

# Analogies of composition

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# ANALOGIES OF COMPOSITION

## Charlotte Malterre-Barthes with Noboru Kawagishi

«It's a frame that contains on a dark background various objects (bowls, dishes, saucers, chopsticks, thin food heaps, a little piece of gray ginger, a few strands of orange vegetables, brown gravy) and as those containers and pieces of food are slight and thin, but numerous, it seems like these trays fulfill the definition of painting, which, according to Pietro della Francesca, «is a demonstration of surfaces and bodies becoming ever smaller or larger depending on their term.»<sup>1</sup>

Roland Barthes.

Obviously appreciative and mesmerized by this preparation, Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup> describes with a relish for detail the composition of a meal – a Japanese meal. While enumerating components, the semiotician sublimates the futile exercise of arranging food and emphasizes the disposition of elements and aliments towards the creation of a perfect object. (For Barthes, this exploration is not about Japan. On the contrary, he stresses the importance of distancing with the «real» country, and of operating on a clean «slate» to experience a system.)<sup>3</sup> The correspondence process is inducted as Barthes refers to Pietro della Francesca and to «the food tray as a the most delicate painting.»<sup>4</sup> **Food and painting, he claims, are similar in order, rhythm, freedom of uncertainty in adding and subtracting elements; some sort of inspired and changing game. The tray becomes the «workspace» as one proceeds to eating, «picking here a pinch of vegetables, there some rice, there seasoning, here a sip of soup in a free alternation as a graphic artist will do.»** **With the assertion that all the making of alimentation is in composition, food is seen as establishing a reduced system of materials and a «shivering of meaning: here are the fundamental signs of script».**<sup>5</sup>

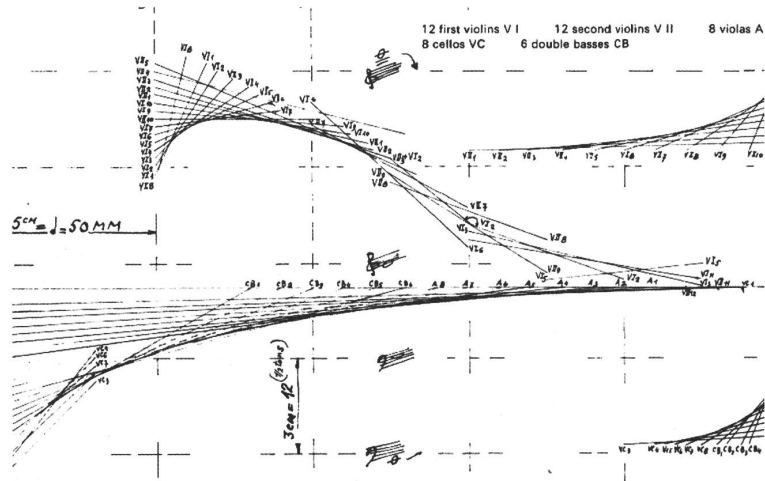


Fig. 9  
Xenakis, Iannis: Metastasis music partition.

«He was searching for some measure of unity in his musical notation [...]. So he devised his own musical Fibonacci series to articulate the percussion and the string episodes in Metastasis.»<sup>14</sup>

Hopping to the next correlation, Barthes points at food as being «written», subjected to gestures of division and deduction, and based upon a vacillating language. Rather than the food item being merely imbedded on the food tray, it is inscribed in a much profounder space in which human, table and universe, are arranged upon each other and create meaning. Scripture that unites and concludes those works of composition beyond the flattened realm of illustration and visual correspondence.

Similarly, Claude Levi-Strauss mentions writing as another form of composition while addressing the discourse of its book *Mythologiques*<sup>6</sup>. The anthropologist describes the course of his manuscript's production as follows: «At the end of the writing process, the work is formed of three or four overlapping sheets, very much alike some painter's collages.»<sup>7</sup> Only briefly touching upon the association between writing and painting, he insists on approaching text composition somehow with a musical stance. «As I wrote it (the book), I had the feeling of composing an opera.»<sup>8</sup> Stressing the multidimensional aspect of his work, he mentions how his investigation is conducted like a musical composition to avoid divisions in the body of text. On the flyleaf of «The raw and the cooked», along with two staves of Chabrier one can read this dedication: «to Music.»

In the book itself, Levi-Strauss uses again this analogy to music, not only by naming chapters «Overtures» or «Themes and Variations» but by relating it to food, or rather to cooking. Decrypting the «origin of table manners»<sup>9</sup>, he determines how «primitive societies» cooking – cuisine in the universal sense, is based upon an original matrix; a triangular system built on three categories: raw, cooked and rotten. Humanity constantly plays with a combination of these three conditions of food, as multiple as the countless variations of nature and culture. Cooking is like a formal structure built around this triangle, the «vocalic triangle» present in all languages. Just as Barthes asserts, cooking is structured as a language, or music, evolving in several directions while conjugating multiple elementary transformations; combinations around raw, cooked and rotten in an infinite elaboration of compositions. In *Mythologiques*<sup>10</sup>, this language, or systemic analysis of combining distinct parts or elements according to structures to form a result, is, together with myths, examined and compared to musical forms by Levi-Strauss.

With a different approach and background to structuralism, but nevertheless pursuing an analogous comparison, Iannis Xenakis affirms that «Whether we like it or not, there is a bridge between architecture and music. It is based

on our mental structures, which are the same in both cases. Composers, for example, have used symmetrical patterns which also exist in architecture.»<sup>11</sup> **While Xenakis' musical works are strongly influenced by and related to abstract mathematical patterns<sup>12</sup>, his ability to visualize music graphically from an 'externally-relative' position forms a perfect connection between the aesthetic composition of architecture and music. Xenakis insists that there are several levels of correspondence. The literary level – Goethe's quotation: «Architecture is frozen music» – is regarded as a simple literary form. A more objective parallel is enclosed in groups of transformations dealing with symmetries; while he mentions other elements such as that of «forming space either in sound or in architecture by using the acoustic axis such as glissandos, or the numerical axis.» Rhythm is also an analogous component: points placed on an axis, time measured by a musician and visually found on a façade. More pragmatically, Xenakis also regards piano keys as architecture: «They are regulated in a constant manner. In one case it is a matter of time, and in the other, of space. So there is a correspondence between the two.»<sup>13</sup> He believes in a common underlying mental structure which mathematicians call an 'order structure.'**

With this succinct but multidisciplinary overview, a basic principle can be postulated: if composition is to be exposed in cuisine, visual arts, writing, music, architecture, mathematics etc. one could suggest that it belongs to a multi-layered collective system of aesthetics. Composition would merely be a universal system, as it is impeccably expressed by Levi-Strauss: «The set of customs of a people is always characterized by a style, and form systems. I am certain that such systems are not available in an unlimited amount and that human societies as well as individuals – in their games and their dreams or delusions, never create absolutely but confine themselves to choose certain combinations in an ideal directory.»<sup>14</sup>

- 1 Barthes, Roland: *L'empire des signes*, ed. Champs Flammarion, Genève, 1970. Barthes, Roland (1916-1981) was a French semiotician, philosopher and thinker. Particularly interested in the «science of signs - semiology». Barthes is a famous and well-known intellectual associated with trends such as structuralism and post-structuralism.
- 2 Barthes, Roland: id., p 7.
- 3 Barthes, Roland: id., p 19.
- 4 Barthes, Roland: id., p 22.
- 5 Levi-Strauss, Claude: *Mythologiques*, volume I, «Le Cru et le Cuit», ed. Plon, Paris, 1964.
- 6 de Rambures, Jean-Louis: «Comment travaillent les écrivains», interview, *Le Monde*, June 21, 1974.
- 7 de Rambures, id.
- 8 Levi-Strauss, Claude: *Mythologiques*, volume II «L'origine des manières de table», ed. Plon, Paris, 1968.
- 9 Levi-Strauss, Claude: *Mythologiques*, volume I «Le Cru et le Cuit», ed. Plon, Paris, 1964.
- 10 Science and music: an interview with Iannis Xenakis, *Unesco Courier*, April 1986.
- 11 Working at Le Corbusier's office, Iannis Xenakis designed the Philips Pavilion for the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958 adhering to mathematical functions.
- 12 *Unesco Courier*, id.
- 13 Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, ed. Plon, 1955 (Paris).
- 14 Evans, Robin: *The Projective Cast*, MIT Press, 1995, pp.295-301.

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