SNOW, REPETITION AND OBLIVION: ECOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS IN BEAT FURRER'S RECENT WORK

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Abstract: The natural world is a frequent touchstone for the Swiss-born Austrian composer Beat Furrer. In the operatic work *Violetter Schnee* (2019), for instance, images of snow and coldness take on a central role. Other works, such as *Wüstenbuch* (2009) and the *Spazio Immergente* triptych (2015), refer more indirectly to notions of barren landscapes and ecological excess. At the basis of all these works are sentiments of slippage and loss, of far-reaching melancholia and an unrepairable detachment from reality. The composer's multi-layered use of repetition further underlines these sentiments and aids in the creation of constantly shifting sonic landscapes. This article argues that the recurrent use of nature imagery in Furrer's work signposts a latent ecological dimension in his oeuvre. In doing so, the article focuses on the slipperiness of musical repetition, and more particularly on the heavily destabilising power of the loop. Taking *Violetter Schnee* as the starting point for inquiry, and using Timothy Morton's philosophical project of 'dark ecology' as a heuristic framework, the article reads Furrer's recent work against the background of ecological critique.

> I see it as a tragic fact that we have become separated from nature. The decision to separate man from nature was already taken in Aristotle's time. A fatal mistake.[1]

The natural world is a recurring trope in the work of Beat Furrer. Notions of snow, ice and coldness, for instance, feature prominently in works such as *voicelessness – the snow has no voice* (1986), *Schneeszenen* (Snow Scenes, 2019) and *Violetter Schnee* (Violet Snow, 2019). Conceptually opposite but nevertheless closely related themes of heat, sand and barren landscapes are at the heart of works such as *Face de la chaleur* (Facing the Heat, 1991), *Wüstenbuch* (The Desert Book, 2009) and *Spazio Immergente* (Immeasurable Space, 2015). Works such as *canti notturni* (Nocturnal Songs, 2006), *canti della tenebra* (Songs of Darkness, 2011–12) and *la bianca notte/the bright night* (2013–15) revolve around topics of shadows and nighttime, and the vastness

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[1] Beat Furrer quoted in Thea Derks, 'Composer Beat Furrer: "We Have Become Detached from Nature"', Contemporary Classical – Thea Derks, https://theaderks.wordpress.com/2022/05/04/composer-beat-furrer-we-have-become-detached-from-nature/ (accessed 31 May 2023).

of the sea is a prominent thematic motif in *Invocation* (2002–2003). The themes of nightfall and water – in this case, the Mapocho river – are combined in *Dort ist das Meer – nachts steig ich hinab* (There is the Sea – In the Night, I Descend, 1986). A far less common reference to the animal world is found in *mia vita da vuolp* (My Life as a Fox, 2019). Although the titles of several of Furrer's works explicitly suggest a thematic engagement with nature, other such references are more covert. *Lotófagos* (The Lotus Eaters, 2007), for instance, tells the mythical story of people who would purposefully feed on the fruits and flowers of the lotus tree, only to fall asleep in peaceful, memoryless apathy. In the orchestral work *Sechs Gesänge* (Six Songs, 2022), Furrer contemplates the fate of indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon who were forced to cut their traditional ties with nature.

In this article, I argue that the recurrent use of nature imagery, such as landscapes, animals and atmospheric conditions, signposts a latent ecological dimension in Furrer's work. One of the most explicit examples of Furrer's use of nature imagery is found in *Violetter Schnee*, a large-scale operatic work scored for orchestra, mixed choir, five vocal soloists and narrator. Taking this niveous work as a starting point for analysis, the article points outwards to identify ecological dimensions in various other works, such as *Wüstenbuch* and *Spazio Immergente*, and establishes a connection between the composer's oeuvre and Timothy Morton's eco-philosophical project of 'dark ecology'.

Morton's philosophical work combines ecological theory with object-oriented ontology (commonly abbreviated to OOO), a philosophical movement which rejects the anthropocentric privilege of human existence over its non-human, or 'object', counterpart.[2] OOO maintains that the non-human exists outside human perception and is, therefore, not ontologically exhausted by its relationships to human existence. In other words, there is no 'outside' of reality: reality is real and sensuous, even though it may sometimes escape knowability. Graham Harman, whose work on the metaphysics of objects eventually led to the development of OOO in the late 1990s, states that '[r]eality is the rock against which our various ships always founder, and as such it must be acknowledged and revered, however elusive it may be'.[3]

Morton's 'dark ecology', then, offers an ecological perspective on OOO and urges a radical re-evaluation of our human entanglement with the natural world. It is essentially a project of ecological criticism, which starts from the premise that the ecological 'catastrophe' prophesied by many climate scientists today 'has already occurred'.[4] Morton claims that there is an inevitable 'negativity and irony, ugliness and horror'[5] to ecological thought: since we, as humans, are deeply intertwined with our non-human counterparts, there is no external metaposition, no ideologically neutral ground from which to make ecological claims. Instead, all beings – both human and non-human

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[2] The term 'object-oriented philosophy' was coined in 1999 by the American philosopher Graham Harman and rephrased as 'object-oriented ontology' by Levi R. Bryant in 2009. The term has since been adopted and adapted by philosophers in many different fields, including Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton. The work of authors such as Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Bruno Latour, although they do not explicitly associate with the movement, also resonates with object-oriented ontology. See Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2017).

[3] Ibid., p. 7.

[4] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 17.

[5] Ibid., p. 16.

alike – are already implicated in ecology. Ecological awareness, according to Morton, is thus 'weird'[6] and 'uncanny',[7] as it defines human experience and reflexivity as part of ecology; we, as humans, are not distant bystanders to the current ecological crisis but are interdependent with it.

Existing, no matter what. . .

To date, the most explicit example of ecological engagement in Furrer's work is found in *Violetter Schnee*. Its libretto, written by the composer's long-time collaborator Händl Klaus, is loosely based on the work of the Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin. In Sorokin's dystopic, satirical and highly repetitive novels, snow is a frequently recurring trope. As a substance that sits in-between being liquid and being frozen, snow is used by Sorokin as a metaphor for liminal spaces and phases of transition.[8] Similarly, the five protagonists of *Violetter Schnee* seem to be caught in limbo. They are stuck in a house together during what appears to be a never-ending blizzard. The situation they find themselves in is dire, to say the least: the sun has disappeared completely and it is snowing incessantly in the middle of summer. Nevertheless, they desperately try to maintain certain routines: they burn furniture for heat and brew tea from molten snow. Slowly, but certainly, the relationships between them start to dissipate. As time progresses, the scenic actions become more and more repetitive, while the conversations between the protagonists start to circle around the same set of topics over and over again (the house, the snow, the cold). Eventually, dialogues turn into simultaneous monologues and stuttering, indicating that the communication between the protagonists is breaking down. Language fails, and there is nothing left to talk about.

Throughout, Klaus' libretto emphasises fragmentation and association, strictly evading clarity as if mirroring the relentless snowfall. Musically, this transition from naïve hope to utter despair is apparent in the orchestral score, which shifts from a highly fragmented multitude of individual and generally high-pitched sound events in the opening 'Prolog' to a much broader, more bass-oriented and highly resonant soundscape in the closing act (Vierte Episode, Act IV, Scene 34). This could also be read as a sonic mirror to the plot's incessant snowfall, which eventually forms thick layers blanketing the stage. A similar transition into apathy and despair is marked in the vocal soloist parts, which feature highly dramatic melodic lines with expressive dynamic and intervallic leaps at the beginning of the work and conjunct, quasi-monotonous melodies, the use of Sprechgesang and an overarching *p* dynamic in its final scenes.[9]

This intense feeling of isolation experienced by the five protagonists – of losing hope and, as a result, withdrawing into oneself and one's

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[6] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 6.

[7] Ibid., p. 5.

[8] Mark Lipovetsky, 'Fleshing/Flashing Discourse: Sorokin's Master Trope', in *Postmodern Crises: From Lolita to Pussy Riot*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017), pp. 25–47.

[9] Andreas Karl also identifies a shift in the intervallic content of the melodic lines in the vocal parts, noting that '[t]heir intervals get smaller and smaller towards the end of the opera'. Andreas Karl, 'Metamorphosis and Filters. An Introduction to the Composer Beat Furrer', *Academia*, 30 June 2020, www.academia.edu/44395000/Metamorphosis_and_filters_An_introduction_to_the_composer_Beat_Furrer, p. 29 (accessed 14 February 2022).

routines – is an example of what Timothy Morton describes as an 'existence no matter what': a mode of being stripped entirely of its human joys and qualities, a feeling of 'numbness or shock'.[10] Morton argues that this type of existence is common nowadays, and more particularly, that it is a sign of 'impending doom', signalling the moment that '[e]verything starts to go haywire'.[11] They argue:

> Like when someone has a seizure, and their brain waves become beautifully regular just beforehand. Or before an earthquake, when the same thing happens to the tectonic plates... The inner logic of the smoothly functioning system – right up until the moment at which it wasn't smoothly functioning, aka now – consists of logical axioms that have to do with survival no matter what. Existence no matter what. Existing overriding any *quality* of existing – human existing that is... Existence above and beyond qualities. This supremacy of existing is a default ontology and a default utilitarianism, and before any of it was philosophically formalized, it was built into social space, which now means pretty much the entire surface of Earth.[12]

The sentiment of 'things going haywire' signals a moment of crisis which, according to Morton, is central to the 'transitional phase' the planet is in now. A central claim in their project of dark ecology is that the planet is currently entering a new geological epoch: the so-called 'Anthropocene', in which human influence significantly shapes the earth's geology and ecosystems. The transition towards this new era is marked by rapid, anthropogenic environmental change and is accompanied by what Morton refers to as 'ecological awareness, dark-depressing... [and] dark-uncanny'[13]: the haunting and deeply existential realisation that the world as we know it is not ending but has already come to an end, an idea also echoed musically in *Violetter Schnee* at the end of Peter's 'Angstarie' (Fear Aria, Act I, Scene 14), where Peter sings: 'schon bin ich gestorben' ('I have already died'; see Example 1).

The repetitive structure of the loop is a recurring image in Morton's work. In their 2016 book *Dark Ecology*, for instance, this manifests in the shape of interchangeable opening and concluding chapters, repetitive wordplay (such as 'weird weirdness' and 'the strange stranger') and several artistic renderings of ouroboroi scattered throughout the pages. Morton argues that '[e]cological awareness is weird: it has a twisted, looping form'. They continue: '[a] strange loop is weirdly weird: a turn of events that has an uncanny appearance. And this defines emerging ecological awareness occurring to 'civilized' people at this moment.'[14] In other words, dark ecology, which Morton describes as a 'bardo-like transition space', is an experience in which the familiar suddenly feels unsettlingly unfamiliar.[15]

Repetition is also a central feature of Furrer's music. In *Violetter Schnee*, this translates to the composer's signature use of what I call 'microvariations': incessant near-exact repetitions of cells and motifs, which aid in the creation of a constantly shifting musical landscape. The effect of these microvariations, in which the difference between repeating cells sits just below the threshold of perception, is one of 'spinning out and away, of losing one's way and eventually getting lost in a strange and complex landscape'.[16] Morton Feldman describes

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[10] Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 36.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., pp. 35–36.
[13] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, p. 5.
[14] Ibid., p. 6, 7.
[15] Morton, *All Art is Ecological*, p. 25.
[16] Christine Dysers, *Critical Guides to Contemporary Composers: Bernhard Lang* (Bristol: Intellect, 2023), p. 59.

Example 1:
End of Peter's 'Angstarie', *Violetter Schnee* (Act I, Scene 14), bars 749–57.
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the highly destabilising effect of musical repetition in his work as 'a disorientation of memory', whereby 'there is a suggestion that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin – where all the buildings look alike, even if they're not'.[17] Through its emphasis on musical repetition, Furrer's work explicitly foregrounds sentiments of slippage and loss, of memory and the loss thereof, of far-reaching melancholia and an unrepairable detachment from reality. As such, a parallel can be drawn between Furrer's use of repetition and the 'weird weirdness' Morton associates with the repetitive structure of loops: '[t]he loop form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing'.[18]

Much like Morton's writing, Furrer's work explores repetition on several different levels. Beyond the musical, repetition is often found on the level of the textual, taking the shape of repetitive language and even the repetition of pre-existing literary works. One could argue that the practice of subsequently de- and re-contextualising a pre-existing artwork is by definition an act of estrangement: a defamiliarisation and decentring. As mentioned earlier, the plot of *Violetter Schnee* is itself repetitive, its five protagonists seemingly stuck in repetitive acts and utterances. The opera also features intertextuality, both in its libretto and its stage design. The opening 'Prolog' starts with a heavily microtonal orchestral overture, after which the mixed choir introduces a slightly adapted quote from the didactic poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*, first century BC). The poem, by the Roman writer-philosopher Lucretius, describes several apocalyptic scenarios in which the world transforms into an unfathomable void of timeless nothingness. The poem is referenced often by Furrer, with fragments of it appearing in works such as *Wüstenbuch* and the *Spazio Immergente* triptych, signalling the composer's tacit engagement with issues of climate change and ecology. The quote used in *Violetter Schnee* is taken from the first book (lines 1102–10) and describes a scenario in which the world comes to a catastrophic end:

> ne volucri ritu flammarum moenia mundi
> diffugiant subito magnum per inane solute
> et ne cetera consimili ratione sequantur
> neve ruant caeli tonitralia templa superne
> terraque se pedibus raptim subducat et omnis
> inter permixtas rerum caelique ruinas
> corpora solventes abeat per inane profundum.

> so that the world's walls do not, like wings of flame,
> suddenly disperse, scattering themselves
> through the enormous void, and other parts
> do not, in a similar way, follow them,
> and the innermost regions of the sky
> do not fall down and, underneath our feet,
> earth does not at once withdraw and all things
> disappear, with substances being dissolved
> in piled-up ruins of sky and matter,
> parts scattering through the cavernous void.[19]

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[17] Morton Feldman, 'Crippled Symmetry' (1981), in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), p. 138.

[18] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 6.

[19] Translation by Ian Johnston, 2010, http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/lucretius/lucretius1html.html (accessed 13 July 2023).

Lucretius' apocalyptic imagery is not to be misunderstood: the world is coming to a fast, devastating and inevitable end. Fragments of the text reappear in each of *Violetter Schnee*'s four acts, or 'episodes', both in the original choral setting and scattered in the solo parts, the image of a world-shattering catastrophe lingering throughout the work as an ominous foreboding.

The 2019 scenography for *Violetter Schnee* by Claus Guth also refers back to an older source. Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *Jagers in de sneeuw* (*The Hunters in the Snow*, 1565) is a recurring visual motif in both the work's stage design and its scenic actions (see Figure 1). The painting, which is part of a series of works depicting the seasons of the year, shows a village scene in the dead of winter. The overall atmosphere of the work is dark and gloomy, with its colour palette largely limited to muted greys, whites and browns. Interestingly, Brueghel's landscape constructs a fictitious geographical location that combines typical Dutch architectural elements with ragged, alpine mountain peaks and a traditional German castle. The bottom left of the painting shows three hunters returning from an unsuccessful outing: the men and their dogs appear weary and defeated, with one of the men carrying the meagre carcass of a fox. The diagonal movement of the composition leads the gaze towards a snow-packed watermill with its wheel frozen shut.[20] Down in the valley, the townspeople are shown carelessly ice-skating and playing early forms of ice hockey and curling on a large frozen lake, as if unaware of the hunger that awaits them. In the far background, just behind the lake, disaster has struck, as heavy smoke rising from a chimney suggests a fire in a remote farmhouse. In the central foreground, a magpie is circling

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[20]   Michel Weemans, 'Pieter Bruegel's Hunters in the Snow and Insidiosus Auceps as Trap Images', in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Religion*, eds. Bertram Kaschek, Jürgen Müller and Jessica Buskirk (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), p. 266.

the scene while crows are looking down from the arid trees in which they rest. Arguing that '[m]agpies and crows are generally birds of ill omen in Bruegel's paintings', Michel Weemans claims that much of the imagery used in *Jagers in de sneeuw* points towards '[t]he idea of a threatening and insidious evil presence'.[21]

Although Weemans' analysis largely suggests a religious interpretation of the painting, in which it offers an ominous allegory for the Christian motifs of hell and the devil, an ecological reading is also possible, the painting anticipating the grim but inevitable reality of climate change. It is noteworthy that the work was created during the so-called Grindelwald Fluctuation, from 1560 to 1628. This is generally believed to have been the coldest stretch of an era described as the Little Ice Age (c. 1300–c. 1850), a 'chilly climatic regime' which '[u]ntil the recent onset of global warming... may have been the most significant climatic anomaly to affect the Northern Hemisphere in at least 6,000 years'.[22] These ecological changes caused severe harvest failure, economic recession, socio-political unrest and death throughout the North Atlantic region, a situation not too different from the one the global community is faced with today.[23]

In Guth's stage design, *Violetter Schnee* opens with a mise-en-abyme. Behind a projection of Brueghel's painting, one of the five protagonists, Tanja, is shown looking at the painting in a museum ('Prolog', see Figure 2). Tanja faints and wakes up in a house with the four others (Act I, Scene 1). As the five protagonists emerge from the house by repeatedly climbing the stairs to the roof, other people appear in the distance. They are Brueghel's subjects: the hunters with their long arrows, elderly women with hunched-over postures collecting wood for a fire, and groups of townspeople, all dressed in thick layers of clothing. Linda Hutcheon refers to the mise-en-abyme as 'an internal self-reflecting mirror', which signals the work's 'dual ontological status', existing both within its own (fictional) reality – the world of the narrative, idea or emotion depicted by the artwork – and outside it, situated in a distinct historical, geographical and socio-cultural reality, the world in which we live.[24] In other words, the mise-en-abyme provides a site for socio-cultural self-reflection and self-analysis. The message is clear: the five protagonists are caught in Brueghel's painting, living its grim reality of irreparable climate change, Morton's 'super wicked problem... for which time is running out, for which there is no central authority; those seeking the solution are also creating it, and policies discount the future irrationally'.[25]

... in barren landscapes...

Throughout *Violetter Schnee*, the omnipresence of snow as both a narrative and a visual trope serves as a metaphor for climate change and ecological catastrophe. Are we headed towards a new ice age? Or will we never see snow again? The relentless blizzard at the heart of the plot also reads as an allegory for isolation, bleakness and death. It represents stillness and, by extension, deafness or apathy towards

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[21] Ibid., p. 265.
[22] Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 2.
[23] Ibid., p. 3.
[24] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 31.
[25] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 37.

Figure 2:
Brueghel as a central image in Claus Guth's stage design for Beat Furrer's *Violetter Schnee* (2019). Photo © Monika Rittershaus; used with permission.

the ecological realities of climate change. In her autobiographic novel *The Faraway Nearby* (2013), Rebecca Solnit describes the deep uncanniness of an arctic landscape:

> The far north is an unearthly earth, where much of what those of us in temperate zones were told is universal is not true. Everyone walks on water, which is a solid. In winter, you can build palaces out of it, or houses out of snow. Ice is blue. Snow insulates. Water crystallizes into floating mountains that destroy whatever collides with them. Many other things turn hard as rock in the cold. Nothing decays, and so time stops for the dead, if not the living.[26]

Are the five protagonists desperately sticking to their routines because they are aware of the ultimate powerlessness and insignificance of their individual actions (as Morton notes, '[o]ne car ignition firing doesn't cause global warming'[27])? Or are they blissfully ignorant of the situation, unknowingly accepting their apocalyptic fate, living life in what Morton poetically describes as 'the gentle slope of the upwardly moving rollercoaster that you don't even suspect to be a rollercoaster'[28])? Comparable metaphors of ecological hopelessness are found in Furrer's musical theatre work *Wüstenbuch*, for small orchestra, actors and vocal ensemble with solo parts. In several respects, *Wüstenbuch* is the polar opposite of *Violetter Schnee*, in that its plot revolves around a journey through the desert. As such, the work deals with imagery of the scorching heat versus *Violetter Schnee*'s bitter cold, the dryness of aridity versus frozen precipitation. Nevertheless, their respective geographical landscapes have much in common as places of uninhabitable ecological excess. The composer refers to desert landscapes as 'places of silence that make concentration possible': in other words, places of loneliness and isolation in which one is faced with oneself and, ultimately, confronted with

[26] Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (New York: Viking Press, 2013), p. 223.
[27] Morton, *All Art is Ecological*, p. 7.
[28] Ibid., p. 36.

one's mortality.[29] Just like the snow in *Violetter Schnee*, the desert in *Wüstenbuch* is a similarly desolate and barren landscape and, as such, also functions as a metaphor for death, loss, isolation and profound emptiness.

As a sonic metaphor, snow suggests softness and stillness.[30] In the world of acoustics, snow is known for its naturally dampening qualities, with just a few inches of it capable of absorbing up to 60 per cent of sounds within the audible range.[31] Furrer had previously explored snow as a metaphor for silence and stillness in *voicelessness – the snow has no voice*, for piano solo. With dynamic markings ranging from *mp* to *ppppp* and a tempo indication that reads 'sehr ruhig – gespannt – schimmernd' (very quiet – tense – shimmering), the work is at the same time delicately fragile and eerily strained. In its soundworld, this earlier work of Furrer's is reminiscent of the late works of Morton Feldman, with slowly shifting repetitions that create a nervously drifting, quasi-static landscape. In *Violetter Schnee*, the deafening silence of excessive snowfall is referenced several times throughout the libretto, perhaps most explicitly in Act I, Scene 15, where four of the protagonists insist that they 'cannot hear anything, nothing but the snow' ('ich höre – nichts – nichts – ist – zu hören – nichts – nichts – als – der Schnee'). Musically, this translates to a reduction in the orchestral score, which is largely stripped of its wind section. The remainder of the musicians are left with a score that prescribes an overall *p* to *pppp* dynamic and explores a multitude of extended techniques (see Example 2). The string writing features high overtones in the violin section and the bowing of the bridge in the lower strings. The piano is made resonant through a gentle stroking of the strings, both with the player's fingertips and a guitar plectrum. The recorder, trumpet, trombone and tuba players are asked to vocalise various shushing sounds into their instruments ('chu', 'hu', 'cha'). These are then mirrored in the vocal parts, which are largely dominated by the use of Sprechstimme. Combined, these extended techniques render the score with an overall eerie and fragile atmosphere, a sort of barren soundscape. Guth's 2019 stage design for *Violetter Schnee* gives the idea of soundlessness or muted sound a visual counterpart with thick artificial snowfall and low-angled, deep blue and eventually ultraviolet stage lighting blurring both the audience's and the performers' vision (see Figure 3). To a certain extent, this idea of blurring also raises questions about ecological change in the current sociopolitical climate of fake news misinformation: unable to see clearly, what is one to believe?

. . . and, finally, into oblivion

The deep-purple stage lighting that gives the snow its titular violet hue in the final seconds of *Violetter Schnee* signals a total obliteration of sorts. During the fourth and final episode (Act IV, Scene 34), the blizzard finally seems to settle. As the snowfall starts to slow, the five protagonists and the silent Brueghelian bystanders come face to

[29] Beat Furrer quoted in Summer Banks, 'A Chat with... Beat Furrer', *ExBerliner*, 1 March 2010), www.exberliner.com/stage/a-chat-with-beat-furrer/ (accessed 6 August 2023).

[30] For an in-depth analysis of how notions of softness, stillness and silence have helped shape musical culture in the traditionally colder-climate regions of the Nordics, see Andrew Mellor, *The Northern Silence: Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

[31] David Herrin cited in 'The Science behind Snow's Serenity', *Science Daily*, 21 January 2016, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/01/160121150503.htm (accessed 25 June 2023).

Example 2:

Snow as a sonic metaphor in *Violetter Schnee* (Act I, Scene 15), bars 758–75. © Bärenreiter Verlag; used with permission.

Example 2:
Continued.

Figure 3:

Heavy snowfall blurs the vision in Claus Guth's stage design for Beat Furrer's *Violetter Schnee* (2019). Photo © Monika Rittershaus; used with permission.

face with a giant ball of light that is falling down from the sky. Their vision is blurred and eventually, for just a brief few seconds, everything turns purple and, more importantly, silent. Straight after that, everything goes dark. Has the world as we know it come to an end? And if so, does that mean humankind will not survive?

Although Morton's project of dark ecology does suggest that the world as we know it has indeed ended, they maintain that this does not mean a definite end, but a mere transition-to. They argue that '[o]pposing anthropocentrism doesn't mean that we hate humans and that we want ourselves to go extinct. What it means is seeing how we humans are included in the biosphere as one being among others.'[32] In other words, Morton suggests a radical re-evaluation of our human entanglement with nature. Being ecological, they argue, is realising that we as humans do not hold any privilege over nature, but instead we are one with it; humankind is part of the natural world. Though the end of *Violetter Schnee* may seem to suggest a meteor impact, in which the earth is annihilated, this gesture of complete obliteration can also be read as the earth disintegrating into and thus being part of the cosmos. Individual existence makes way for shared co-existence, and the individual is lost into the mass. This idea is at the very core of OOO and is echoed musically in the closing scene of *Violetter Schnee* (Act IV, Scene 34), where the vocal solo parts dissolve entirely into the orchestral sound (see Example 3). The performance notes read: 'wie man einen neuen Planeten betreten würde – die Worte bedeuten nichts mehr, sie sind ganz in den Orchesterklang integriert' (like stepping on to a new planet – the words have lost all meaning; they are fully integrated into the orchestral sound). Whereas the orchestral score had initially served as a traditional backdrop for the vocal parts, voices and orchestra are now

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[32] Morton, *All Art is Ecological*, p. 30.

Example 3:
Loss of the individual into the collective: *Violetter Schnee* (Act IV, Scene 34), bars 1673–ff. © Bärenreiter Verlag; used with permission.

deeply interconnected, the boundaries between them blurred; metaphorically, there is no longer any distinction between the individual and the collective, the subject and the object, the human and the non-human.

Similar individual-to-collective motions can also be found in *mia vita da vuolp*, for soprano and baritone saxophone, in *Wüstenbuch* (specifically in Scene XI) and in *Lotófagos*, for soprano and double bass. In the latter work, the voice and the double bass explore the extremities of their pitch registers while also sometimes reuniting on a curious common ground where the soprano's lowest range meets the double bass' highest, in microtonal explorations of repeated cells. Sonically, this unusual combination results in an uncanny timbral space that lingers between stasis and movement. The work highlights difference and individual identity but also emphasises notions of sameness, similarity or at the very least a deep entanglement between what at first glance appear to be two entirely isolated entities. In *Spazio Immergente I*, for soprano and trombone, the timbral qualities of the voice and the trombone start to merge together, ultimately becoming indistinguishable from one another and thus, again, exploring the idea of the loss of the individual within the group, Morton's notion of ecological awareness as an 'inextricable coexistence with a host of entities that surround and penetrate us'.[33]

Reading Furrer's oeuvre through the lens of ecological awareness creates what Slavoj Žižek refers to as a 'short circuit': a critical reading that leads to 'the inherent decentring of the interpreted text, which brings to light its "unthought", its disavowed presuppositions and consequences'.[34] More specifically, it points towards a possible link between this oeuvre and Morton's eco-philosophical project of 'dark ecology'. Interestingly, Morton understands dark ecology largely as an aesthetic mode of thinking. Art, they argue, is a means of accessing this 'weird' and 'eerie' ecological awareness:

> Art is far from a superficial and exclusively human-flavoured region of reality. Whatever human art is, it is telling us something very deep about the structure of how things are: 'the structure of how things are' being a pretty good paraphrase of the word 'ontology'. Indeed, one of the things that art is telling us – that we still allow it (as opposed to what we expect from science textbooks, for instance) to tell us, perhaps – is something profound about the very workings of causality itself. OOO thinks of art not as decoration, but as the fundamental operation of cause and effect. To make an artwork is to interfere directly with the realm of causes and effects.[35]

Although the composer has never claimed any sort of socio-political agenda for his music, an ecological engagement shimmers through several of Furrer's works. The frequent allusions that the composer makes to nature imagery, in both the titles and the narrative plots of his works, hint at his deep affinity with the natural world. A 'dark ecological' reading of Furrer's work, however, reveals a multitude of more tacit ecological dimensions to his work, from the uncanny instabilities created by the composer's multi-layered use of repetition to the plea for a radical intraspecies coexistence suggested by his music's signature processes of fragmentation, disintegration and coalescence.

[33] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 160.
[34] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
[35] Timothy Morton, 'What If Art Were a Kind of Magic?', *ArtReview*, 10 December 2015, https://artreview.com/november-2015-feature-timothy-morton-charisma-causality (accessed 1 August 2023).