

Becoming Bear: On the Sami *Yoik*, Music, and Human Involution

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Abstract: Can a human become a bear? Starting from an analysis of Sami *yoik*, this chapter suggests how the notion of *becoming-animal* could shed a light on this musical practice and bring out some relevant ethico-aesthetical implications. The concept of *becoming-animal*, as theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, emphasises the proximity of the human and the non-human realm and, along with the *yoik*, shows the illusory nature of their division. The chapter discusses this theoretical-practical nexus and examines the potentialities of music and sound worlds in fostering a different arrangement of the way we perceive the world—freed from anthropocentrism's chains and contiguous with a non-human sensitivity.

Keywords: *yoik*, becoming-animal, soundscapes, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, non-human sensitivity

Introduction

Imagine hearing in the distance a chant that crosses the air and the trees while you are walking in the forest. It sounds like a human voice but, at the same time, you are not sure. It has a sort of melody, accompanied by meaningless noises or words that come from an unknown language. And slowly you start to believe that it is an animal—it seems to be a bear. You are invading its territory and you should have listened to the advice of not venturing alone in the woods. Indeed, it *could* be a bear; nonetheless, you are listening to a *yoik*, a traditional Sami chant.¹

¹ Here I am assuming the point of view of a person who is unfamiliar with Sami culture.

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The Sami are a people who inhabit the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. They have their own languages and old customs, which they try to preserve. One of the features of their musical traditions is the *yoik* that, in absence of a proper word, we could reductively define as folk singing. Yet, in many ways, *yoik* differs from the modern Western conception of a song. Its short, circular melody directly evokes the *presence* of what it is connected to. In fact, there is a *yoik* for each person and every animal or natural element, for instance, a river, a forest or a mountain. By performing this refrain you make the thing present; in a certain way, you call for its essence. *Yoik* can be performed in various situations, whether individual or collective, and it can intersect different dimensions, such as the biographic, relational, narrative, artistic, or ecological. The *yoik* also has a religious, shamanic valence for the Sami people. Because of its usage in pagan rituals, it was prohibited during the Christianisation of the Sami.

The *yoik* is not considered by the Sami as a sign, a reference for a meaning, as if it were a word or a metaphor: ‘this is not sound as mediation between people and environments [...] but a different understanding of the environment in which humans are a part’ (Ramnarine, 2009, p. 205). *Yoiks* are modelled on the character—the nature—of the person or the animal they are. *Yoiks* are not representations or ways of referring to something which remains inescapably absent. If you sing the *yoik* of one of your friends, you make him or her present with you, in you, around you.

More than a mere artistic expression, the *yoik* is a way of connecting to the environment, an immediate and a-signifying form of communication where music, existence and nature converge until they merge into one another. A process which refers to a logic completely different from Western rationality (Somby, 2007). Through *yoik*, sound-centred thinking and sensing is elicited along with a sympathetic disposition towards the non-human realm. Through *yoik*, animals acquire a new philosophical value as being something more than a mere piece of meat to be intensively bred and slaughtered.

The configuration disclosed through these practices relies on the Sami conception of world and life (see also Aamold et al., 2017). As musician and

anthropologist Tina Ramnarine underlines: ‘*joik* [sic.] performance [...] points to a complex set of relationships between music, environment, and the sacred’ (2009, p. 189). Humans, animals and lands constitute a whole that overcomes the distinction between nature and culture (Aubinet, 2017). *Yoik* itself has a sort of autonomy which can captivate you with its force. There is no dividing line between the subject and the object uttered; they become one and new connections emerge. *Yoiking* a wolf, for instance, creates a new relationship with nature, to which a human, in that very performance, is adding the ‘wolfness’ to his or her being. The human, in this sense, has entered into the process of *becoming-animal*.

Philosophy of *Becoming*

If considering the Sami *yoik* from a philosophical perspective in the tradition of continental philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of *becoming-animal* might be a fruitful perspective. The two French authors define their notions of philosophical *becoming* as follows:

Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 272)

In short, *becoming* means reconfiguring your own body according to the world around you, which is continuously changing. This is not some abstruse claim, but rather the simple description of a life submerged into nature—of a living being into its environment. Both the world and the body *become*, since there is nothing fixed and immutable but an unstoppable work of building connections between them. Seen from this perspective, humans cannot be isolated from the environment and nature cannot be reified as a pure object of knowledge within which human rationality deploys.

Of the different types of *becoming* described by Deleuze and Guattari (*becoming-woman*, *becoming-child*, *becoming-music*, etc.), *becoming-animal*, as it suggests, is related to the animal realm and, in general, to

nature. It does not have to be confused with a process at the end of which your substance is changed and you are eventually turned into an animal. Neither is it a question of mimicking the animal, like barking or walking on all fours, and we can observe to what extent its description is consistent with that of the *yoik*. *Becoming-animal* means to create assemblages that enter into contact or proximity with animal molecules (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 273) and, precisely through *yoik*, humans can undertake or be undertaken by this process, attuning themselves with the animality they go through: integrating their voice harmonically into the environment's sounds and letting their hearing embrace all its richness. A practice that is ethically and aesthetically driven, since it is a certain way of positioning in, and of being affected by, the world that changes the way we perceive it and consequently our acts.

From the rational Western point of view—soaked with the positivistic dream of progress and based upon a pyramidal structure of reality—this process might seem to be a sort of involution. Deleuze and Guattari are not afraid of addressing it in these terms: ‘involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is involu-tionary [sic.], involution is creative’ (1980/1987, p. 238) To *involve* has to be comprehended as a rediscovery of the non-humanity that lives within us. To involve means to overcome the human/non-human separation, in order to let emerge what we have in common with the organic and inorganic world and realise that we are inseparable from it. To involve is a matter of ‘making kin’ (Haraway, 2016; see also Haraway, 2007, pp. 27–42 and Williams, 2009) between species, rather than one dominating or exploiting the others.² In short, it demands a movement towards nature³ in favour of the creation of new connections and communications capable of operating in both directions between what is human and what is not.

2 The notion of species itself should be problematised, given that it is a human category useful for scientific research and not something that rigidly divides living beings in nature. For this purpose, it might be of some help to bear in mind Darwin's words: ‘I look at the term species as one arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other, and that it does not essentially differ from the term variety, which is given to less distinct and more fluctuating forms. The term variety, again, in comparison with mere individual differences, is also applied arbitrarily, for convenience' sake’ (Darwin, 2009, p. 42).

3 It has to be stressed that the point here is to consider our species as one of many and not to return to a sort of primitive form of life.

This step seems more and more necessary since we entered the age of the Anthropocene, which asks us to invent new models for our actions. We must abandon a unidirectional approach based on our godlike attitude in relation to the non-human, as if the prefix *non* stood for a sort of lack or weakness. Along these lines, a new, reinvented human behaviour could be similar to Deleuze's interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the superman (*Übermensch*).⁴ Deleuze writes:

The superman [...] is the man who is even in charge of the animals [...]. It is man in charge of the very rocks, or inorganic matter [...] the superman is much less than the disappearance of living men, and much more than a change of concept: it is the advent of a new form that is neither God nor man and which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than its two previous forms. (1986/1988, p. 132)

Submerged and cohesive with the non-human realm, a new form should be able to avoid all the atrocities perpetrated under the name (or taking the place) of God and, simultaneously, to abandon the adage 'the survival of the fittest' as the guiding principle for its actions, in so far as it arbitrarily poses brute force as the only criterion to decide what fits and what does not.

Becoming Musics

Given that the *Übermensch* looms also as a deep reconfiguration of human life according to nature, the question right now is about how to initiate this *becoming-animal*, how to embrace our non-humanity in order to dismiss an illusory awareness of superiority, how to take the first, small step in a process from which one comes out transformed. For this purpose, I think *musics*⁵—following the example of the *yoik*—play an essential

4 *Übermensch* is a key concept of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and it indicates the overcoming of the human form. For this reason it has also been translated as 'beyond-man' or 'overman', which are closer to the original meaning. The concept has been subject to numerous interpretations. The original reference can be found in Nietzsche, 1885/2006.

5 I use the plural on purpose, in order to point out the richness of sound worlds and the most disparate forms of music that can be perceived and produced by human, as well as non-human, beings, namely *musics* in charge of the organic and inorganic matter. For an original philosophical contribution on thinking sonically and on sound as a material flux, see Cox, 2018.

role, since they touch and rearrange our sensibility, and since our senses are the means that allow us to experience the world. Through new combinations between the senses and nature, we might initiate a change that merges our relations with what surrounds us, because different sound worlds could provide for different ways of feeling—of being with the environment—and at the same time, reconfigures our attitude. New perspectives on the same experience, sounds from the past and the future, from the land, the air, and the water, showing unexpected portions of reality with all the potentialities they disclose in the present. *Becoming other than what we are, and what we seem doomed to be*. In short, *musics*, in all their various forms and not necessarily as artistic expressions, challenge the ‘human, all too human’ rationality which privileges the eyes and a supposed neutral vision, which trusts what it can see and that often looks only at what it wants to subject, exploit or prey on (see also Seeger, 2016).

To this end, *musics* themselves have to come from a process of becoming, where human willingness and interiority would step aside to let non-humanity work. Indeed, also ‘in traditional yoik performance, the notion of composer is not prominent’ (Ramnarine, 2009, p. 196). The focus, instead, is centred on the *yoik* and on the being it recalls. Traditional categories of artistic and cultural production are not sufficient, since they stem from the same rationality which finds its main support in sight and in creativity-conscious subjects. Arguably, we need something that we would not even define as art, at least in conventional terms. Instead, we require a practice capable of bringing into play our senses in different ways and, with them, other components of reality. Communication is not strictly signifying and linguistical, and perception can be more than a matter of sight. There are other manners of vocalisation that contemplate gestures, refrains and meaningless syllabising, and that are inextricably linked to the situation and environment in which, for instance, the *yoik* is performed. The world touches us by many different means, all equally relevant. It is up to us to be receptive, to feel, to hear, to see, to taste, and to smell them. Such a posture is the minimal requirement to embrace a process through which we become *with* the world, being a singularity among other singularities, aware of what constitutes

us, of our proximity—which is nothing more than an ontological equivalence and interdependence—to the non-human realm (see also Abram, 1996, 2010). In any case, as with *yoik* and *becoming-animal*, the lack of proper definitions for a practice reveals the novel logic that lies behind it and, as a consequence, the whole universe of virtualities and ethico-aesthetical possibilities it carries with it.

New Sound Paradigms

A valid example through which we can understand this kind of suggestion, together with relevant conceptual tools, is represented by the multimedia installation *The Great Animal Orchestra*, created by Bernie Krause and United Visual Artists.⁶ This artwork combines the soundscapes shaped by the American bioacoustician from his audio recordings of natural habitats with their visual transcriptions created by the London-based studio. Throughout his life, Krause collected more than 5,000 hours of recordings from the most varied environments all around the world, including at least 15,000 terrestrial and marine species: an incredible effort which testifies to the richness and complexity of the seemingly nonsensical animal noises. This gives an account of their harmonic arrangement, inseparable from the ecosystem in which they are nestled. With his work Krause played a crucial role in the development of a new discipline, bioacoustics, and in highlighting the hidden structure of these soundscapes, which consist of ‘all of the sounds we hear from every source within our range of hearing at a given time’ (Krause & United Visual Artists [UVA], 2019, pp. 25–26). Soundscapes contemplate different ensembles of sounds: *geophony* (non-biological sound sources), *biophony* (non-human sounds from living beings) and *anthropophony* (derived from human activities) (see also Allen & Dawe, 2016). Within this theoretical framework, the *yoik*’s ambivalence emerges: human sounds that are harmoniously incorporated in biophony’s variety, vocalisations that find their acoustic niche without encompassing or silencing the others.

6 I heard and saw this work at XXII Triennale di Milano, *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*.

On the other hand, through the audio-visual display of the orchestrated equilibrium of animal vocalisations, *The Great Animal Orchestra* creates an immediate connection between human beings and the incredible biodiversity of the non-human realm, likewise making it clear that anthropophony is simply a variety of biophony's infinite heterogeneity. Conceived as a performative space,⁷ the artwork itself is designed to produce real effects in the audience—to affect its perception (see also Ribac, 2016). The listeners start to think of themselves as a small part of the biosphere, rather than separated or predominant; they can feel their non-humanity by rediscovering the consonance between their sensations and the succession of these *musics* from a non-human score. As Krause wrote:

The fabric of these sounds, sensations of vibrant domains of living organism, leave an impression of humidity on the surface of your skin – a sense that typifies the presence of tropical rainforests; the varying intensities and pitches of Arctic wind will send a chill through your body; while other sounds will suggest the piquant aromas given off by the soil and vegetation; and, if you listen carefully, they will evoke in your mind's eye an image of the landscape through the expression of the acoustic textures. (Krause & UVA, 2019, p. 34)

In both *yoik* and *The Great Animal Orchestra*, a process of *becoming-animal* occurs by means of sound worlds. This involitional movement, considered in its effects, lets common elements emerge, go through and dismantle the binary separation that constitutes and hierarchises the human and the non-human and, in doing so, deposes any pretension of anthropocentrism. Here, as well as in the Sami *yoiks*, *musics* are produced by, and simultaneously produce, a *becoming-animal* for a reconsideration of our role in relation to the environment. They encourage a process of involution in favour of new affections and connections within the living

7 Krause focused in particular on non-human sounds and, for the purpose of this installation, he moulded seven soundscapes taken from different natural habitats that cover diverse world regions, ranging from the Amazon to central and southern Africa, passing through the Pacific Ocean, the Yukon Delta, the canyons of California and the forests of the western part of Canada. On the occasion of its exhibition, a selection from his soundscape ecology project was supported by a software algorithm elaborated by UVA, which translates and shows through lights the environment sound signals and the animal noises. UVA intended the installation to be a performative space where 'the architecture, the people, and the work coexist to create the experience together' (Krause & UVA, 2019, p. 21).

world, ultimately, in favour of new forms and ways of life which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than the previous ones.

A sort of crossroad, hence, arises in our foreseeable (and, why not, foreseeable) future. If exposed again, alone in the forest, to the *yoiking* of a bear, we might not become concerned about the human origin of these sounds. Two paths seem conceivably to be able to lead us to this acknowledgement. One, which I would rather cross, could let us recognise the different nuances of soundscapes, their specificities, in a renewed stance of human beings in the environment in which they are nestled—neither reducing the non-human vocalisation richness, nor restricting it in dedicated spaces, but rather integrating anthropophony as one part among others in the biophonic complex. The needed process would imply a radical turnabout, an ecologically driven reconfiguration of our thoughts, acts, and senses; an ontological rearrangement carrying interspecies kinships capable of making the human/non-human distinction look like a distant memory. The other, which seems to me—not without great disapproval—more realistic, could conduct us to the awareness that bears simply do not exist anymore and that those sounds we hear are only a relic of extinguished life forms and of the fruitful nexus few of us succeeded in establishing with them. We can already see what the latter path is filled with: delusions of grandeur, nothing more.

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