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Imaginary media: Alexander Scriabin's *Mysterium*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the unrealised compositional work *Mysterium* by Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915) as an example of an imaginary medium. It is demonstrated how the creation of *Mysterium* was dependent on discursive practices of the time, on the media landscape of 1900 as defined by Kittler, and on a particular development of the local sphere as conceptualised by Peter Sloterdijk. Furthermore, it reveals some ways in which *Mysterium* interacts with realised and imaginary media of its own time and times to come. The structural complexity of *Mysterium* is used to discuss the limitations and possibilities of the concept of *imaginary media*, and the historically loaded Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is employed for historiographical contextualisation. The article thereby provides a critical understanding of the limits of the technological in the concept of media and also offers a new perspective on a historically important but seldom addressed

work of art and music, which has often left scholars struggling with its unfinished and unrealised character.

Keywords

Media archaeology, imaginary media, Alexander Scriabin, *Mysterium*, colour music, synaesthesia,

Medios imaginarios: Mysterium *de Alexander Scriabin*

Resumen

Este ensayo se centra en Mysterium, *la obra incompleta del compositor ruso Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915), como ejemplo de un medio imaginario. Se demuestra cómo la creación de* Mysterium *dependió de las prácticas discursivas de la época, del paisaje de los medios de 1900, según la definición de Kittler, así como de la evolución concreta de la esfera local, según el concepto de Peter Sloterdijk. Además, muestra algunas de las formas en las que* Mysterium *interacciona con otros medios completos e imaginarios de su propia época y de épocas posteriores. La complejidad estructural de* Mysterium *sirve para debatir las limitaciones y posibilidades del concepto de medios imaginarios, mientras que el* Gesamtkunstwerk, *un concepto wagneriano repleto de connotaciones históricas, se utiliza para la contextualización historiográfica. Así, este artículo proporciona una comprensión crítica de los límites de lo tecnológico en el concepto de los medios y también ofrece una nueva perspectiva sobre una obra artística y musical importante desde el punto de vista histórico, pero raramente estudiada y que, a menudo, ha obligado a los académicos a lidiar con su carácter inacabado e incompleto.*

Palabras clave

arqueología de los medios, medios imaginarios, Alexander Scriabin, Mysterium, *música de color, sinestesia*

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Introduction

Alexander Scriabin was one of the most influential composers and pianists of his time and made a strong impression on others including Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev (Bowers 1996, 50). In his early career his compositions were tonal, but he would eventually develop some of the first atonal harmonic structures of classical music (Sabbagh 2001, 14). The musical poem *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* was a ground-breaking work of atonal composition that created a rupture in a long tradition of tonal harmony, leading the way for a succession of composers of atonal music. The harmonic structures of the composition were created with the help of a colour organ, ordered and designed by a Russian builder, with inspiration from A.W. Remington's colour organ, exclusively for the performance of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*. Experiments in light-colour music can be traced back to the early modern era, following Newton and Goethe's respective theories of colours in the 18th century, before technological experiments became more sophisticated in the 19th century and epistemologically encountered their conditions of possibility with electric light. The early twentieth century saw artistic compositions

and patents for inventions in Russia, Western Europe and the U.S. Like other artists and composers in his sphere, Scriabin had proclaimed himself a synaesthete one who could perceive the concealed link between senses like sight and sound. He believed that there was a structurally identifiable link between colour and musical harmony and that he had the power to display that link to a larger audience (Peacock 1985, 494). As a result, he let colour coding partly decide the compositional structure of his musical poem, and this is how the atonal structure of the 'mystical chord' subsequently came into being. In other words, a forgotten medium – Scriabin's colour organ – created the circumstances necessary for the very rupture in classical composition that came to define musical modernism (Bucknell 2007, 517). In this essay, I will not focus on *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* and the concept of the important category of the forgotten medium as an agent of change (though that discussion will be found in my forthcoming book *Synasthesia and New Media: 1880-1930*). Instead I will look at Scriabin's last, unrealised work: *Mysterium,* a work that can no longer be defined by the original profession of its creator (or as he would later call himself, facilitator), the composer. The first sketches of *Mysterium* are from 1903 and the visionary project existed alongside

the creation of his most influential works of composition. In 1910 the project took over his professional life and it remained his only focus until his death in 1915. Seen by some as a curse and by others as a sacrifice in the name of mystical symbolism, *Mysterium* became the imaginary medium that silenced Scriabin for good.

Mysterium and the archaeology of imaginary media

So, if not a composition, what is *Mysterium*? It was never realised, and its only completed parts were a composition and a libretto called *Preparatory act to Mysterium*. They were not intended to be part of the grand performance of the *Mysterium* itself, but rather an initial practice for the creation of the actual work. *Mysterium* was to become the grandest multimedia, multiaesthetic, mystical work of art that ever had existed, so grand that it could no longer be defined as a work of art but rather as a rite (Morrison 2002, 189). In Scriabin's sketches for *Mysterium* we read that it would consist of an orchestra, a large choir, a colour organ (not the same as the one used for *Prometheus*), dancers, mystical theosophical recitals, chanting and incense among other things. It would take place in a dome-like architectural structure (see illustration) that would change shape and colour in accordance with the rite. It would ideally, in accordance with the theosophical ideas it was based on, take place in the Himalayas, go on for seven days and seven nights and end in the transformation of human life as we know it into a "higher" existence in an "astral dimension", a type of apocalypse (Scriabin 2018, IX). Scriabin even managed to buy a piece of land in Darjeeling from the British in 1914. Though Scriabin would initially be a Promethean type of leader of the *Mysterium,* the rite would eventually be taken over by its spectators, who by inner powers would naturally take over and transform *Mysterium* from artwork to rite. Thus, Scriabin would be transformed from creator to facilitator of *Mysterium*. His fellow symbolist colleagues criticised him for wanting to have control over *Mysterium*, saying that if it truly were the sacred ritual he claimed it was, it would not even initially need a leader. Although there was some criticism in his inner circles, it is evident that they believed in the core ideas he was working on. Ideas that today may sound nonsensical were actually part of the discursive order of the Russian artistic elite of the time. And even though *Mysterium* was never realised, its imaginary configuration existed in Russian symbolist circles of the time, influencing not only composers on a quest for ground-breaking chords and harmonies, but poets, visual artists, scientists and scholars in search of a greater cause for their practices. I will not have time in this essay to account for the way in which the discursive practices in Scriabin's sphere evolved into the aesthetics of avant-garde Soviet cinema, but I have developed that argument elsewhere (Stolpe Törneman, 2012).

So, with *Mysterium*, Scriabin is both the inventor of two separate imaginary mediums of different calibres – the moving dome and the new colour organ – and the creator of an imaginary media landscape – the *Mysterium* in its totality. To define an imaginary multimedia rite such as *Mysterium* as an *imaginary medium* might seem strange, seeing as it has no realised technological components, but it suits the work well. To Scriabin, *Mysterium* had already transcended the sphere of artwork and entered into the imaginary sphere of a new medium that had powers not yet existing in this world. Imaginary in its components and purpose, but medial in every way. The totality of *Mysterium* consists of both mechanical and corporeal media. Here we can draw on several recent critical discussions about the fetishization of the technological in media archaeology and alternative ways of investigating non-technological media archeologically to question the idea that an imaginary medium has to consist mainly of technological components (Parikka 2012, 41-66; Kluitenberg, 2011, 48-69). In a longer cultural history of media, the voice is a core component in defining the connection of the body to the world, that which mediates one consciousness to another and makes culture possible (Ernst 2013, 174). Adding the element of dance – an art form that in the discourse network – 1900 was being used as a way of systematising the movement of the body with inspiration from the technologically reproducible way of 'fixating' the body in time – and the orchestra – with instruments that were acoustic but still technologically advanced, not least in terms of sound amplification thanks to the acoustics of a specially designed room – we find a complex of medial phenomena that relate to a long history of cultural techniques relevant for the development of new media technologies 1900. In "Why are people media?" Peter Sloterdijk states that "to be a medium means to occupy the middle in a field of at least three elements" (2016, 7). He goes on to state that this is a given in technological media, but previously humans occupied this midpoint between two communicating sides. It is a definition that connects to the linguistic understanding of a 'medium' as the reception surface between receiver and received. So, in the midst of *Mysterium* we find the difficulty of defining the limits of the technological in media archaeology; do we draw the line between manmade instruments and the voice, or do we, in accordance with Benjamin (1936), only take an interest in the reproducible art works of the 20th century, thus pushing even the colour organ to the dark side of media? Insofar as these concepts are just historiographical tools it really doesn't matter, and it is clear that the conceptual issues of Scriabin are different. In *Mysterium* the distinction between *artwork* and *rite* is central, and for Scriabin the medium (a concept not used by him) would merely be the thing that takes the participants in the ritual to a higher state.

The epistemological change that makes us lean so confidently towards McLuhan's catchphrase "The Medium is the Message" is not yet discursively potent, though it exists inherently in the discourse of imaginary media in itself, since that which is never realised can really only have one message: the imagined medium itself. There

are no direct traces to be found in the physical world, only an eerie idea of a medium, discursively floating around the contemporaries of its thinker, that then possibly comes into existence as something else, something close or distant to the original imaginary medium.

Nevertheless, the two components that easily lend themselves to the category of imaginary media are, as mentioned above, the dome and the colour organ. The dome only exists in words and sketches, but it is the dream of a machine containing a specific type of mobility, that of expansion. Scriabin vaguely mentions that this expansion could possibly be achieved with the help of light and smoke, but it seems this would just be a substitute for a dome that would actually physically expand as the rite progressed (Scriabin 2018, IX). What he is in fact dreaming of is physical transcendence. With the help of mechanics, it would be possible to transcend this world into the next. It seems that it would be impossible to reach transcendence without the dome; all the components of *Mysterium* are strictly necessary to Scriabin, so this rite could not be completed without the imaginary engineering of a vessel containing the power of expansion. In the mind of Scriabin it might be that the expansion of a building is no stranger than high speed or high mobility. It is an imaginary possible in the technological landscape around 1900. I will not say that the psychoactive imaginings reproduced in artistic representations of the time and brought forth by the vast usage of opium as well as syphilitic hallucination (going back to at least the French symbolists), and which became an element in the conditions of possibility, are necessarily relevant to the idea of spatial expansion as part of a revelatory act, but they might well be.

The colour organ was something much less imaginary than the dome, since colour organs had already existed for centuries and Scriabin had already designed a colour organ and a matching composition in *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*. In a sense, the colour organ intended for *Mysterium* was an existing medium; even though Scriabin planned to design one specifically for *Mysterium*, he had created an organ based on his synaesthetic principles, and those had not been entirely transformed. It is a medium that is no longer actively used, and is thus a dead or forgotten medium. As pointed out by Parikka and Huhtamo, "On the basis of their discoveries, media archaeologists have begun to construct alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their 'perfection'. Dead ends, losers, and inventions that never made it into a material product have important stories to tell" (Parikka and Huhtamo 2011, 3). Scriabin's colour organ questions the genealogies long sustained in art and film history of what can be seen as one unified historical concept of cinema. Scriabin's colour organ as presented in *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* successfully used synchronised audio-visual techniques with effects that received raving reviews from audiences and critics. It clearly was a new but accepted art form of its time, a part of the rich media landscape 1900, harbouring components that would later be defined as cinematic. The recurring idea of Total Cinema echoes the ambition of Scriabin's

Mysterium to be the 'realer world' (Bazin 1967, 22). Scriabin made a distinction between the 'real' and the 'realer' world, where the latter would reveal itself to mankind as it is underneath the blurriness that is our limited perception. The idea of 'Vsyedinstvo' – all-unity – was his spiritual and artistic guideline (Morrison 2002, 185). He might have succeeded had he used the cinematograph in convincing his audience that this transcendence was possible. Building on the success of the ecstasies around *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, the idea that this type of multimedia total artwork was the way to reveal the world in its purest form is not strange at all. The medial landscape of Scriabin in *Prometheus* was felt intensely, and the anticipation of *Mysterium* created an imaginary possibility of the total artwork that might have been a peak of sorts.
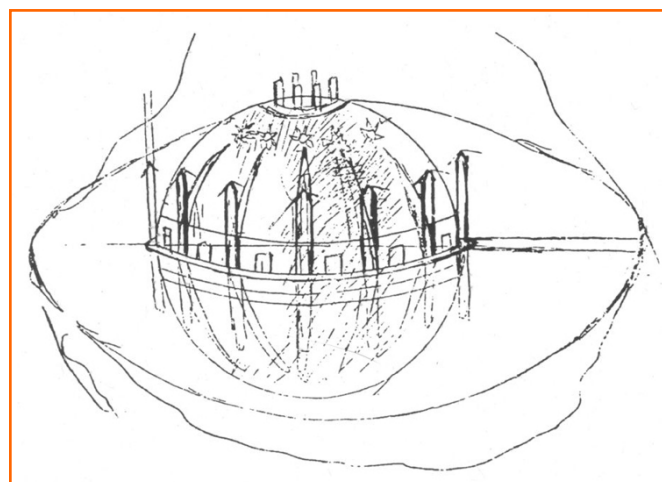
Sketch of the temple for *Mysterium/ The Preparatory Act*, 1914, Wikimedia commons.

Anticipating media technologies

After this descendance into the expansive imagination of Scriabin, it is important to return to the fact that his mystical ideas were widely established within the artistic community of the time. He was not considered to have lost his mind, as was the case of Mallarmé when, in 1915, he published *Un Coup de Des Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard* (Roger 2010). He also enjoyed extreme popularity as a composer. This distinction is important when understanding Scriabin as an example of an epistemic imagination – or the "conditions of possibility", as Foucault calls it – as his ideas were recognised and felt by many. But towards the end his vision fell in popularity, until finally not many but Scriabin believed in *Mysterium*. Not so much because of the artistic and spiritual ideas behind it, but rather due to the apocalyptic end it required.

Scriabin's contemporary fellow mystic symbolist Leonid Sabaneyev was astonished to see how far into this utopian media machine he had invested himself, to the point that he could no longer differentiate between the imaginary and the real. "I just could not understand how he had 'seriously' (not as an artistic creation of

his fantastic imagination, not as a literary dream, but as truth, as something indisputable and believable) created and bound up his life with this intangible creation of his genius. 'Is he in part just imagining? Or has he really set himself on?' I thought, losing myself in conjectures" (Sabaneyev 1925, 82). Scriabin's creation can thus be described as an imaginary medium that evoked madness but also intense inspiration in those who came into contact with it.

> The cast of performers includes, of course, an orchestra, a large mixed choir, an instrument with visual effects, dancers, a procession, incense, rhytmicized textual articulation… The form of the cathedral, in which it will all take place, will not be of one monotonous type of stone, but will continually change, along with the atmosphere and motion of the *Mysterium*. This, of course [will happen] with the aid of mists and lights, which will modify the architectural contours. (Scriabin 2018, IX)

Even though few believed in the actual outcome (an apocalypse) of Scriabin's *Mysterium*, his contemporaries were still inspired by his medial and artistic visions. From the time the idea of *Mysterium* originated in 1903 to the time of Scriabin's death, an epistemic shift in attitudes towards mysticism was taking place. There were many factors that played a role in this shift, one of which was the emergence of a new type of historical consciousness that can be seen, for example, in the historically self-conscious art of the futurist movement. If Scriabin was now creating for the absolute, seeking the absolution of time in transcendence, a new conception of time and history was gradually taking place as exemplified by the Baudelarian concept of the present as a "brief, no-longer-perceptible moment of transition" that so strongly defined the transformative part of what we call modernity (Gumbrecht 2014). This conception of time, which has its own place in history, made Scriabin's transcendental aims seem silly to those who once believed in the very same ideas.

Alexander Scriabin's *Clavier à lumieres*, © Prometheus Institute, Moscow

Instead of going forward in time into the different local spheres of futurism, I would like to go deeper into the discourse network that made *Mysterium* possible, and which relates it to surviving and existing media. The theological tropes inherent to the Total work of art are laid out by Wagner in his essay *The Artwork of the Future*. After a thorough description of the shortcomings and inherent egoism of separate art forms, Wagner goes on to point out the conditions of their unification in theological terms and claims that only when these have been destroyed "can the new religion step forth of itself to life; the religion which includes within itself the conditions of the Artwork of the Future" (Wagner 1898, 155).

Mysterium is an example of how an artwork becomes imaginary through its epistemological shift from artwork to rite. I find the dialectics between the concepts of Gesamtkunstwerk and imaginary media useful in the way they resonate with empirical material of the media landscape 1900; the first being a historical concept that has travelled alongside media for more than a century and the second a contemporary concept that tries to encapsulate a category of media history that has often been overlooked. The one does not exclude the other, but as concepts they have different characteristics – e.g. age and reception history – which can make a comparison confusing. Wagner and the Gesamtkunstwerk cannot be ignored in the discourse order of Scriabin and his contemporaries and the concept itself was highly fashionable among all types of artists. Kittler has called Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk "a monomaniacal anticipation of modern media technologies" and no attempted Gesamtkunstwerk could be more monomaniacal than *Mysterium* – the artwork that would bring forth the apocalypse (Kittler 1990, 23). Scriabin himself was critical of Wagner's artistic strategy, using his supposed failures (in a surprisingly pragmatic way) as a model for what mistakes to avoid in the creation of *Mysterium*:

> In this artistic event there will not be a single spectator. All will be participants. [Wagner's] misfortune lies in the fact that for his reforms he did not acquire the money to construct the theatre, to organize the invisible orchestra, and so forth…. [The *Mysterium*] requires special people, special artists, a completely different, new culture, which money does not provide… (Scriabin 2018, 194).

The relation between Wagner's idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the appropriated idea of the cinematic total work of art as the founding idea of multimedia at large is complicated. It is actually only briefly mentioned in Wagner's writing in a couple of essays, but has since been traced in his work and writings as a fundament of the cinematic total work of art (Wilson Smith, 2007). It suggests that a medium is not simply defined by its technological configuration, but rather by the sum of its components, both artistic and technological. In Wagner's total artworks there are fixed components such as his technologically ground-breaking construction of the stage. The

combination of orchestra, the acoustics of his Bayreuth theatre and the advanced lighting are other rather fixed technological components. Although it existed in constant development, the progress of the Wagnerian stage is no different from that of cinematic media, as the basic principles were becoming more advanced. This issue raises interesting questions about the differences in the concept of historical change: when can we say that something has transformed into something else, and when can we say that it has stayed within its former category, as, for example, the *cinematograph*? What makes us feel justified in interpreting the chaotic history of audiovisuality along a unified linear path from that first cinematograph to the digital apparatus we use for reproducing images and sound today? Other components such as the musical composition and the libretto, the voices of the singers and the use of these components differ in each artwork. When we visualise a given medium, like the *cinematograph,* as swiftly changing over time, and its fixed components being the audiovisual technological configuration, separated from the entity that is needed for the development of the technological and the artistic alike, the components of meaning and matter are so deeply entangled that they cannot be understood without each other.

So why is it that we find it easy to isolate the technological components of a cinematic Gesamtkunstwerk from its artistic components? Why can we so clearly define audiovisual cinema as a technologically fixed entity when it seems strange to do so with the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk? What are our requirements for something to be 'technological'? As has been pointed out by Wolfgang Ernst in *Sonic Time Machines*, the voice of a singer is a medium in a technological sense; before we could reproduce voices with the help of the phonograph we could still reproduce a certain sound of the voice through a highly developed technique of the singer (Ernst, 2016).

The sphere of *Mysterium*

In understanding the concept of 'medium', we have a tendency to put too much weight on the aspect first pointed out by Benjamin (1936), that of the technologically reproducible medium as the defining factor of mediality. But if we follow Benjamin's (1936) distinction between reproducible media and craft-based media, then imaginary media is not a category worth having. If a medium is imaginary, it does not make distinctions between crafts and mechanics. The phantasies that create an imaginary medium are discursive, so the media practices of the time will function as fuel for the conditions of possibility (as a media technological *episteme*). But the components that build the imaginary medium are non-existent and have no (or little) technology to back them up. In the case of *Mysterium* there is no distinction between the technological and the corporeal; it is all part of the 'highest' and 'most special' that he can imagine. In fact, the overlapping meaning of medium as a technological construction and

the mystical notion of a person acting as a *medium* between levels of reality cannot be separated in Scriabin's sphere. With the help of Kittler's discourse network 1900 we can draw on some important factors of what could be imagined there, including the separation of the senses brought about by gramophone, film and typewriter (1990).

But it is still important to differentiate within the discursive order or local sphere to understand that the imaginary possible is plastic and interchangeable. Scriabin's St. Petersburg is not Paris, but it is not impossible to travel from the one place to the other (metaphorically speaking and not). Here, Peter Sloterdijk's concept of 'the sphere' can be helpful in accounting for the movement of discursive ideas and practices in smaller units of space and time, with the focal point being the spatial dimension which Sloterdijk derives from the increased globalisation of modernity as the other of Heidegger's Being: "Since the globe on which the lateral movement of the expansion of terrestrial globalization takes place is finite, this expansion creates a sort of densified globalized interior in which populations, things, and pieces of information interact like air pockets compressed by the multiplicity of neighbouring bubbles: foams" (Elden 2012, 15).

As a conclusion to this investigation of Scriabin and the archaeology of imaginary media, I would like to consider some key elements of Scriabin's local sphere, springing from the theoretical concepts discussed above. These tentative elements should be understood as entangled in space and time by the local sphere itself. A first element is the mysticism of the post-Christian theological urge for transcendence in a country where God was being executed together with aristocracy, while Blavatsky's theosophy thrived. This theological context seems to push Scriabin's artistic quest in the direction of *Mysterium.* The Russian Symbolist movement was a salon-based collective of artists, in which Slavic folk aesthetics co-existed with musical and poetical experimentation with symbolical leitmotifs that transformed musical composition into a poetic act. All of this took place in a new technological media landscape, which brought about a separation of the senses and a new synthetisation through art with the idea of a higher synthesis. Another important element in Scriabin's local sphere is the concept of synaesthesia, which can be understood as a result of this new media landscape and the emergence of a new approach to medical science and psychology as developed by Hermann von Helmholtz. Indirectly it was also related to the mystical interest of the symbolists as they appropriated the clinical concept of synaesthesia, and turned it into an artistic marker and a tool for reaching a higher state. Like several of his contemporary Russian artists, Scriabin claimed to have access to a higher state of perception through synaesthesia. The sphere of *Mysterium* is also marked by political turmoil, which matched collectivism against individualism, the masses against the elite, and those in power against those subjugated to power. The ideal placement of *Mysterium* at the top of the Himalayas was no coincidence, as increased travel to Asia was endowing eastern culture with a sense of mysticism. Another key concept is that of

war, as brought about by the political turmoil that exploded into the first world war, which Scriabin called *Mysterium Tremendum*. This speculative discussion is meant to highlight the complex interactions of the local sphere, following Sloterdijk, in which an imaginary medium can be created and exist.

Alexander Scriabin's *Mysterium* is a striking case of the agency of an imaginary medium – although it was never realised, or rather materialised, it very much affected the epistemological order around 1900 of which it formed part. Teleological historiography often omits such works, as they do not fit into the present perception of what in the past was deemed important. The method of media archaeology and the concept of imaginary media provide an alternative way of rendering artistic practices visible and comprehensible. At the same time, the concept of imaginary media sheds light on the complex interplay between discourse and materiality and thereby raises the question of how we understand media historically. Scriabin´s *Mysterium* helps us to critically engage the limits of the technological in the concept of a medium.

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