned aspects of the hegemonic discourse and chose to become a typographic man.

What *The Gutenberg Galaxy* shares with *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* and 'Living with Music' is the fact that it captures an imminent medial shift. Even though McLuhan acknowledges that - at the time of writing - printed text is still a dominant medium, he expects its reign soon to be destroyed by a contemporary technological medium: electricity. According to him, the supersession of the Gutenberg Galaxy and the typographic man by another medial universe of knowledge - the electric age - a new social order and a corresponding subject is unavoidable and irrevocable. The position that McLuhan defends is deterministic

in a twofold way: the dominant medium determines the human condition, and technological progress is an irreversible process. These two aspects combined form a position that is commonly known as technological determinism.

Marshal McLuhan conceives history as a linear succession of hegemonic, medial epistemes. By describing a synchronic rather than a diachronic shift from music to text, Ralph Ellison disturbs the underlying logic of the media theorist's technological determinism. His seemingly trivial shift from trumpet to typewriter has ramifications on an ontological, an existential and a political level. Ontologically, it implies a coexistence rather than a succession of different medial epistemes. In 'Living with Music', a universe of music exists parallel to the Gutenberg Galaxy. Existentially, this means that the typographic man is not a historically determined subject but a (conceptual) persona amongst many. Most importantly, it suggests that the transition from musician to author was inspired by political rather than personal motives. It meant a conscious choice to actively participate in a major discourse rather than a minor one.

"Writing, however, stored writing - no more and no less." (Kittler: 7)

In the introduction to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler radicalizes McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy by fertilizing it with insights from poststructuralism. Even more than McLuhan did, Kittler emphasizes the autonomous status and the hermetic structure of this medial episteme. He defines the Gutenberg Galaxy as an endless chain of signifiers, a hegemonic text without an accessible outside. In fact, Kittler transforms the Gutenberg Galaxy in such a way that this medial episteme actually resembles Jacques Derrida's concept of writing (*écriture*). "Therefore, all data flows, provided they were really streams of data, had to pass through the bottleneck of the signifier. Alphabetic monopoly, grammatology." (Kittler: 4) In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, however, text is a historically contingent writing system rather than an onto-theological horizon of knowledge. Consequently, Kittler carefully distinguishes between different epistemes on the basis of their dominant media. The Gutenberg Galaxy was a particular medial episteme in which the movable type functioned as a universal medium. This realm of text functioned an autonomous and hegemonic writing system that could only store and transmit alphabetical characters and musical notes. Everything else just did not exist.

More simply, but no less technically than tomorrow's fiber optic cables, writing functioned as a universal medium - in times when there was no concept of medium. Whatever else was going on dropped through the filter of letter or ideograms." (Kittler: 4)

The non-textual was a constitutive but inaccessible outside, and could therefore only exist as a theological or metaphysical postulate.

Since Kittler historicizes the concept of writing, the non-textual is not just a synchronic but also as a diachronic supplement to the Gutenberg Galaxy. More precisely, history itself is a concept that could only exist within the confinements of this specific medial episteme. "History was the homogenized field that, as an academic subject, only took account of literate cultures. Mouths and graphisms were relegated to prehistory. Otherwise, stories and histories (both deriving from *historia*) could not have been linked." (Kittler: 4) According to Kittler, the concept of history functions as an exclusive principle because it is inextricably linked to writing: it is the totality of everything that has ever been written, as opposed to everything that has ever happened. Within the Gutenberg Galaxy, the former was mistaken for the latter, because this medial episteme did not have a concept of medium. As long as writing functioned as a universal medium, there was neither the need nor the possibility to conceptualize it as such. Only after new, technical devices were invented the concept of a medium emerged. In this universe of

technical media, the typewriter was only one writing system amongst others - hence the title *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. As soon as writing stopped being a universal medium, however, history had to lose its universalist pretensions and the outside its transcendent status.

Writing is as much an effect of history as history is an effect of writing. In retrospect, Friedrich Kittler's radical appropriation of Marshal McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy explains the difficulties that Ralph Ellison encountered in his years as a musician divided between two traditions.

To record the sound sequences of speech, literature has to arrest them in a system of 26 letters, thereby categorically excluding all noise sequences. Not coincidentally, this system also contains as a subsystem the seven notes, whose diatonics—from A to G—form the basis of occidental music." (Kittler: 3)

Whereas classical music can be stored in scores, a linear and discrete notation system cannot possibly do justice to the improvisations and polyrhythms of jazz, gospel and blues music. Reading 'Living with Music' through McLuhan and Kittler explains that "negro folk music" is a data flow that cannot be captured by the symbolic grid of writing. The minor discourse of Ellison's musical past is part of the postulated, non-textual supplement to the Gutenberg Galaxy. In fact, there is no place for any minor discourses in the ontology of this medial episteme. The Gutenberg Galaxy is a writing system in which a hegemonic discourse and a universal medium coincide. This media-theoretical insight adds another dimension to Ellison's existential dilemma: he no longer only has to choose between productive determinism and crippling freedom, but also between historical recognition and complete oblivion. Posed like this, it becomes clear why Ellison opted for the first horn of the dilemma. His sudden career shift from musician to author, was an attempt to subscribe to the Gutenberg Galaxy and to achieve artistic and political recognition. The price that needs to be paid for entering history, however, is to accept the definite loss of the expressive modalities - in this case the sounds and music - that belong to a minoritarian position.

Thus the crimes and aspirations of my youth. It had been years since I had played the trumpet or irritated a single ear with other than the spoken or written word, but as far as my singing neighbor was concerned I had to hold my peace. (Ellison: 192)

Unfortunately, in 'Living with Music' writing is no longer capable of eliminating the tension between a minor and major discourse. The story takes place after the shift from the Gutenberg Galaxy to a new medial episteme has already occurred; the protagonist has just failed to notice. The narrator - looking back from a future perspective - does not. The story portrays Ralph Ellison as a paralyzed author, struggling with a typewriter rather than a feather or a pen. Even more tellingly, is the fact that his writer's block stems from all kinds of audial disturbances or, in Kittler's words, streams of data that cannot "pass through the bottleneck of the signifier". These not-so-silent-witnesses testify to the disavowal of writing as a universal medium as well as to the decay of a hegemonic discourse. Although the author is bothered by these noises, he is not yet - and no longer - capable of recognizing them as legitimate data flows, let alone as manifestations of a minor discourse. These sounds and songs do not correspond to the keys on his typewriter.

The author's constant irritation with the outside noises and his neighbor's singing turn out to be mere projections that distract from the underlying problem: the typewriter's incapacity to live up to its original promise. The audial disturbances are not the actual cause of Ellison's writer's block, they only function as an outlet to him. His real frustration derives from the fact that his political choice for the dominant medium of his times - the typewriter - did not unambiguously release him from the problems that stem from a minoritarian position. The aspiring

author remains caught between the contradictory demands that the two conflicting discourses impose on him. The shouting and singing are constant reminders of a repressed outside. These aural data streams point to the fact that the minor discourse is just banned to the background and did not really disappear. As a reaction, the author employs in vain several strategies to eliminate this non-textual noise. A real solution to his problem, however, comes to him by accident. When Ellison turns on the radio in a state of complete despair, a female voice tells him: "Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee..." (193)

The starting author decides to take this advice literally. In order to outdo the background nuisances and to create a quiet space for his writing, he goes out and buys a gramophone. In practice, however, the manner in which he initially uses the technical device is far from relaxing nor does it release him from the noise. On the contrary, rather than simply enjoying recordings of his favorite music, Ellison abuses his latest acquisition. In his hands, the gramophone becomes a means of sonic warfare. "Now when jarred from my writer's reveries by some especially enthusiastic flourish of our singer, I'd rush to my music system with blood in my eyes and burst a few decibels in her direction. If she defied me with a few more pounds of pressure against her diaphragm, then a war of decibels was declared." (Ellison: 194) Whenever his neighbor starts her vocal exercises, the narrator counters the dilettante by playing loud music of outstanding singers. The gramophone helps him to outperform his competitor in both a qualitative and quantitative manner. It is actually the total degradation of the neighbor instead of the initial goal of peace and quietness that now motivates the author to write. "For instead of soothing, music seemed to release the beast in me." (194)

Against Ellison's hopes and expectations, however, the singer uses her defeat as an incentive. She starts mimicking the recordings that her neighbor plays to silence her, and thereby improves her singing substantially. It is her unexpected tenacity that makes the author conscious of his own artistic and moral shortcomings.

And although I was now getting on with my writing, the unfairness of this business bore in upon me. Aware that I could not have withstood a similar comparison with literary artists of like caliber, I grew remorseful. I also came to admire the singer's courage and control, for she was neither intimidated into silence nor goaded into undisciplined screaming; she persevered, she marked the phrasing of the great singers I sent her way, she improved her style. (Ellison: 194)

To Ellison's disgrace, the singer conceives the confrontation with her imperfections as a stimulus to improve rather than an excuse to give up. As soon as Ellison recognizes the instructive relation between the gramophone and his neighbor, he completely reverses his attitude towards music. Along with his neighbor's progress, her singing gradually becomes an object of admiration rather than irritation to the author. "Better still, she vocalized more softly, and I, in turn, used music less and less as a weapon and more for its magic with mood and memory. After a while a simple twirl of the volume control up a few decibels and down again would bring a live-and-let-live reduction of her volume." (Ellison: 195) Ralph Ellison now realizes that sound is more than just territorial marker; it contains something irreducible that eludes writing. According to him, this magical element is an alternative past that cannot be captured in the alphabetical characters and spaces of the typewriter.

The strange duet between Ellison's neighbor and the gramophone, prefigures a more organic way to live with music. Although the author initially bought a

record player to literally deal with noise, the device has now transgressed its immediate practical use. Its sounds are no longer solely a defense system against everyday nuisances, but offer an alternative to a redundant text-based concept of history.

Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspired. (Ellison: 196-197)

At the end of the story, the narrator claims that music functions as a temporal compass. It possesses this capacity, because it imbues the present with lost times. These lost times, however, do not only consist of actual representations of the past, but they also contain repressed or forgotten loves, heartbreaks, expectations, dreams, nightmares, etc. Music superimposes a virtual layer on top of an actual one; it stores the major discourse as well as its minoritarian becoming. By inserting this multilayered past into the present, the author believes it to be possible to determine the course of time.

Music forms an irreducible origin, instigates the rediscovery of a repressed past and provides an orientation in time. It is no coincidence that the gramophone fulfills the same threefold function in 'Living with Music', as it does in the introduction of Ellison's seminal novel *Invisible Man* (1951). Both the fictional novel and the autobiographical story capture the pivotal moment in which music re-enters the protagonist's life. In *Invisible Man*, the gramophone's intrusion offers the protagonist an escape from a free but meaningless existence as an outlaw. In 'Living with Music', the device transforms the sonic chaos of his house into the musical order that the author needs in order to overcome his writer's block.

Now in this magical moment all the old love, the old fascination with music superbly rendered, flooded back. When she finished I realized that with such music in my own apartment, the chaotic sounds from without and above had sunk, if not into silence, then well below the level where they mattered. (Ellison: 193)

By the end of 'Living with Music', music is all of a sudden no longer an endless strain to the minoritarian musician anymore, but relieves the aspiring author from his constant struggles by giving him a temporal sense of direction. The immediate question that comes to mind when such a drastic change occurs is of course: what has changed? After reading Kittler and McLuhan, the answer is both remarkably simple as well as infinitely complex: technology. As opposed to Ellison's own testimony, I claim that the narrator actually does not rediscover music... he discovers the gramophone. "All this plunge into electronics, mind you, had as its simple end the enjoyment of recorded music as it was intended to be heard." (Ellison 194) This new technical medium lures the author with something which he could not achieve with neither the trumpet nor the typewriter: better-than-perfect reproduction of the past in its full detail.

Sound recordings improve on both scores as well as live performances of the same piece of music, because they do not only capture their notes but also the data flows that circulate in-between them. The distinctive feature of this technical medium is that it does not only store the intended content but also all kinds of other accidental sounds and disruptive noises. The ability of the gramophone to store all frequencies and their fluctuations in time leads Friedrich

Kittler to the wild but productive hypothesis that the technological device corresponds to the 'real' in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

And only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning. To experience pleasure, Freud's patients no longer have to desire what philosophers consider good. Rather, they are free to babble. Thus, the real — especially in the talking cure known as psychoanalysis — has the status of phonography. (Kittler: 16)

Whereas the typewriter can only deal with the symbolic, the gramophone also registers the streams of data that precede and exceed the linguistic order. This medium does not only record intentions, meanings, and syntactically formed utterances, but also the slippages, mistakes, and plain noises. In other words, the gramophone is capable of storing and transmitting all the nonsensical data flows that resist the symbolic order of the major discourse.

Reproduction is demoted once the past in all its sensuous detail is transmitted by technical devices. Certainly, hi-fi means "high fidelity" and is supposed to convince consumers that record companies remain loyal to musical deities. But it is a term of appeasement. More precise than the poetic imagination of 1800, whose alphabetism or creativity confronted an exclusively reproductive memory, technology literally makes the unheard-of possible. (Kittler: 36)

The real potential of the record player consists in the device's immanent promise of a better-than-perfect recording. The narrator of 'Living with Music' hopes that this multilayered past of sound recordings will ultimately overwrite the official, text-based account called history. Rather than producing a factual representation of an event, the gramophone offers a faithful recording that is simultaneously actual and virtual. He values the gramophone for its potential power to break the hegemony of a conscious, major discourse by confronting it with its subconscious. The technical device's capacity to physically store and transmit non-symbolic data flows distinguishes it from rivaling writing systems. All of a sudden, the background noises and the neighbor's singing are no longer nonsensical nuisances, but turn into manifestations of a minor discourse. "I was obsessed with the idea of reproducing sound with such fidelity that even when using music as a defense behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion. And it didn't come easily." (Ellison: 193)

Because of its capacity to bypass the symbolic order of the typewriter, the gramophone transfigures the relation between a major and minor discourse. The latter is no longer external to the first, but has become an integral, though distinct, part of it. Still, it would be too easy to understand Ralph Ellison's appraisal of the record player as a naive utopian stance towards the latest technology. On the contrary, his enthusiasm stems from the possibilities that the confrontation with the gramophone - and the realm of knowledge that it opens up - offers to his writing. The author does not simply give in to the temptation of a *tabula rasa* that new technology offers, but proposes a media-epistemic pluralism instead. Without the gramophone he would have never been able to resolve the tension between a major and a minor discourse in a satisfactory way. Nonetheless, sound recordings do not replace typed texts or live music performances. The three media, trumpet, type writer and gramophone, are complementary rather than mutually exclusive to Ellison. Despite their coexistence, however, these media do maintain a hierarchical relation with one another. The narrator clearly prioritizes the gramophone over the trumpet and

the typewriter. It is the high-tech device that allows him to rediscover the music from his youth, and it is the same machine that helps the author to overcome his writer's block. "A writer thus celebrates the very opposite of his own medium—the white noise no writing can store." (Kittler: 45) In 'Living with Music', new technology functions as an event to existing, rivaling writing systems. The introduction of the gramophone challenges and transforms the typewriter - and the concepts, speculation, tropes, and metaphors that this device brought into existence - without actually replacing it.

"Here was a way out. If I was to live and write in that apartment, it would be only through the grace of music." (Ellison: 193) Whereas the blank spaces of the typewriter gave rise to theoretical speculations about the in-between as an anti-space without any form of positive determination, the continuous groove of the gramophone record renders all such conjunctures obsolete. In this analogue medium, the in-between is neither a metaphysical nor a metaphorical concept but an actual material space inscribed in vinyl. Despite the medium specificity of this material in-between, Ellison does not confine it to the gramophone, but actually introduces it as a metaphor in the practice of writing. Through the gramophone, the author can re-signify the margins and the blanks his typed pages as spaces where his minoritarian background resides. In this sense, the in-between remains a site of exclusion. The gramophone's intrusion, though, transforms this intermediary space from a relative outside into an immanent other. This in-between therefore acquires the potential to disturb, subvert and even reshape the major discourse. The seemingly trivial transfiguration of minor discourses from empty into nonsensical margins, gaps and breaches of their major counterparts opens up a possibility for intervention. Although the outer limits of these intermediary spaces remain initially fixed, their interior does not. The newly discovered in-between thereby avoids the dilemma between productive determinism and crippling freedom. It allows absolute freedom within set boundaries.

But not yet. Between the hi-fi record and the ear, I learned, there was a new electronic world. In that realization our apartment was well on its way toward becoming an audio booby trap. (Ellison: 193)

Ellison opens up a new inner realm that is neither fixed nor boundless, but simultaneously produced and restricted by the historical and geographical contingencies of the major discourse. As a consequence of the perforations inflicted by minor discourses, on the other hand, the major discourse is in constant need of interventions in order to make sense. Without some form of agency, its musical notes and alphabetical characters would not have any meaning. In 'Living with Music', the corresponding agent comes in the form of a third persona - next to the author and the musician - the engineer. A substantial part of this story is dedicated to gargantuan task of mastering the gramophone. "There were wires and pieces of equipment all over the tiny apartment (I became a compulsive experimenter) and it was worth your life to move about without first taking careful bearings. Once we were almost crushed in our sleep by the tape machine, for which there was space only on a shelf at the head of our bed. But it was worth it." (Ellison 194) The narrator describes the complex interplay between theoretical knowledge and practical interventions needed to eliminate the static, cracks and hisses from the recording as much as possible. The engineer's goal is high fidelity: minimization of the noise between the recording and the ear, maximization of information.

In this process of purifying sound, Ralph Ellison accidentally discovers a second in-between: the gap between the gramophone and its listener. Even though he realizes that the first in-between - the one inscribed into the vinyl - makes it

possible to recognize a repressed past, the protagonist treats this second realm as mere nuisance. The physical space between him and the loudspeaker is a sonic obstacle that prevents him from fully enjoying music and obstructs the past from being fully recognized. Consequently, the engineer tries to eliminate this second in-between. Unwittingly, he thereby rids the gramophone of its biggest potential: noise recording and production.

The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; it registers acoustic events as such. Articulativeness becomes a second-order exception in a spectrum of noise. (Kittler: 23)

The importance of the gramophone lies in the fact that it is a low rather than high fidelity sound device. Its capacity to store noises rather than symbolic data flows, transforms the in-between from a black hole into a rich space stuffed with forgotten, repressed or excluded sounds, smells and images. In fact, it is exactly this transformation that takes place in both the introduction of *Invisible Man* as well as 'Living with Music'. The engineer's discovery of this excluded space stains the metaphor of the in-between as a clean sheet. This zone of indeterminacy is smudged with noise, dirt, chaos, sex, and violence... which could very well be the major discourse's revolutionary becoming. By continuously trying to ban sonic nuisances from his house, Ralph Ellison actually fails to recognize the full potential of his own discovery. Despite good intentions, he actually effaces the minor discourse that he wanted to rescue. It is noise that resists assimilation by a hegemonic medium and that forces the major discourse to adapt and transform.

Even though the engineer in 'Living with Music' tries to purify the sound of the gramophone, it is very easy to think of a different engineer: one that actually maximizes the noise. According to Friedrich Kittler, noise production was the only remaining strategy to subvert hegemony in the analogue age.

If media are anthropological a priori, then humans cannot have invented language; rather, they must have evolved as its pets, victims, or subjects. And the only weapon to fight that may well be tape salad. Sense turns into nonsense, government propaganda into the white noise of Turing's vocoder, impossible fillers like is/or/the are edited out, precisely the ingredients of William Burroughs's tape cut-up technique. (Kittler: 109)

Amidst all his appraisal for the gramophone. It is easy to forget that to Kittler the universe of technical media maintains the same relation to the digital age as the Gutenberg Galaxy to the analogue age. With the decay of this medial episteme, so convincingly prophesied in the introduction of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, a unique historical opportunity to resist hegemony seems to disappear. The gramophone was a singular medium that stored non-symbolic data flows, not as pure chaos but as manifestations of a minor discourse. Its cracks and hisses actively resisted assimilation by their hegemonic counterpart and its corresponding medium. In a universe that exclusively exists out of 0 and 1, though, these nonsensical - in the good sense of the word - data flows can no longer be stored or transmitted.

Not unlike Turing's correspondents, everyone is deserting analog machines in favor of discrete ones. The CD digitizes the gramophone, the video camera digitizes the movies. All data streams flow into a state n of Turing's universal machine; Romanticism notwithstanding, numbers and figures become the key to all creatures." (Kittler 19)

Still, everything might not be lost. 'Living with Music' implicitly develops, in my opinion, an alternative to McLuhan's and Kittler's media determinism. The subtle critique that this text offers, does not consist in its analysis of the gramophone but in the way in which Ralph Ellison treats the device. In his struggles with the technology, a new kind of agency is born; an agency beyond the dichotomy of productive determinism and crippling freedom. The engineer regains some degree of control, exactly because this figure bypasses the symbolic order and directly intervenes in the underlying, material structure. He does not speak, he acts. Nonetheless, the engineer is fully aware of the fact that his interventions are never fully autonomous. Neither he nor the medium are in full control. Instead, agency emerges from the constant negotiations - rather than negations - between the engineer and different technological media. In 'Living with Music', new media do not automatically replace existing ones; they function as events that challenge and transform their predecessors. Man, in its role as engineer, is fully inscribed into this complex network of machines. Through his negotiations with the gramophone and the typewriter, Ralph Ellison prefigures a subject that belongs to a universe in which medial epistemes do not diachronically succeed each other but synchronically coexist. Although different ways to capture the past, present and future continue to compete with one another, the bare fact of this competition should be interpreted as proof of a medial-epistemic pluralism... no matter if it is 1952, 1985 or 2008. Against Friedrich Kittler's own expectations, the following statement is therefore still valid more than twenty years after he first wrote it: "But there still are media; there still is entertainment." (Kittler: 2) and I will be very surprised if it does not stand the test of time.

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Jan Hein Hoogstad is a lecturer of Comparative Literature at the University of Amsterdam and a postdoctoral researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. He studied Philosophy, Media Theory and Cultural Studies at the University of Utrecht and the Humboldt-University in Berlin. He has published on Prince, Marvin Gaye, Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka and Michel Foucault.



