GHOST OF THE MACHINE

BY

RYAN CHASE

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GHOST OF THE MACHINE

for sinfonietta

- 2014 -
The author Pamela Sargent describes science fiction as a "literature of ideas." I'd be hard-pressed to name another genre that has so effectively translated high-concept philosophical, theological, and neurological issues into a format that is palatable to a broad audience. Terry Gilliam's Brazil is one such film. Cheekily appropriating an Orwellian dystopian setting (as might have been imagined in the 1940's), the film immerses its viewers into a visually stunning world of hyper-surveillance, terrorism, and consumer capitalism run amok. While it's clear that the movie's satirical punchlines are central to its message, and certainly made ever more relevant in the post-9/11 era, its climax gives rise to even more important questions. What is happiness? How much does society or the world impact our definition and pursuit of it? Can happiness be completely internal?

Perhaps it is no coincidence that I am also drawn to David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest, a sprawling epic novel which encourages its readers to ponder the means to happiness and what happens when we succeed or fail in its pursuit. In America and much of the Western world, entertainments and diversions abound. All of us, to different lengths, use them to distract ourselves from the horrors, self-inflicted or natural, that humanity continues to endure. Depending on the vice, sometimes the entertainment and the horror are one and the same.

Ghost of the Machine draws its title from a quote rejecting Descartes' mind-body dualism by the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle writes the following in his treatise The Concept of Mind,

"Minds are not bits of clockwork, they are just bits of not-clockwork. As thus represented, minds are not merely ghosts harnessed to machines, they are themselves just spectral machines. . . . Now the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine does just this. It maintains that there exist both bodies and minds; that there occur physical processes and mental processes; that there are mechanical causes of corporeal movements and mental causes of corporeal movements. I shall argue that these and other analogous conjunctions are absurd."

Arthur Koestler takes this idea further, writing that the modern human brain is built on primitive brain structures that have become uncontrollable or "mechanized." Sometimes, these simpler brain structures can override "higher-level" logic-driven structures and, in Koestler's mind, can be responsible for hate, anger, greed, and other impulses. More dangerous, perhaps, is when these more primitive structures seek pleasure. As we move toward an increasingly mechanized society (one that is dangerously resembling the one in Terry Gilliam's Brazil), I am especially fascinated by the newest influence on the brain's pursuit and perception of happiness: computers. So often, we become transfixed by our smartphones, tablets, video game consoles, and computer terminals to the point where we lose track of time and the world around us. Millions of years of evolution have occurred to endow our species with especially complex minds for processing the world's phenomena, and we are slowly becoming lost to cyberspace as technology becomes more adept at mining the mind for catharsis and pleasure. We become less like ghosts in the machinery of our minds than external "ghost components" of the literal machinery at our fingertips.

Throughout Ghost of the Machine, the music is constantly in a state of flux between modernist exploration and neo-Romantic indulgence. While I don't hold these two styles to universally objective meanings, I hope the conflict between them in this particular work resembles the often difficult choices we have to make between self-improvement and vice. The way this dichotomy develops over the course of the piece is also reflective of Ryle's rejection of Descartes' mind-body dualism. At the beginning, I establish these two languages as being at odds, but the overall harmonic trajectory of the piece is meant to emphasize their similarities until they cannot be disassociated.

At a more "genetic" level, the piece is built on musical material drawn from Ary Barroso's "Aquarela do Brasil," the musical idée fixe in Terry Gilliam's film. The chromatic, samba ostinato in the original song is transformed into a capricious, fleet-footed line in the clarinet. While this thread runs through the entirety of the piece at various speeds, the opening statement establishes the fastest possible rhythmic value in the work as a whole. Strains of the melody from Ary Barroso's tune are heard as half-remembered fragments, occasionally finding moments of clarity but always falling apart and being overtaken by the more rhythmically active parts of the texture. Though there is a constant conflict between the highly chromatic lines and the diatonic inflections of "Aquarela do Brasil," there is enough common ground between the two ideas to allow the piece to develop an internally consistent set of harmonic rules and preferences.

In many ways, this is the most direct expression of my musical creed. As Ryle rejects mind-body dualism, I reject tonal-atonal dualism. The expressive power of counterpoint, colored further by microtonal inflection, has the ability to give composers control over a vast continuous spectrum of consonance and dissonance. In life, I try to find the balance between vice and self-improvement. In music, I try to find a similar balance between stimulating the mind and the heart.

- Ryan Chase, Bloomington, IN
INSTRUMENTATION

Flute
Oboe (dbl. English Horn)
Clarinet in B-flat (dbl. Bass Clarinet)
Bassoon (dbl. Contrabassoon)
Horn in F
Trumpet in C
Bass Trombone

Percussion (2 players):
1. Marimba, Chimes, Glockenspiel (shared with Player 2), Crotales, Bass Drum (shared with Player 2), Large Tam-Tam, Large Suspended Cymbal
2. Vibraphone, Glockenspiel (shared with Player 1), Xylophone, Bass Drum (shared with Player 1), Triangle

Harp
Piano / Celesta

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Double Bass

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 11’10”

PERFORMANCE NOTES

Score is written in concert pitch with the following octave transpositions:
- Contrabassoon sounds 8vb
- Glockenspiel sounds 15ma
- Crotales sound 15ma
- Xylophone sounds 8va
- Celesta sounds 8va
- Double Bass sounds 8vb

Accidentals carry through the measure and are octave-specific in the traditional manner.

Grace notes should be played before the beat.

Glissandi last the entire duration of the notes to which they are attached.

Explanations for unconventional note-heads and extended techniques appear in the score and parts where they occur.

Microtonal Accidentals:
- $\flat = \frac{1}{4}$ flat
- $\sharp = \frac{1}{4}$ sharp
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\[ \frac{d}{2} = \frac{1}{4} \text{ flat} \]
\[ \frac{f}{2} = \frac{1}{4} \text{ sharp} \]
Ghost of the Machine
for sinfonietta

Andante agitato, $j = 72$

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* Refer to instrumental part for detailed instructions.
KK Tempo primo, \( \text{\( \mathfrak{d} = 72 \)} \)