

# Utopia, Sound, and Matter in Ernst Bloch

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Bloch's philosophy of music is one of the most interesting of the twentieth century, particularly in the context of Marxist aesthetics. This article focuses on the various peculiarities of this thought, which seldom are highlighted. Firstly, through a new analysis of the musical sections of *Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, the relation between utopia and music will be discussed in Sections 2 and 3 in order to show the originality of Bloch's refusal of the Marxist base-superstructure model in the field of aesthetics. In contrast to the other philosophies of music, the study of music inspires theoretical speculation in Bloch's thought and not vice versa. In order to demonstrate this connection, in Sections 4 and 5, the idea of the sound in *Spirit of Utopia* will be examined and compared to the conception of the matter as it is presented in *The Principle of Hope*, *The Materialism Problem, its History and Substance*, and other works. These paragraphs aim to highlight how the early conception of sound was the model for the later conception of matter. | *Keywords: Ernst Bloch, Marxism, Aesthetics, Philosophy of Music, Materialism.*

## 1. Introduction

Ernst Bloch's philosophy of music represents one of the most remarkable and original theoretical reflections on music in history, particularly in the twentieth century, for at least two partially neglected reasons.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, the philosophy of music constitutes the nucleus of the theoretical reflection that is fundamental to understand the distance from orthodox Marxism that Bloch has always tried to maintain in his thought. Secondly, Bloch's thoughts on music constitute an extraordinary example of integration between music and philosophy that deserves careful analysis. Indeed, Bloch's reflection is not a systematic theoretical treatment of the musical problem from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics. Instead, Bloch's analysis arises from a complex phenomenological conception of consciousness and emotion in contact with musical language, and from art in general. Therefore, in Bloch

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography on Bloch's philosophy is growing wider. Italian studies are of the essence, on this matter see Cipolletta (2017). See also Münster (1985), Geoghegan (1996), J.O. Daniel-T. Moylan (1997).

theoretical and aesthetic thought combine and inspire each other, moving in the same direction.

Firstly, struggling with music's questions allows Bloch to develop a profound rethinking of Marxist dialectics based on the base-superstructure model.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Bloch does not reduce music to a simple outcome of the mode of production. On the contrary, he argued that the forms and contents of music contain the anticipation and traces for planning utopia.<sup>3</sup> Even though it is not possible to reduce to a univocal current the countless historians, sociologists, musicologists and music theorists inspired by Marxism in the most varied of ways, the purpose of studying the musical experience in order to analyse the phenomena of society can be considered as a common element. Since music, like any other human production, belongs to the superstructure within the base-superstructure model, it is to be considered as an element strongly influenced by the economic base that serves as a foundation for the society. Conversely, Bloch introduces his thought as a 'utopian philosophy', meaning research into, a promotion of, and preparation for the *Novum*, the *Noch-Nicht-Sein*; this research is led through an in-depth study of political praxis and poetic creativity, as well as, of course, an analysis of the confused uneasiness of quotidian existence itself. In the second and third sections of this work, this thought will be analysed so as to focus on the idea that it needs to be grounded on the belief that the model of 'base-superstructure' is not supposed to include the whole sphere of human spiritual nature and activities. Indeed, such a model weakens the universe of utopian 'pre-apparitions', i.e. the ample area of the activities and things expressing the most profound human desires, turning these phenomena into a mere reflection of the current mode of production. According to Bloch some realisations of the human spirit, especially music, instead tear apart the fabric of the present instant, allowing the 'utopian instant' to be experienced. Thanks to them it is possible to trace back some valid contents, beyond their elaboration time or diffusion, that are capable of revealing directions that turn out to be guidelines to current issues.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, Bloch's reflection on music does not base itself on a theoretical setting previously conceived and *a fortiori* used in order to capture something elusive. Vice versa, the analysis of the musical phenomenon sometimes inspires the development of some philosophical concepts in his maturity. This peculiarity needs to be highlighted. Music does not represent a specific and circumscribed moment within Bloch's reflection; rather, it is the driving force for the philosophy of hope, both on genealogical and theoretical grounds. As the fourth and fifth paragraphs aim to demonstrate, all of this becomes evident when debating the notions of sound and matter. The concept of matter, which has been fully expressed in works such as *The Principle of Hope* and *The Materialism Problem, its History and Substance*, is strongly inspired by the concept of sound, eminently debated in Bloch's debut work *Spirit of Utopia*.

<sup>2</sup> Garda (1983, pp. 124–125) touches on the peculiarity of Bloch's aesthetics compared to other Marxist thinkers.

<sup>3</sup> See Bloch (2000, pp. 40–42).

<sup>4</sup> See Bloch (1963).

## 2. Figures of Utopia

The notion of utopia constitutes the unitary theoretical synthesis of Bloch's entire philosophy, aimed at developing a new anthropology and ontology.<sup>5</sup> The former intends to promote an expansion of the field of the unconscious, and of the ego in general, to all those drive contents that are not below the threshold of consciousness but rather on the same line as becoming conscious. Meanwhile, the latter is aimed at founding the concept of utopia on the more general level, i.e. the cosmological and metaphysical levels; in other words, seeking the conditions of possibility for the realisation of the most hidden desires of human beings.

The notion of utopia in Bloch's unique perspective can be interpreted through the analysis of a number of figures, each of them capable of explaining it comprehensively, while jointly contributing to the projection of the proper extent of its substantiality. The primordial inspiration for Bloch's philosophy can be seen as consisting in an unorthodox assumption of nihilism as a steppingstone, deducing from a negative force the impulse towards utopian affirmation. As Boella (1987, p. 14) pointed out, the "instance of the 'overthrow of nihilism' dominates [...] Bloch's comparison with contemporary thought and is especially content to never accept the drastic and ideological oppositions of rationalism and irrationalism, philosophies of progress and philosophies of decadence". As a result, *Spirit of Utopia* can be read as the real counterpoint, or even the antidote, to Spengler's work *The Decline of the West*. Faced with the crisis in the West, Spengler presented himself as a sort of apologist for western imperialism and military expansionism. In contrast, for many intellectuals and artists of the time, the decline of the West was linked to an awareness of the exhaustion of a certain tradition: an awareness emblematically expressed by the *Der Blaue Reiter* movement. Bloch, in this sense, is the philosopher of expressionism, as Adorno (1961) claimed, who intends to translate the intentions of the avant-garde into a complex philosophical project. This project was directed towards the elaboration of a revolutionary thought aimed at the practical development of ethical and political needs, i.e. to escape from alienation in a world in which interiority was increasingly subjugated. Bloch moves from the experience of the 'darkness of the lived instant', understood as an embodiment of the nihilism and alienation inherent to modern times, which he nonetheless does not consider immutable. The very first words of *Spirit of Utopia* are emblematic:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the relation between anthropology and ontology throughout the development of Bloch's thought see Zecchi (2008) and Cunico (1976). Cunico (1976, pp. 80–82) accurately criticised Zecchi (2008, pp. 134–140) for having underestimated the ontological turn in Bloch: in fact, in Zecchi's view the concept of matter is fundamental for the new anthropology Bloch traced in the first works, but it is not in relation to the new ontology Bloch aims to theorise in the latter works.

<sup>6</sup> The conception of a utopia that presents itself as a total eschatological opening, characterised by the messianic idea according to which "the creative, the philosophical hour kat exochen is here" (Bloch, 2000, p. 171) was already noted by the first reviewers of *Spirit of Utopia*. For instance, Blass stated that *Spirit of Utopia* was like a "lighthouse (which), unexpected in our darkness, suddenly casts its powerful light" (1978, p. 66). Susman welcomed the publication of *Spirit of Utopia* as the announcement of a "new German metaphysics": according to her, "[Blochian] utopia casts its anchor at the bottom of the deepest, most terrible night in which I have ever lived" (1965, p. 384).

I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put in our hands. For itself it became empty already long ago. It pitches senselessly back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative and we want to be its ends (Bloch, 2000, p. 1).<sup>7</sup>

Against “the nihilism of this modern age”, the “veiled life”, the “pure nothingness”, Bloch counterposes “the paradoxical courage to prophesy the light precisely out of the fog” (Bloch, 2000, p. 171). At the moment when reality presents itself as negative, human beings have the possibility and the capacity to imagine what could be but ‘is not yet’. In this perspective, the desired reality becomes truth in its most authentic sense, the ‘second truth’, as opposed to the ‘first truth’, the actual one, which is unable to appease human beings completely. Authentic truth is ‘not-yet’ given; it is conceived as a utopia, a concept that, however, Bloch understands as viable in the foreseeable future. Thus, nihilism is only assumed to be overturned; a ‘no’ becomes a ‘not yet’.<sup>8</sup> Utopian philosophy, therefore, is an anticipatory and propulsive analysis of what is ‘not-yet-being’, ‘not-yet-conscious’. The recognition of the ‘darkness of the lived instant’ is far from suggesting a sceptical resignation; on the contrary, it urges the elaboration of a theoretical and practical plan. Bloch’s intention is thus to establish a relationship between historical reality and ethical ideal, between praxis and theory, allowing a way out of the fragmentation induced by relativism and possible nihilist outcomes. The desire for a philosophy that would be opposed to the tradition of contemplative and rationalistic thought (thus against the neo-Kantianism of Windelband and Rickert, and closer to Simmel), and at the same time would return to inspire action; the more general questions about the meaning of human beings’ existence and the world (already common to the philosophy that was immediately opposed to Hegel, like for instance Kierkegaard, Marx, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche); and the shocking historical events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were elements common to an entire generation of thinkers (such as Rosenzweig, Lukács, Kracauer, Benjamin), yet in Bloch they unfolded and led to truly distinctive results. For example, as Boella (1987, p. 38) pointed out, Bloch, unlike Lukács, never translated his critique of reification into neo-Hegelian categories, into a renewed sense of the totality of reality. The void resulting from the crisis of the Hegelian closed totality cannot be overcome by a historicist dialectic, which renews the sense of the totality of reality through a dialectic that is attentive to mediations as the connective tissue of reality. Bloch incorporates the acquisitions of the philosophies of the crisis in an original manner, and develops the idea of a utopian and evolving reality, which nonetheless is structured through a dialectical method aimed rather at the cracks and interstices of the present reality, i.e. at the utopian instants that sometimes reveal themselves within the darkness of the lived instant. The purpose of overcoming the nihilism is made achievable because Bloch, in the ‘lived instant’, envisages not only obscurity, but potentiality as well. Bloch draws inspiration from Plato and Hegel, supporting an ontological and dynamic connection between being and not being. In order to find

<sup>7</sup> See also Bloch (1965, p. 77).

<sup>8</sup> See Boella (1987, pp. 89–101).

a possible connection between negativity, darkness, and utopia within the lived instant itself, which would allow human beings to ascribe value to the instant by transcending it immanentistically, Bloch engaged in a profound reconsideration of Hegel's dialectics.

In particular, on "the problem of beginning", Bloch states: "the concept, as the essence of the world, could not take a step beyond the sterile  $A=A$  without the non-conceptual, the non-logical, which provides the stimulus and the first impulse" (Bloch, 1962, Section 18). In Bloch's interpretation of Hegel's dialectics, the process takes place with the priority and firm consideration of the real data and with the intrusion of nothingness within the very being, or even the entity. In this way, nothingness is not absolute nihil. It is the primary gap between existence and essence, that is the darkness of the lived instant, which can ignite the spark of becoming. This theoretical approach, which allows becoming not to turn into rigid necessity but to open up to possibility, is expressed in the context of reflection on time and history in the one-to-one relationship between *Jetzt* and *Nie*. The present displays itself as negative with the unavoidable experience of violence and injustice, but this could not happen if something of the utopian world of which it is the negation did not pre-appear in this same world. On the other hand, the utopian world would not manifest itself as utopian if the present, in turn, did not show its negativities. Bloch thus opens up the Hegelian closed system. With Leibniz (who attempts to oppose Spinozian necessity), he recovers the dimension of the future as a tendency already contained in the present, and with Aristotle he develops a materialistic and dynamic ontology. Thus, the reversal of Hegel's *amor fati* – a heavy tribute paid for opposing Kantian ought-to-be – is realised, recovering the explosive seed contained in Hegel's own thought, namely the mediation of thought with reality. This mediation, in fact, allows Bloch's utopia not to be lost in an abstract future but to become part of the real conditions of its possible – never predictable or inevitable – realisation.

On a more particular level, i.e. the practical and artistic levels, human beings are pushed towards the concretisation of the *Novum* experiencing a perturbing instant, which interrupts everyday life. That instant is 'amazement'.

Of course this hoping and, making it clearer, this amazement often ignite completely arbitrarily, even inappropriately; indeed, there is perhaps not even a rule here by which the same causes of it within the same person could be found (Bloch, 2000, p. 193).

The experience of amazement allows the subject to save himself or herself from the caging induced by the 'darkness of the lived instant'. Through the insignificant succession of dark instants, some escape routes disclose themselves. It is up to human beings to grasp these and choose to undertake them. In a first moment, amazement can stun the subject, whereas in a second moment it stimulates, within him or her, the 'unconstruable question' (*unkonstruierbaren Frage*). Amazement is neither a theoretical act nor an ethical decision; it is an aesthetic experience. It reveals itself rather suddenly, as a rupture in quotidian life. Unlike Aristotle's *thaumazein*,

Blochian's amazement is not felt through any impressive experience. However, it instead starts with common, everyday, marginal objects, often overlooked and apparently irrelevant, such as the 'old pitcher'.<sup>9</sup> From this event, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the opening-up meaning that is unlocked on reality; the ethical choice, which should follow said experience and the accomplishment of which entirely falls back upon the subject, consists in the orientation of one's conscience towards the utopia, through an actualisation of those lingering concepts of our conscience. Bloch, in his typical poetic style, states:

It [the amazement] is questioning in itself, an inmost, deepest amazement, which often moves toward nothing, and yet quiets the flux of what was just lived; lets one reflect oneself into oneself such that what is most deeply meant for us appears there, regards itself strangely. A drop falls and there it is (Bloch, 2000, p. 193).

### 3. Music

Music plays a pivotal role in Bloch's philosophy.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the analysis of the musical issue inspires the reflection on certain philosophical themes, such as the 'darkness of the lived instant', the 'amazement' and the 'daydream', characteristic of theoretical reflection. On the other hand, philosophical thought constantly invokes music in respect to such notions in order to make further clarifications on them. The differences and boundaries between the specificity of music and theoretical speculation almost seem to blend into each other, resulting in a unified conception. In his messianic perspective, Bloch attributes a more potent prophetic power to music than that of any other form of art. Even though paintings serve a purpose as a reminder of the utopian destination, they appear to Bloch as mere signs; music, instead, is a constant tension towards utopia itself. Music therefore represents the most powerful engine of new conscience acquisitions, volitions, and actions. It radiates a utopian spirit<sup>11</sup> and plays a fundamental role as an impulse for social and political praxis.

Utopian art does not confine itself to representing sensible reality, nor does it settle for plain objectivity; instead, it pursues a new truth. Thus, a true artist is one who is able to transpose material into a utopian guiding idea, anticipating within itself traces of the future. Nonetheless, it is essential to emphasise that music does not redeem the individual when it comes to utopian accomplishments; rather it articulates the inner dimension in order to stimulate the pursuit of any possible sensible paths to be entrusted to political and social praxis. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch claims:

Though whether the call for perfection – we can call it the godless prayer of poetry – becomes practical even only to a small extent and does not merely remain in aesthetic pre-appearance is something which is not decided in poetry, but in society. (Bloch, 1995, p. 216).

<sup>9</sup> See Bloch (2000, pp. 7–9). On the crucial concept of marginality, see Latini (2005).

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough analysis of Bloch's philosophy of music, see Migliaccio (1995) and Rampinini (2018).

<sup>11</sup> See Bloch (2000, p. 41).

The task of art, similar but superior to astonishment, is to dispose the soul to question reality, looking for paths that lead to possible redemption. Once the phenomenonic shell is broken, the possibility of an encounter between subject and object opens up. In the modern world, where clairvoyance has failed and the metaphysic has proven to be uncertain, music has become the place where transcendence can still be glimpsed.<sup>12</sup> In the chapter *The Mystery of Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch (2000, p. 158), referring to music and clairvoyance, states: “one never saw them together in the same place, but as one retreated, the other grew slowly and, so it seems, increased by the same energies”.

According to Bloch, music is a phenomenon proper to the modern age: a metaphysical gift that only modern human beings, who have to deal with the “death of God”, can seize. Compared to any other figurative art, the privileged position of music is due to its capacity to tend towards our *Selbstbegegnung* with unparalleled strength, without the need to objectify, qualify or represent reality. Bloch thus seeks to understand the essence of music through a subjectivist approach: the ‘melisma’, “what sings within us”, is the real element that guides the analysis of musical experience.

Bloch rejects any sociological<sup>13</sup> or merely formal criteria. For him, sociological explanations tend to underestimate the essence of music and its expressive contents. Hence, he does not aim to compose a sociology of music; rather he attempts to understand the musical phenomenon through a subjectivist perspective. In this way, he can overturn the Marxists’ musical aesthetics, reversing the relationship between music and historical temporality from one of mirroring to one of anticipating. He also distances himself from the formalists, who deny music any capability to express feelings. Our longings, our deepest desires, which are externalised and which give shape to music, are the guiding criteria of Bloch’s philosophy of music, which is to be eminently intended as a philosophy of the history of music. Bloch’s philosophy of music consists in a theory of the intimate subjectivity that materialises in musical forms. As a result, works of art are assessed based on their expressive power, their utopian force: they should not passively submit to reality. Rather, they should rectify it, creating a new order and displaying previously undisclosed spaces of subjectivity. This subjective criterion is expressed by the evidently Hegelian notion of *Kunstwollen* (artistic volition), which in turn outlines the concept of *Teppich* (carpet).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Today the last things are no longer given as easily to listeners as in the blessed times when God was near, but at least artists are again letting their arrows, their slower arrows of expression, fly in the esoteric direction” (Bloch, 2000, p. 116). I believe that the ideas discussed in the chapter *The Mystery* presuppose the critique of metaphysics moved by Nietzsche, a philosopher Bloch studied eminently during his early years (see Bloch, 1983). According to Nietzsche, metaphysics resulted from fear and human desire for a rediscovery of an endless flow to the world; therefore, it had to be demolished. By accepting Nietzsche’s theory of metaphysics’ genealogy, Bloch nonetheless supports that the longings that originated metaphysical constructions needed to find satisfaction in the present world. While expressed and hypostatized through magical and religious rituals in ancient eras, these desires have been uniquely represented within the arts, and primarily within music, only in the modern age.

<sup>13</sup> “Meanwhile, precisely, all this ‘explaining’ from the outside in remains ultimately superficial, and does not make Bach’s total manifestation, his profound historical isolation, his sociologically uninvolvable level of existence comprehensible” (Bloch, 2000, p. 41).

<sup>14</sup> Latini (2005, pp. 75–108) provides an important analysis of the concept of *Kunstwollen* in relation to Bloch’s philosophy of art. In addition, Korstvedt (2010, pp. 11–18 and pp. 57–68) focuses on *Kunstwollen* and reconstructs the history of the metaphor of *Teppich*.

The concept of *Kunstwollen*, instituted by Alois Riegl, is employed by Bloch to tie chronologically distant eras, styles and compositions together, according to a new teleological order rather than a chronological one. As stated by Panofsky (1981), the *Kunstwollen* is a critical principle that aims to analyse the artistic object beyond its empirical presence, tracing back to its conditions of existence. Hence, the *Kunstwollen* represents the pure inner requirement to mould, to express oneself through art, independently from the object's material ways of production. In *The Principle of Hope* this concept is defined as follows: "the artistic aspiration is an aspiration to correspond, an actually constructed congruence with the utopianized space imagined as most perfect in each case" (Bloch, 1995, p. 719). Relatively to figurative art, three levels of *Kunstwollen* can be detected, which articulate "the path from a human being to what is human" (Bloch, 2000, p. 18). In the first level, the Greek form presents a complete adjustment to the expression on behalf of the matter, to the point that any transcendent tension is lost. In the second place, Egyptian artistic volition, eager to elude the test of time, achieves eternity by sacrificing any form of life, wanting to become like a stone. Finally, the Gothic is:

the unconsummatedly expressive-descriptive sigillary sign for the unconsummated mystery of the We and of the ground, for a spontaneously animated, unconsummated, functional, in itself still symbolic ornamentation and symbolism; is the artistic suggestion of living space [Lebensraum], of the problem of the We (Bloch, 2000, p. 24).

Just as three forms of *Kunstwollen* are identified in relation to figurative arts, three types of *Teppich* are distinguished in order to analyse and understand music.<sup>15</sup> These carpets are flexible and permeable formal models, which should not be considered to be exhausted within a certain historical moment. Roughly speaking, it can be said that the first carpet is inauthentic, as it only contains forms that were not personally created by anyone, such as dancing or humming, which need further recovery to be elevated to their maximally proficient expression. The second is an authentic carpet because it expresses a section of subjectivity – it represents the 'small Self', dominated by a taste for balance and shape, characterised by quiet, plain emotions. This carpet is the one of Greek expressivity, of the 'closed *Lied*', of the playful opera, eminently embodied by personalities such as Schumann, Pergolesi, Offenbach, and Mozart. The third carpet represents the acme of the history of music and includes forms such as the 'open *Lied*', the symphony, and Wagnerian opera; it finds its expression in the works of Mahler, Bruckner, Wagner, and, most of all, Beethoven.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Sound

In addition to all that has been said above, the privileged position held by music is founded on the special characteristics of sound. Sound, as the matter of music, is an immediate manifestation of the inner Self and lends itself to equally immediate internalisation. The most elementary forms of sound (the exclamation, the shout, and the vocal modulations) are all utopian

<sup>15</sup> See Bloch (2000, pp. 18–33).

<sup>16</sup> On the three carpets, see Bloch (2000, pp. 34–94).



manifestations, that is, they are ways of investing the exterior world with an immediate inner expression of the Self. Therefore, we could say that, according to the early Bloch, sound (not matter) is the ‘ontological ground of utopia’ in the context of music. During composition, human beings find themselves in the condition to experience both their possibilities and capabilities to process the datum in order to externalise the lingering contents and potentialities of matter. It is precisely within music that the contrast intrinsic to the ‘lived instant’ becomes visible and liveable, unwinding the road that leads to utopia. A bare sound and bare theme in themselves mean nothing if considered in their pure singularity. The contradiction characterising musical fruition corresponds to the one characterising the lived instant, where, as said before, darkness and enlightenments coexist. A single sound and a single theme, when considered in their pure physical application – in their mere physicality – are not invested of any value. True richness emerges only from the sound through “our hands’ fruitful violation of the note and its related frequencies. The note, if it is to become musical, depends absolutely on the blood of the one who takes it up and performs it” (Bloch, 2000, p. 142).<sup>17</sup> It is only through the work that human beings shape the sound and give it a meaning. In *Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch declares:

One could say that since time immemorial music has glorified the other truth, the pious fraud, the constitutive imagination [...]. Only sound, this sensory riddle, is not so laden by the world, is sufficiently phenomenal for the end, that – like the metaphysical word – it can return as a final material moment in the fulfilment of mystical self-perception, laid immaculately on the gold ground of receptive human latency. That can and hence absolutely shall not mean that natural sound in itself is already a metaphysical part or even just a spiritual enclave within nature, but the correlation remains undeniable insofar as hearing sound, hearing and perceiving oneself within it, in other words sound’s potential application to extrinsic, incorporeal spiritual categories, certainly do permit one to assert a similarity between this material and the ‘material’ of what is meant by ‘God’ (Bloch, 2000, pp. 145–146).

For this reason, Bloch engages a severe critique against any astronomical theory of music, such as those formulated by Pythagoras and Kepler, and against Arthur Schopenhauer’s conception. The latter is wrong in his belief that music is a mere reflection of metaphysical truth. Bloch’s pages are indeed clear on this matter:

Schopenhauer [...] is still quite far from understanding music’s true correlation to the *apeiron*, to the extent that he anchors it only passively, cosmically, and not in the individual, heroic, Christian element: in other words, to the extent that he indeed concedes to music the power to supplement appearance with the thing-in-itself, but nonetheless defines this thing-in-itself only as something metaphysical, of an indeterminate, deindividuated, aprocessual, indeed of the already empirically most real kind (Bloch, 2000, pp. 148–149).

Consequently, music should not be understood as a mere hypostatisation or mirroring of objective reality, confusing what is necessary for it with what constitutes its physical reality. According to Bloch, who is close to Jankélévitch (2003) on this point, the nature of music is not a different reality, in opposition

<sup>17</sup> See also Bloch (1995, pp. 1058–1061).

to human beings and to the world – it only exists during its execution. Adequate audition is essential to achieve a true comprehension of music;<sup>18</sup> this audition, because of the characteristic features of sound, implies the establishment of a contact with the dimension of our deepest Self. As Bloch (2000, p. 94) says, on the one side “we hear only ourselves”, whether on the other side,

nothing here may sound by itself, then. Only in us can it blossom and awaken. The sound is intensified by us, qualitatively coloured and at once dispersed. We alone are the ones who raise it up, even more: who make it define and animate itself with our life. Of course it is no accident that just this tender, transparent body is chosen. (Bloch, 2000, p. 120).

At this point, I believe that the comparison between the previously outlined conception of sound, presented in *Spirit of Utopia*, and the original notion of matter, developed after the Marxist breakthrough in 1926, which aim to ground utopia, which is otherwise too abstract, on the sphere of immanency, is of eminent interest. This comparison aims at exposing how the speculation on the nature of sound might have been the main ground on which the intuition of the renewed concept of matter blossomed.

A clear hint is suggested in Section 51 of *The Principle of Hope*, where Bloch reads the Ovidian myth of Pan and Syrinx (*Metam.* I, 689-712). Ovid narrates the vicissitudes of how Pan, courting the nymph Syrinx, ended up making her run away. Though Pan is made melancholic because of his loved one’s escape, nevertheless she leaves behind her some bamboo canes:

During Pan’s lamentations for his lost beloved, the breeze produces sounds in the reeds, and their harmony moves the god. Pan breaks the reeds, longer, then shorter ones, sticks the finely graded pipes together with wax and plays the first tones, like the breeze, but with living breath and as a lament. Thus, the panpipe came into being, playing gives Pan the consolation of a union with the nymph [...] who has vanished and yet not vanished, who remained in his hands as the sound of the flute (Bloch, 1995, p. 1059).

Even though the sound is an immediate epiphany of our spirit, I believe that the construction of musical instruments is not a symptom of decadence compared to the more directed expression of the Self like the primal voice modulations and screams. Pan’s flute represents the real beginning of music, a kind of music within which human beings have the widest expressive faculties, going so far as building for themselves a musical instrument to better shape the timbre of sounds. The construction of musical instruments shows very clearly the possibility for human beings, who are incomplete and indigent by nature, to gain redemption and reach utopia, by forging nature and impressing on it the seal of each own Self. According to Bloch, matter itself is filled with potentialities.

## 5. Matter

Bloch devoted a great deal of effort to the study of the concept of matter. As early as 1926, he extensively studied the works of Avicenna and Averroes. During his stay in France in 1953, he regularly visited the Bibliothèque

<sup>18</sup> See Bloch (2000, p. 141).

Nationale, studying French materialist philosophers such as Diderot, d'Alembert and d'Holbach. These studies – motivated and animated by the desire to bring to light a 'heated' and 'speculative' materialistic current, far from the approaches suggested by the 'vulgar' and mechanistic materialism – would lead, in 1972, to the publication of the extensive work *The Materialism Problem, its History and Substance*.<sup>19</sup>

The theme is of the utmost importance in Bloch's system. It comes down to extending the horizon of hope from the anthropological to the ontological level.<sup>20</sup> To protect the utopia and turn the utopian's intrinsic not into a not-yet, Bloch needs to bind it with the historic-practical dimension, which is proper to human being. However, this becomes possible only after distancing himself from the mechanistic conception of matter, which is rather widespread in orthodox Marxism. The mechanistic and deterministic vision of nature, which has dominated the Western intellectual landscape since the modern age, tends to bring with it the annihilation of all utopian tensions, which do not seem to find any room for their concretisation in a deterministically conceived world. The process of reducing every aspect of being to a mechanistic and deterministic scheme is analysed not only in its social and economic outcomes, but also in its deep cosmological and ontological motivations, as well as its ethical consequences. Such a *Weltanschauung* implies a prejudicial negation of every alternative horizon to present society. In fact, it reduces the whole reality to a space-temporal dimension, so any attempt at a revolutionary praxis towards a new horizon would be prejudicially denied. Therefore, the formulation of an ontology that would not shut the doors to human praxis and that would, instead, allow the subject to put in place the spiritual desires and tensions guiding him or her, through the peculiar interpretation of the concept of matter, is the cornerstone of Bloch's later philosophy.

Bloch tries to recover a 'warm materialism', following the path paved by the French materialists of the eighteenth century or by the 'Aristotelian Left', and distancing himself from 'vulgar materialism'.<sup>21</sup> He bitterly argues with the Marxist and positivistic vision of matter, conceived as lifeless, eternally guided by immutable laws.<sup>22</sup> In fact, such a position intends the universe as an organism held together by mechanistic and materialistic principles, precluding an adequate comprehension of nature in its qualitative aspects.

The analysis of the Aristotelian Left is essential for the elaboration of Bloch's materialism, which has to cope with nature's potential aspects. This current, already foreshadowed by Strato of Lampsacus, properly inaugurated by Avicenna, and later developed by Avicbron, Averroes and Giordano Bruno, is opposed to the 'Aristotelian Right', represented by Thomas

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the concept of matter and the ontology in Bloch, see Holz (1975), Cunico (1976, in part. pp. 67–131; 2000), and Moir (2019, in part. pp. 26–76).

<sup>20</sup> Habermas (1969, p. 319) and Schmidt (1981, p. 118) criticised Bloch for having founded ontology on an illegitimate hypostatisation of the principle of anthropology. Moir (2019, pp. 70–76) has recently responded in a persuasive way to this critique.

<sup>21</sup> On the Aristotelian notion of matter, see Haap (1971).

<sup>22</sup> Bloch's passages on that subject are numerous, see in particular Bloch (1976).

Aquinas and the Scholastics, who emphasised the pure theism of the pure *nous* and forced matter into a radical impossibility of taking form by itself. Aristotle recognised the “possibility in real terms, in the worldstock itself” (Bloch, 1995, p. 235). However, he accentuated the passive feature of matter by defining it as separated from and dominated by the form. If matter remains an exclusively receptive element, in need of an active principle, it is destined to be like something whose opening to the possible does not affect the actual historic procession. The overcoming of the Aristotelian matter-form and potentiality-actuality dualities is accomplished by the Aristotelian Left, which takes the decisive step from theism in the direction of pantheism. The philosophers of the Aristotelian Left do not consider matter as something purely passive, but rather as the womb from which everything arises, pursuing the efficient function of form in the bosom of matter.

According to the Aristotelian tradition, the notion of matter, although understood as the principle opposed to the formal one, has some allusions to the doctrine of the *horme*, of the aspiration to form. Strato of Lampsacus tried to include efficient form in matter, but his attempt had little success because the “actual philosophical work within the peripatetic school was close to dying out; it had become specialized within individual branches of knowledge and hence scattered” (Bloch, 2019, p. 19). While maintaining the separation between efficient form and matter, Avicenna conceived of the latter as uncreated and original, thus conferring on it autonomy from form on the plane of existence. Secondly, although he attributed to a *dator formarum* the task of raising things from possibility to reality, he immediately limits this power to the conferral and conservation of existence, denying the ability to create new content.

Within this *actus purus*, therefore, there is no content (no Whatness, essence) that is not already predisposed within the objective possibility of matter, indeed, that is not preformed; and God alone can awaken matter. God, or Aristotle’s immaterial *actus purus*, thus becomes the fiat within form, such that the form giver becomes the giver of a signal for the emergence of that which was already prepared for development, and therefore the sum total of the essences, the Whatnesses, the substances of the forms, does not rest within God. (Bloch, 2019, p. 22. Italics in the text).

Compared to Avicenna, a crucial step is taken by Averroes, according to whom “matter does not only carry within it all forms as the kernels of life but also the movement essential to matter and not, as in Aristotle, entelechy” (Bloch, 2019, pp. 22–23).

The apex of this tradition, which reverses the relationship between form and matter, is reached by the thought of Giordano Bruno. He eliminates the last remnant of the priority of form and develops a perfect coincidence of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, form and matter. As Bloch argues: “He [Giordano Bruno] maintains the unity of form (the active principle) and matter, that matter is productive in itself” (2019, p. 65). At this point, however, Bloch individuates further room for improvement of the form-matter relationship in connection with a conception of potential. Once the active dimension of

matter has been brought to light, it becomes crucial to understand the 'lingering and gravid with fermenting future' one. The absolute unity of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* brings along the negation of any future for the possibility, since in that case the *natura naturans* would turn out to be intrinsically indigent and God himself would be deprived of his perfection. "The thinker of fermenting infinity [Bruno], allows that the matter of his universe has already completed what it can, with the argument that all possibilities must have already been realized in the whole of the universe" (Bloch, 2019, p. 40).

According to Bloch (2019, p. 41), a "second transformation of the grand matter-form tradition [...], a transformation that now concerns the horizon of matter-possibility and not only its passivity" is inevitable; a metamorphosis that Bloch himself aims to accomplish with his philosophy. Once the passive character of matter has been swept away, what still needs to be realised, for Bloch, is the conjunction of matter and real potentiality, which cannot be fulfilled without taking into consideration Hegel's thought concerning the historical and teleological course of being. In order to guarantee the effective opening of dialectical becoming to the world of possibility, Bloch conceived matter as both *dynamei on*, what-is-in-possibility, and *kata to dynaton*, what-is-according-to-possibility. The critical issue, which appears to Bloch as unavoidable, is that of not precluding the creative potential of nature, even if now intended as one with the form, without falling back into the static nature of pantheism.

## 6. Conclusion

It is only through this conception of matter, fertile and malleable, capable of representing the objective correlate of hope (while the subjective correlate is constituted by the wide set of utopian desires), that Bloch can affirm the possibility of human beings to operate in the world in order to realise their innermost desires, to produce the 'self-encounter', and to effectuate the utopia. This revision of the notion of matter provides Bloch with a *conditio sine qua non* to the conception of a realisable positive utopia; as a matter of fact, on this account it is not possible to conceive Bloch's theory of objectification of utopian images without taking such a concept into adequate consideration.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, within artistic production, from the ornaments' production to the sculpture, human beings mould the matter at their disposal (colour, marble or sound), imprinting on it their own code, their own Self. Sound, just like the material substrate of the universe, is plenty of potentialities, yet it remains sterile and flat without the intervention of the subject. More than any other artistic material, sound is suitable for an expression of the contents of the not-yet-being, since these concepts are not yet fully determined and can find

<sup>23</sup> Concerning the implication of the objective correlate and the subjective correlate of hope, see: "Without matter no basis of (real) anticipation, without (real) anticipation no horizon of matter is ascertainable". Said anticipations are also given in "psychologically as wishful image forwards, morally as human ideal, and aesthetically as natural object-based symbol" (Bloch, 1995, pp. 237–238).

a better representation within a material that transcends the logical sphere of conceptual language. Thanks to the specific features of sound, the subject can give shape to the 'daydream'.

The enigmatic nature of music is unveiled through this theory – through the means by which human beings infuse the not-yet-conscious, the daydream, within sound, the meaning of music may often seem obscure, or rather not-yet-understood. Bloch himself states that the pages about music in *Spirit of Utopia* are those that deal with the question music's language:

Why does everyone assume to understand it (ed. music) and yet nobody knows its or a melody's meaning? Nonetheless, it is understood [...]. When will we eventually comprehend it properly? When will we finally clearly hear Beethoven, listening and understanding him as a spoken word? As it persists being open, music grows into a utopian expedition, in our own utopia. Hence, the encounter with the Self echoes within it (Bloch, 1978, p. 385, translation is mine).

In conclusion, the profound similarities between Bloch's interpretation of sound and matter appear extremely evident. Both appear to the subject as malleable and filled with potentialities, and both require a subject to determine them through the utopian project. Although the basic instances of Bloch's thought substantially remain unaltered during its evolution, i.e. before and after he joined with communist thought in 1926,<sup>24</sup> what changes are the conceptual instruments that he uses to justify, with a more consistent materialistic slant and a more profound need for substantiality, their possible implement into reality through human praxis. If, according to the early phase of Bloch's philosophy, physical nature is something extraneous,<sup>25</sup> without the potentialities, which would be seen in Bloch's mature philosophy, in *Spirit of Utopia*, by contrast, sound is living and already rich in itself. Therefore, it seems to me that what sound stands for in the first, more expressionist and mystical, writings of Bloch, coincides with what matter stands for in the second, more materialistic and concreteness-craving, production.

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<sup>24</sup> Recently, Cunico (2019, in part. pp. 42, 107, 132) has maintained a substantial uniformity in Blochian thought, consisting in a Messianism aspiring to elaborate the categories of not-yet-being. A similar idea was also argued by Moir (2019, p. 80). Conversely, the idea of a caesura between a first phase, that of the youth and of the *Spirit of Utopia*, and a second phase, starting around in the last years of 1920s, characterised in the joining to Marxism and which would find its inauguration in the work *Traces*, was supported first of all by Adorno (1961). Recently, Mancini (2005, pp. 23–27, 75–84) supported this account. Differently, Boella (1987, pp. 24–28) identified three different interconnected phases.

<sup>25</sup> As mentioned by Zudeick (1987, pp. 18–19), a thirteen-year-old Bloch wrote his first philosophical writing in 1898, *The Cosmos in the Light of Atheism*, arguing that "Matter is the mother of everything existing. It alone has brought forth everything, and no supernatural being played a role". Nonetheless, it appears that the idea of nature as the womb of everything, of potential being, is not developed and even rejected in his first published work, *Spirit of Utopia*, whilst it would be rehabilitated and further analysed in Bloch's maturity: "In the end, however, after this internal vertical movement: may a new expanse appear, the world of the soul, the external, cosmic function of utopia, maintained against misery, death, the husk-realm of mere physical nature" (Bloch, 2000, p. 3).

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