

Queer Timbres, Queered Elegy: Diamanda Galás's The Plague Mass and the First Wave of the AIDS Crisis

airekb

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Abstract

Welcome to the final week of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the IASPM-US blog in connection with this year’s IASPM-US conference on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Cultural Studies, Identity, Language



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Welcome to the final week of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the [IASPM-US blog](#) in connection with this year’s [IASPM-US conference](#) on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013. The “Sonic Borders” forum is a Virtual Roundtable cross-blog entity that will feature six *Sounding Out!* writers posting on Mondays through February 25, and four writers from [IASPM-US](#), posting on Wednesdays starting February 6th and ending February 27th. For an encore of weeks one through four of the forum, click [here](#). And now, while we regret to inform you that Art Jones’s dispatch from Pakistan must be re-booked at a later date, the show must go on . . . and I am thrilled that writer and Ph.D. student Airek Beauchamp is stepping in as our closing act. Make no mistake, he brings the pain, and it matters deeply. Once again, *Sounding Out!* gives you something you can feel. **–JS, Editor-in-Chief**

At dinner a few days later in the Village Jarrod tells me that he cries whenever anyone says that they really ‘get’ his work. Because his work is so horrifying. It hurts him to know that he has inflicted it upon someone, someone able to understand it.–A.W. Strouse, in reference to the [recent performance of Jarrod Kentrell at Ps1’s “The Meeting”](#)

I first heard [Diamanda Galás’s *The Plague Mass* \(1991\)](#) around 1994, when I would have been about 20 years old. Equal parts mass and babble, *The Plague Mass* is an elegiac tribute to Galás’s brother and other victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a sonic rage against the silence surrounding the disease that redefines “the elegy” in the process. I suppose that I should make a confession here and say that contracting HIV was one of my biggest fears at the time. I was fresh out of the closet and ready to experiment, yet the media coverage of the crisis had pretty much told me that, as a gay man, an active sex life was a death sentence, a message I had been receiving since I was in fourth grade. There was something in Galás’s record to which I automatically, deeply connected. Although this brand of desire was new to me, there was also something deeply familiar about it—ancient even—and this feeling was produced *by* the horror of her work, not in spite of it.



Cover of *The Plague Mass* (1991)

Recorded live in 1990 at Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, *The Plague Mass* was conceived as a performance piece, enabling Galás to use sound to move in a messy, unstructured, and often terrifying way across multi-dimensional space. Her sonic trajectories seemed to take my global, abstract fears and make them intimate and concrete. In “[Diamanda Galás: Defining the Space In-between](#),” Julia Meier describes Galás’s soundscape as composed of “chants, shrieks, gurgles, hisses often at extreme volumes, frequently distorted electronically and accompanied by a torrent of words” which defy description (2). In the space created by this cacophony, Galás mourns her brother, responding to the silence surrounding AIDS by making use of what composer and sound theorist [Yvon Bonenfant](#) refers to as “queer timbres” in “[Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres](#),” the unique, dynamic sounds of desire and self in the voice that also operate as a kind of touch, a reaching out to other desired and desiring bodies. In homage to [Antonin Artaud](#)’s theory of the [theater of cruelty](#)—in which audiences are exposed through multisensory domains to truths they often do not wish to see—Galás uses queer timbres to form an outsized means of aural communication in *The Plague Mass* that fills more affective space than standard musical productions or theater productions. The shrieks and howls suggest Galás as depicted on the album’s cover: flayed, raw, and radically open to the passage of every vibration. By erasing semantic and syntactical codes, these sounds deeply engage the entire body in the process of making sound.



001000 Antonin Artaud (1896-1948).
Credit: Rue des Archives / The Granger Collection, New York

Artaud

Queering the traditional theater, Artaud argued for new intersensuality that would occupy space in a three-dimensional manner. In [The Theater and Its Double](#), Artaud describes how the “intensities of colors, lights, or sounds, which utilize vibration, tremors, repetition, whether of a musical rhythm or a spoken phrase, special tones or a general diffusion of light, can obtain their full effect only by *dissonances*. But instead of limiting these dissonances to a single sense, we shall cause them to overlap from one sense to the other” (125). Texturing sound, or working with dissonance and disruption to create a more forceful product, offered Artaud a unique play between the senses, allowing it a more direct and apparent physical impact upon the bodies of both performers and the audience.

The plague and how it inhabits and destroys bodies is a central metaphor for sound and language in the work of both Artaud and Galás. Artaud focused much of his theory on the plague as an example not only of an affective space but also as a transformative event in human history and in individual lives. Artaud’s writing on the plague, however, also garnered him harsh criticism. By suggesting a theater in which language became subordinate to the shriek, the grunt or other non-semantic orality, he decried all of traditional French theater and its lofty legacy. Nonetheless, he was invited to speak about his essay “The Theater and the Plague” at the Sorbonne. Deciding to actually incorporate his ideas about “liquefying boundaries,” he began speaking in a standard oratorical mode but slowly devolved into a theatrical performance of the plague, eventually ending in shrieks of physical pain. In [Watchfiends & Rack Screams](#), Clayton Eshleman describes how, by the end of his speech, the only people left in the lecture hall were a minor contingent of his close friends, including Anais Nin, who recounted the tale (12). The shrieks, the howls are all a further way to engage the whole body in the process of making sound, while also erasing semantic and syntactical code. In Gilles Deleuze’s estimation of Artaud’s work in [The Logic of Sense](#), it reached the depths of language: “The word no longer expresses an attribute of the state of affairs; its fragments merge with unbearable sonorous qualities, invade the body where they form a mixture and a new state of affairs... In this passion, a pure language-affect is substituted for the effect of language” (89).



<https://youtu.be/VpfO99lYPQc>

Jaap Blonk performs Artaud's "To Have Done with the Judgement of God"

Reflecting and refracting Artaud, Galás uses the space of *The Plague Mass* to re-consider and re-theorize the ailing body. In her work the body represents not just Galás herself, but also the bodies of all the afflicted, the bodies issuing negation of suffering, and finally, the collective body of the spectacle of the AIDS crisis. Like Artaud, Galás sees the plague of AIDS as transformative, but without the safe buffer provided by the critical space of history. This plague is instead an immediate issue made all the more volatile due to the refusal to help the victims by the conservative Reagan administration as well as the rigidity of the Catholic Church's encoded dogma that characterizes homosexuality as sinful depravity and refuses to acknowledge the need for AIDS education and condom distribution. Galás evidences this in the opening track "There Are No More Tickets to the Funeral" which incorporates traditional Christian hymns, liturgical representations of condemnation, and the voices of the afflicted.



<https://youtu.be/m6S4t2lS-5I>

These appropriated sounds circulate in constant tension, queering the ominous, authoritative patriarchal drones by contrasting them to the timbres of desire and pain embodied by the shrieks. In “Confessional (Give Me Sodomy or Give Me Death),” the narrator’s voice bleeds into the frantic voice of the defiant dying, blending in with the conjured voices of angels of death that hover over the bed. This commentary places the listener in a very immediate and uncomfortable multidimensional space encompassing several terrifying aspects of death. Here Galás exemplifies Bonenfant’s queer timbres through the tactile effect of layered sound that is felt with the skin, in the bones, as well as with the ears, communicating a palpable experience that lies beyond the barely-nuanced music it is seductively easy to grow accustomed to.



<https://youtu.be/SAvsgUR9RBU>

It is Galás’s use of sound’s affective properties that makes *The Plague Mass* most effective as queered communication. In “This is the Law of the Plague” she incorporates elements of glossolalia, colloquially known in religious communities as “speaking in tongues,” a speech act that embodies voice by implying a physical loss of control of the body as well as the casting off of concrete linguistic structure. Galás’s use of glossolalia deliberately blurs the border between spiritual possession and the madness inherent to AIDS as the virus passed through the blood/brain barrier of its human host.



<https://youtu.be/LEKuX8arORc>

Aided by electronics, Galás's vocals begin as the chant of orator. Punctuated by a throbbing, sparse single drum-beat, her sickened, keening crawl of words enumerates in detail what it is that defines a person as unclean. The language is precisely enunciated, each word sharply edged and cornered—a practice that would no doubt double Artaud over in pain, given his struggle with schizophrenia that left him vulnerable to crisp sounds. Slowly, Galás's voice rises to the shriek of a pious, avenging angel, a shrill, wail shimmering with vibrato communicating the sound of a raptured body, rent in chaotic ecstasy. Eventually her ululations are submerged in a bath of primordial babble, a place where language moves in every direction through a body somehow more permeable, a sonic space that Deleuze would describe as topographic, that is, possessing heights and depths. Enacting and inviting the babble of the mad and the afflicted maintains a red line on the tolerance of the listener's psyche before returning, without ceremony, to the sparse and cold incantations of the church. Here queer(ed) timbres push the audience to limits well past the reaches of patriarchal or accepted sound; Galas plays along the edge of tolerance before dropping the audience abruptly back into the decidedly colder and less humane sonic tropes of an unforgiving religion.

Galás's sonic practices encourage in me a listening that reaches out into space to connect with these sounds, whose physicality communicates fears and apprehensions that are old enough to feel genetically encoded in my psyche. Bonenfant describes this reaching as "queer listening," an extrinsic process based on desire in which "we listen 'out' for (reaching towards) voices that we think will gratify us" (77). Bonenfant queers the body in the process of sound; it becomes abstracted, absorbed into a process and functioning on many layers that include—but also subsume—the subjective Cartesian body of agency we are comfortable with. The body becomes bodies, and it becomes present in spaces that go beyond the immediate space it occupies in space/time. Galas traverses time and space in *The Plague Mass*, from the ancient litanies of hymns and spirituals to the anguish of those afflicted with AIDS, and layers voice on voice until they are inextricable, a huge din telling more than just a story, or *The Story* but the stories of many.



Image by Flickr User 1v0

In a personal e-mail exchange, Bonenfant clarified his relation to both Artaud and Galás. When asked if he was influenced by Artaud he explained:

Not directly, but certainly indirectly, and his ideas affect extended voice practice generally. I think the idea of the 'theatre of cruelty' is often deeply misunderstood and it was a product of its time. I understand Artaud to have been crying out for an anti-bourgeois theatre that actually stirred people up. But stirring people up is only part of the story. What stirs some, attracts others. Now, my argument is more that: these voices we might call 'queer' stir SOME people up but actually they ATTRACT others – others who might be seeking queered bodies to contact.

Bonenfant went on to explain that artists such as Galás can thus make contact with people who desire the kind of disruption or 'stirring' that they provide. He went on to relate a story that Galás shared in an interview, in which she described a performance in which she looked out at the audience and noticed a very young boy listening to her perform. For the rest of the concert, Galás said she felt guilty for the damage she was undoubtedly inflicting on the young boy's ears and psyche. However, after the concert the boy approached her and thanked her profusely. It turns out that he had suffered from a terminal and painful illness and felt unable to express the physical and emotional distress that he lived with. Here, though, was an artist onstage articulating it, broadcasting it to him and others, for him and others. This is what Bonenfant refers to as "an affective, somatic bond" created through shared sonic experience, and this is what Galás constructs. By standard definitions *The Plague Mass* is almost unlistenable, but yet it has connected audiences remote in space and time (a nod here to [Karen Tongson's "remote intimacy"](#)). A sonic reaching out attracting listeners similarly reaching, its indelicate music draws the suffering near, providing a form of collective comfort by exploring and embodying the

suffering, grief, and rage located beyond the permeable membrane of conscious thought and feeling.



Diamanda Galas performing in the 1980s, Image Courtesy of Flickr User Carl Guderian

It is this kind of connection through a tonal richness that is uncoded but yet full of information that is radically important. Galás's groans, growls, and chants create an intersubjective circuit of communication that moves active listening outside of the body and draws visceral connections in a three-dimensional psychic space. This is what Galás immediately stirred in me back in 1994, and what I have been determined to recover and communicate since that first listening cut me to the quick. Queer listening does not just entail an affirmation of the soundtracks of queer lives—a kind of perpetual disco, 12" remix project—but rather it also demands a critical—and visceral—vulnerability to the jarring, violent world arranged against queer agency.

Galás's work hijacks the elegy and queers it, extending it to us as an offering against the true horror: the official silence in the face of so much death.

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Featured Image of Diamanda Galás courtesy of Flickr user [digital_freak](#)

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A Taurus who enjoys the ocean, [Airek Beauchamp](#) is currently at SUNY Binghamton pursuing his PhD in Creative Writing. He also studies composition pedagogy and queer theory, although he is becoming more and more seduced by sound studies. He can rock a disco all night or just stay in and maybe catch up on some 30 Rock. Some call him fancy, some call him a bitch, but really he is both. He is a multiplicity of multiplicities, all in one mortal shell.