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{ An evening at Cinema for the Ear. }

SCOTT HUNTER | JULY 15, 2013



A couple weeks ago, while taking advantage of a 2-for-1 happy hour in the East Village, a friend and I found ourselves in conversation with a fellow named Lex. He told us he was interested in aural art, and as we were a few beers deep and my friend has a habit of recording refrigerators, we became fast drinking friends that afternoon. Lex told us he was curating an event called Cinema for the Ear at Tribeca Cinema. My friend and I pulled out our phones and RSVPed while he was still there, just to show him we were serious. We actually went.

recordings intended for cinematic sound systems, and distribute them to theaters across the country, where people could go enjoy a composition the way they would a movie—in the air conditioning, on a high-quality system, eating Milk Duds.

The July 11th presentation was the second Cinema for the Ear event in NYC to date. It was put on by ((audience)) and LMCC as part of the River To River festival, and the piece presented was JG Thirlwell's *Manorexia: Dinoflagellate Blooms*. Thirlwell is best known, perhaps, for his work as Foetus, which started out in the '90s as a sort of screechy industrial project, though far more interesting than that description implies. Foetus's output in the 2000s combines psychedelic grandiosity, pop hooks, and classical complexity to a really jarring and powerful effect. It's the dark side of the *Sgt. Pepper's*-era Beatles, maybe with PTSD. And *Manorexia* is Foetus's mute, brilliant, pop-averse, possibly schizophrenic twin—on *Dinoflagellate Blooms*, Thirlwell forgoes vocals entirely, excepting a frantic, anxiety-inducing sample of a woman talking too fast.

When I arrived, I saw Thirlwell in the lobby and introduced myself. He said "we've met before," which we hadn't, but I told him of course, we were old friends. Then I went to sit down in the theater, where a very drunk woman offered me popcorn, which I politely refused. Thirlwell, who at once resembles an omniscient 80-year-old and a hip 20-year-old, introduced the piece. "Slipping out of consciousness is quite desirable, for this work, but if your neighbor starts snoring, jab them."

Dinoflagellate Blooms was recorded for 5.1, the chosen format for film soundtracks. Played over the sound system in a movie theater, it becomes a swirling, immersive experience—I didn't know what the action was, but it was overwhelming and I was right in the middle of it, resisting the urge to open my eyes during some of the more startling moments. The overall feeling was similar to watching an intense scene in a science fiction film, in which the protagonist's legs are being sawed off while Darth Vader claims paternity, and an alien digs itself out of a clown's stomach off to the side. But I was also thinking about Edgard Varèse, whose orchestral work Thirlwell's resembles quite closely. Like Varèse, Thirlwell has an element of Dada humor that you can't really ignore—I said earlier that I didn't know what the action was, but at one point it seemed everyone in the theater was brushing their teeth and being swarmed by monstrous flies. And at another point, I was in the midst of an army of wind-up toys overheating. In retrospect, I could have used an intermission or a nap, because the whole thing was very intense, but as a friend kindly put it, "you're a coward."

Sitting still in a dark room, with nothing to look at but the back of people's heads and the red glow of the exit sign, one is forced to choose either a deep engagement with the music or an intense boredom with life. Closing your eyes and engaging with music as looming and delirious as Thirlwell's can be incredibly transportive—you are stuck with your own thoughts, reactions, and visualizations, which can be almost as good as watching *Star Wars* on the big screen. What it lacks in the things we usually expect from cinema (namely, a story or a pretty lead actress), it makes up for in privileging a sense that is usually ignored in the art world, the sense of hearing. This repurposing of the cinema is a promising avenue for composers and aural artists to further explore, and I look forward to it gaining traction.

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