Review of Thor Magnusson "Sonic Writing. Technologies of Material, Symbolic and Signal Inscriptions"

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In Sonic Writing: Technologies of Material, Symbolic and Signal Inscriptions, Thor Magnusson focuses on understanding "how emerging digital music technologies trace their concepts, design and functionality to practices that precede our culture-epoch" (3). Magnusson's approach to music takes as lead not from the "work-concept", whether in the form of a music score or recordings, but from its "technological" character. This implies considering the musical instrument not as the transition between the composer's ideas and the finished work, but as an "epistemic tool" that embodies the actual music theory. Magnusson is interested in the "unstable" character of musical instruments, insofar as they possess a material excess in regard to the theory they are supposed to embody. He names the instrument's potential for expression, its discoverability and its depth: its "ergodynamics". On account of the tension inherent to his "embodiment" between its epistemic and its ergodynamic character, Magnusson approaches "sonic writing" in relation to the practices of material, symbolic and signal inscription, that is, to the design of the instruments, notation and recording technologies.

There are two main genealogical traits in Magnusson's approach to digital musical instruments. Firstly, the abandonment of the "sedimentation" of the "work-concept" [to their "music score" during Romanticism, and to compose digitalization in the 20th century] by the "music recording" and its "commodification". Secondly, a "neo-baroque" character that arises as a result of the digital decoupling from a physical interface, making digital instruments more epistemic, in the sense that the theoretical system becomes the music itself, like in generative music. There's a risk of "idealism" in this genealogy in the philosophical "material" turn which Magnusson refers to, in which "matter" does not name something external to our thinking but the proper act of self-reflection. Magnusson acknowledges the risk in the lack of "depth" that digital musical instruments have in comparison to their analogue counterparts, yet he is confident that by way of "generativity", "machine learning" and the "multimedia" and "networked" character that code allows for, they could enrich their ergodynamics.

Part I: Material Inscriptions

In the first part of the book, Magnusson approaches the "musical instrument" in terms of its material inscription. Instead of asking what an instrument is, he defines it, by referring back to the Greek organon, as that which mediates the motion between the mover (the doer) and the moved (the deed). He traces this "organology" of musical instruments throughout the whole of European history by always paying attention to the sense of this mediation or "inscription". In Ancient Greece, he recognizes a tension which is exemplified by the division of the musical instrumentation in ethos and next instruments. The former, by way of their mathematization in discreet notes, serve as an inscription of rationality as cosmic and political harmony, whereas the latter are related to the body and the instinctive, as well as to ecstasy and bacchanal, because of their inharmonic pitch and their alteration of the body. We could then say that the "organology" of the musical object can only be accounted for in terms of its material inscription, which "oscillates" between it being the representation of a preestablished harmony that at the same time effaces its material character and, on the other hand, a materiality as a support of sense transformation. It is the former character that is privileged in medieval thought in its hierarchization in a "music of the spheres", the natural music of the voice and the artificial music of the instruments. In the Renaissance, there's a shift from music belonging to a cosmic harmony, to music having its place in the human domain. This involved a process of distanciation or "sedimentation", as Husserl would say [1], by the industrialization of musical instrument production and the "standardization" of design, playing technique and notation syntax. By this shift, the musical instrument was no longer either the embodiment of cosmic or universal transcendence, nor its mere representation. It became the tragic dialectics between Apollo and Dionysus, nor of religious transgrecancy, by means of the celestial voice, but the representation of the mathematical harmony of the universe, similar to a scientific instrument. Magnusson ends his historic overview of music instrumentation by pointing out that the 20th century marks a shift from a standardization of discreet instrumental notes to a focus on "timbre" and that the 21st century is beginning to show a move towards an algorithmic nature and automation.

It is in this sense that the difference between "acoustic", "electric" or "digital" musical instruments is not approached by means of its "what", but precisely on account of "how" these different paradigms embody our understanding of musical inscription. In regard to digital musical instruments, which are the main focus of the book, Magnusson says that his interest lies on the unique qualities of the digital, as opposed to the digital simulation of past technologies. And this means to focus in "the affordances, expressive scope, and theoretical potential offered by the instruments + their ergodynamics" (33). In this sense, Magnusson's examination of digital musical instruments focuses on setting aside what consists of an "ergomimetic" functionality, insofar as the "what" of the object serves a sedimented "how", in order to highlight its "transductive" potential, whereby the "what" of the object inscribes a new "how". According to Magnusson, one of the differences between the acoustic and the electric and digital instruments, regarding their "expressivity", lies in their "interface" (electric and digital instruments have an interface, whereas acoustic instruments are their own interface), which can be subdivided into a gestural interface, a mapping engine and a sound engine. It is this decoupling that, at the same time, enables the object a greater affordance while preventing it from becoming a musical instrument and makes of it just a "controller". Although digital instruments aim to get rid of the "sedimentation" of their acoustic counterparts, they 'e-trace to their "property" to character in terms both of: "individuation" and of an "individualization" as a part of music culture. This becomes evident in Magnusson's description of some of the contemporary ways of (past and the acoustic instruments. The "acoustic" instruments is not just related to a standardization of the music theory it contains, but also to the "singularity" of their ergodynamics. As Magnusson says, there's a depth, character and resonance that digital instruments aspire to by way of non-linear design. It in "controllerism" there seems to be an organic character in regard to its performance, this comes at the cost of the standardization of the music theory that the controller allows for. On the contrary, in digital instruments, the instrument design becomes indistinguishable from the designing of a new music theory. However, there seems to be an increasing risk of "idealism" in the emphasis given to the instrument "design", rather than to its "play".

One of the central theses of Magnusson's book is that instruments are not just objects that serve as a cognitive process or a thought-system, but that they embody the process itself, because they change that same cognitive structure. In this sense he focuses on early Modernity, when scientific instrumentation becomes a critical extension of the human intellect. The scientific instruments do not merely follow theory, but they determine it, since they open up the possibility of the unthinkable. In the Romantic period, Magnusson recognizes a process of standardization where the instrument becomes simply the medium between the composer's ideas and the performer's playing, and he argues that with electronic and digital technology the instrument becomes, once again, a vehicle for scientific and musical exploration. However, because instruments are "containers of theory", there's an intricacy between what they reveal and what they conceal. They can at the same time amplify new possibilities of musical experience and reinforce music theory sedimentations. It is, in the case of acoustic instruments, it is true that they are "epistemic tools", in that they are container or container of theory features in the case of digital instruments. Magnusson recognizes three aspects to take into account with regard to this, namely their materiality, in the form of code-writing; their symbolic character, concerning their control; and their sonic character, that pertains to their function. In order to analyze all three aspects in their interaction, in design and performance, he proposes an "organological" approach.

If the primary concern of Magnusson seems to be the overcoming of the division between techne and episteme by means of an emphasis on how technology predetermines knowledge, this entails a permanent tension between the "design" of the instrument and its "use". Concerning its design, the digital instrument involves a knowledge of sound, signal processing, music theory and interface design, while it is in its "use", by working with it, that we build an understanding of its functionalities and limitations. In order to work with an instrument, you do not need to be aware of its signal processing or music theory but can simply interact with its interface. There seems to be a presupposed "idealism" in the digital instrument, insofar as its "predefined quality" can be exhaustively described in a manual. Magnusson seems to counteract this by positing a material excess in which its non-linear design would not be considered a fault, but in which the interaction with it, by way of a continuous process of "use", would generate behaviors not previously designed. In contrast with digital instruments, acoustic instruments contain an intrinsic non-linearity that make up their "depth". The acoustic instrument gains its "singularity" through use of it, in which it is tested to its limits. If an instrument is a "container of theory", at the same time it cannot be exhausted by the music theory it is supposed to embody. We could say that it, in the history of musical instruments, there was a division between techne and episteme whereby the instrument was considered as a mere medium for knowledge, this would disregard how its technological character determined that same knowledge. There is the opposite danger in digital instruments, where the knowledge would be contained in the technology, whereby "the music results are the instrument" (61).

In accordance with the examination of musical instruments by means of their "ergodynamics", an analysis of the organizational principles of digital instruments should follow an "organology", in which the physiological, the technical and the social need to be included. This means taking into account how digital instruments have transformed our ways of symbolizing music theory, our bodily relations to them and the areas of technological and social culture which they involve. Although Magnusson's aim is not only to approach music instruments as "epistemic tools", but also as "ergodynamic" artefacts to explore, it seems that his last dimension is more clearly exemplified by acoustic instruments, whereas in the case of digital instruments the emphasis is put more on their design and not in an exploration of their potential non-linearity.

Part II: Symbolic Inscriptions

In the second part of the book, Magnusson provides an overview of the history of "music notation", which proves to be a perfect example of his concept of "technological inscription", that is, of the process through which an instrument by means of its material inscription transforms the music theory, the performance and the social and technological culture. It in Ancient Greece, music embodies a sonic expression of political and cosmic harmony, this marked a hierarchy between written music theory (separated and the music practice performer) which only survives as oral culture, "Music notation" emerged as a mnemotechnical aid within ecclesial music and, although it was restricted only to pitch, its externalization and spatial arrangement of temporal sonic information soon allowed for polyphonic composition. Moreover, by this "grammatization" of music, the roles of the composer, of the luthier and of the performer became more specialized. With printing, not only a democratization of access to music takes place, but also a whole industry of instrument building is generated apart from the composers. Printed music goes from being a medium of preserving music as cultural memory, to allowing for original musical thinking. With Romanticism, the ideas of musical work, autonomy, authorship and interpretation emerge, whereby the musical score embodies the primary manifestation of the music itself, while the performances of the work become mere instances of it. This transformation of an ontology of music, by means of the affordances that the technological medium of the "music score" uncovered, does not come without a sedimentation of its music theory, mainly of the music "work-concept". It is in the 20th century that a continuous exploration of the ergodynamics of "music notation" beyond its restriction to a work-concept takes place.

Magnusson approaches this exploration by making use of a dichotomy between "descriptive" and "prescriptive" notation. "Descriptive" scores refer to music notation which was intended as a mnemotechnical aid for performers, while "prescriptive" scores determine the performance of the music. It is not about a quantitative difference concerning how much music is notated, but a transformation of whether the music notation is just a medium or the work itself. Yet, with this sedimentation of the music score as the embodiment of the work itself comes a growing tension whereby musical notation fails to grasp a musical mechanical reenactment, that is, what served as a material inscription now effaces its ergomimetic character and must acknowledge its incompleteness as an "open work". Magnusson explores this tension in "action notations", in which the composer gives instructions to the performer and the score gains a collaborative nature, in "graphic scores", in which the composer "grammatizes" not only pitch, time and duration but any notable sonic parameter to be explored, in "multimedia notation", in which an increasing importance is given to the "play" and "indeterminacy" of the given directions; and in "improvisation", which tries to break through the "work-concept" still prevalent in the formalism of even the collaborative, indeterminate and generative character of prescriptive notation.

In order to unveil wherein could lie the affordances that digital instruments provide us with, pertaining to computer code as a form of music notation, Magnusson traces again a historic overview of algorithmic and generative music. In doing this, he focuses not so much on music notation as a device of mnemotechnical aid for music performance, but on music notation inherent to the "music theory" that lies behind its practice. If music could need cosmic harmony, by establishing a set of rules, then all music could be derived by way of combinatorial methods. Music composition would consist in the application of algorithmic or generative rules, whereby an infinite number of music pieces could be produced. It is clear then the approach, in which the system itself is considered the music work, resonates with digital instrument design. It is exemplarily exemplified that Magnusson considers briefly and then focuses on their design and not in an exploration. By "metaphor" of a generative music work, because "metaphor" embodies precisely the "material inscription" in the domain of language. "Metaphor" predetermines "concept", in the same way as performance determines music notation and the instrument embodies music theory's sedimentations, and that within the metaphor lies a surplus of semantic power that goes beyond its use in a conceptual system. Just to mention one of the "metaphors" that Magnusson refers to, digital generativity could be described in biological terms as genotypes and phenotypes, where the software is the genotype that engenders infinite musical instances as phenotypes. However, the phenotype is not an instantiation of a genotype, but precisely its "material inscription", insofar as, in account of its "plasticity", it expresses the "ergodynamics" of its openness to environmental factors. If Magnusson opts for "biology" in "code" in order to approach generative music, this seems to presuppose that "code" could be "non-metaphorical". Although Magnusson refers as well to the Deleuzian concept of "virtuality", which would correspond to the software, that contains the potential to become fulfilled in the "actuality" of the pieces, this "virtuality" should be understood in the sense of a "modularity". He ends precisely by referring to "modular systems" in electronic music, in which the design of the system functions like a compositional and generative framework, albeit one where an ergodynamic exploration is necessary in order to "play" with it.

Part III: Signal Inscriptions

In the case of "music notation", Magnusson approaches the material inscription of music in relation to "symbolic" transcription. This is genuine to the selection of a determined number of sonic parameters, e.g. pitch, time, duration, to which a symbol is ascribed, in order to be reproduced. In the third part of the book, he deals with the history of the dynamic mechanical inscription of sound, with the attempt to investigate "whether sound could be written down, similar to the possibility of writing light with photography" (124). This writing of sound or "phonography" aims to depict the effect of a vibrating object, the actual sound it emits through air. This "signal inscription" appears to write the actual wave motion, and it is thus not "symbolic" like music notation. Magnusson traces the history of "sonic writing" back to its early attempts in the form of wavetracings behind onto material substances, but still without the intention of "playing back" what was written down, most probably because of its analogy to photography's "light writing".

It is with the phonograph that the possibility of reproducing the written sound materializes. The "sonic recording", on the one hand, is not just the medium for a signal transposition and reproduction of sound, but an "organon" that changes the way in which we conceive music theory, our bodily relation to it and the social and technological culture around it. On the other hand, the "material inscription", by bypassing the music work itself, carries with it an "erasing" of its ergodynamic character (by its sedimentation in the "work-concept"). Magnusson exemplifies this with the "sound recording". When was at first thought of as a medium for documenting music, soon proved to be the space in which the actual music composition took place. Like with music notation, "sonic writing" goes from being the signal transcription of a work to becoming the material out of which new sounds could emerge. Magnusson describes two tendencies in which sonic writing became the compositional medium itself. On the one hand, the "sound synthesis" back to the fixed attempts to directly write down the waveform by hand on a material substance. Nowadays you would work similarly with any additive synthesis digital instrument, in order for it to be later transduced into sound. On the other hand, with the invention of magnetic tape, a musique concrète was born, whereby recorded sound was no longer approached as a symbolic transcription of a music parameter but a phenomenological bracketing as "pure sound". In terms of ergodynamics, its material inscription allowed for new forms of musical composition, insofar as tape could be cut and pasted, slowed down or sped up, reversed and so on. At the same time, the material inscription of sonic writing brings a risk of "idealism", in that there's no depth behind a recorded sound whose ergodynamic character is fixed, as opposed to the ergodynamic character of a live instrument. The risk here is that the recorded music becomes the music piece itself, against which all live performance is judged. The music work is composed through the process of working in the studio, whether by its assemblage of recorded sound, or by manipulation of it in its sonic analysis. In the case of the music score, despite the detailed prescriptive notation, there is still an affordance for interpretation by the music performer. Whereas in the case of the music recorded sound, there's an increasing sedimentation of the "work-concept", in which the "sound recording" sediments both the music theory and its performance, insofar as it becomes the "commodification" of the music record, whereby it determines a mass-produced, normed and consumed around the world.

Although "sonic writing" allowed for "signal inscription", bypassing the need for a "symbolic transcription", it was an inscription of how the machine "hears", not of how it "listens". In the case of "sound synthesis", it was necessary to understand, in order to be able to recreate already sedimented sounds by drawing them, their acoustic architecture and spectrum. In this sense, as the sound's fundamental frequency, its partials or its amplitude increase in "the sound or a machine-listening", by particular in its amplitude envelope. In the case of "musique concrète" this presented a problem, insofar as it represented a "transduction" between how the machine "hears" and how a human "listens", whereby the latter consists of a phenomenological bracketing of sound, in its "reduced listening" approach to reduce sound as an "object". Although the musical score could correctly represent the musical parameters to create an already sedimented sound, it faces great difficulty, when confronted with the problem of "sound analysis" and "machine listening" involves at the same time as sound's ergodynamic and material inscription, from necessitating a transduction of how the machine "hears" to how a human "listens". The technological instruments that allow us to analyze sound in each of its signal parameters at the same time precede their own "sedimentation". This "critical music" approaches a "material" turn in ontology, in which "matter" refers to something external to our thinking but is generated by the process of self-music "self-reflection". If the "sonic writing" of "machine listening" involves at the same time an enormous technical and cultural impact, from which it difficulty analysis of its sedimentation is far more important to the social dynamics we are constructed when engaged within its generative and combinatorial nature.

Part IV: Digital Writing

In the final part of the book, Magnusson displays an overwhelming and kaleidoscopic overview of contemporary digital music technology in order to hint at what sort of transformation is taking place in regard to the three technological principles, which we have previously analyzed. As I have tried to point out, the thesis, according to which a musical instrument is a double-edged sword, insofar as it embodies a cognitive structure by the very same character of its technological materiality. Thus digital instruments bring with them new affordances but at the same time a new risk of "sedimentation". Being the most versatile of all instruments, because of its "epistemic tool" and its materiality insofar, its epistemic dimension (its "depth" and "mystery") of acoustic instruments as an "algorithmic and computational character", enough on its "ergodynamics". If there's a lost depth in digital instruments, that is in relation to "machine learning", a far more important area. In "machine learning", whereby the instrument predetermines what could be sensed as "theory itself", in the first of musical instruments, digital instruments struggle to achieve the "depth" and "mystery" of acoustic instruments, wherein there's always a material excess of its ergodynamic character. Against this, Magnusson points out two main affordances of digital musical instruments. On the one hand, the implementation of machine learning, the interface becomes a "listener" in its own right, and the mapping between gestures and sound is something it can learn to do (instead of just executing preprogrammed commands). On the other hand, the interface "feeling" involves, by its multimedia and networked character, the breaking through of the established paradigms and conventions, whereby the composer could play with any form of sensory information and express it in any sonic parameter in any device. Moreover, this digital materiality allows for an emphasis on the music piece itself.

In the case of "symbolic inscription", Magnusson affirms the formation of an "oral culture", not in the sense of an abandonment of writing, but of its transformation, from being a medium of archiving to an execution of, as Derrida would say, its "dissemination"[3]. This orality is hyper-writing, whereby a sonic phrase is written by means of a "grammatization"[4] of the material inscription of the music theory, that uncovers new affordances, opening a vast affinity between digital music theory, the recording and the performance. With respect to "signal inscription", Magnusson points out that in digital music, sound is now thought of as mere information, as an algorithmic combinatorial system. Digital music is a creative pluralism, in terms of the sheer variety of instruments it allows for, a "community" and social dynamics around the shared musical information in "networked" systems. The risk here could lie in that "code" comes to be thought of not so much as systems, but as "ecosystems", that at anticipated openness to the environment of the "instrument" to the environment, in generative music, new musical experiences emerge.

This shift in "music notation" achieves its apex in "live coding", in which practitioners perform on stage by writing code that generates audiovisual work, which seems to get rid of the whole problem of a music interface. Since it approaches music theory as composition, it predetermines the design and the "play" of the music instruments itself, like in generative music, the work-system itself, it performs the music notation, live and in real-time. If the "live-coding" often becomes trapped in the "idealism" of systematic musics of their code is the interface. Moreover, the practice of "live coding" often involves improvisation in front of code sharing. As Magnusson points out, the standardization and dissemination on the internet makes of the act of programming a new form of "social creativity". The computer code embodies, "as itself", the conditions of being-in-the-world and of "making-present" that music theory's sedimentations "mystery" could at the same time be thought of not as idealistic as generative, but as a "shared ecosystem".

In the case of "signal inscription", as we saw, the "sound recording" that produced the most pervasive sedimentation of "work-concept", as well as its "commodification". If digital instruments by means of the way that their "critical" character not only reflect their own design, but also their critical reflection is no longer an analysis of their own sedimentation as in the case of generative and networked systems, but an "over-abundance" in a looser-scale materiality, as we sought in "machine learning" and in the multimedia and networked character of code. Against the idealism of generative music, Magnusson develops by Magnusson reflects a consideration of the digital music as the result of a collaborative and social combination of a creation of a dispersed "ecosystem" character, rather than the solitary and mysterious character of the acoustic instruments in their ergodynamics, whereby they inform our being-in-the-world.

Conclusion

Magnusson's book could have been entitled "a neo-baroque approach to digital music instruments" in resonance with Deleuze's "neo-baroque" interpretation of Leibniz, in which the "fold" (pli) plays an analogous role to that of "inscription"[4]. Magnusson seems to presuppose that "code" is "non-metaphorical", while acknowledging its "ergoforce" character. He makes use of an "ergomimetic" trait to both instruments and media, insofar, and, in the medium, one-way, digital instruments and media, insofar, on the medium, one-given musical material, as it were. Over the emphasis music that the "transductive" character has in acoustic instruments, which allows that there's always a material excess to the music theory they embody, could lie in overcoming the "idealism" that is necessarily incurred in "sedimentation". If there's an overcoming of the danger of "idealism" in digital instruments, Magnusson consistently reminds us of their "double-edged" character. The problem of digital instruments "depth" and "mystery" could consist in that, while a "simple" generativity", its "ergodynamic" character is at risk of being exhausted in its own design, there's also a performative aspect in which "machine learning", the multimedia and networked character of code can enrich that of its "depth" and "mystery". This is "code" as an "ecosystem" of being-in-the-world.

What characterizes contemporary music practice is a shift from the "work-concept", whether expressed as a generalization notated, or in a music practice sedimented by playback, towards a focus on the music material as such or in the instrument practice itself. We could highlight three aspects of Magnusson's approach. Firstly, a concern of the instrumentalist that is an appraisal of the analytical, scientific-technical character of instruments as a set of critical tools in order to navigate and trace its genealogy. The historic overview given by Magnusson that insofar it consists of an organological approach, the music theory, the performance and the social and technical dynamics that an instrument embodies. Secondly, a practical, hands-on approach, in which each of the diverse digital music technologies is referred back to the kind of musical creativity it allows for. Thirdly, a speculative, theoretical interest insofar as the character of the instruments determines our ways of knowing and being-in-the-world. Concerning this last dimension, I have tried to point out throughout this review the risk of "idealism" that Magnusson presupposes in the "material inscription" of digital music technology, insofar as, in his focus on their "design" and not so much in their "play", "matter" could be thought of not as an external character to our thinking, but the proper act of "self-reflection". Perhaps it is precisely the "ergodynamic" character, by which any instrument contains an excess material to the theory it embodies, which could overcome the "idealist" risk of the digital, in a similar way to the manner in which it is constantly achieved by the "depth" and "mystery" that acoustic instruments possess. As Magnusson says, there's always an "over-abundance" in the musical instrument's "material inscription" that enacts what he calls "excitation-potential" (244), whereby the musical instrument plays in the open of being-in-the-world, as a "social, political, aesthetic and technological machine" that always reveals more than what it could conceal.

Biography

Angel Alvarado Cabellos studied philosophy in Lima, Louvain-la-Neuve, Prague and Wuppertal. He has an Erasmus Mundus EuroPhilosophie master's degree in French and German philosophy. He is currently finishing his PhD in a cotutelle about the architectonical ideology of the phenomenon of Eros in German and French phenomenology.

1.   "Sedimentation" is a geological metaphor found in the late work of Edmund Husserl to express the genealogical process of every foundation, whereby a new apodictic evidence discovers a new object is constituted, in which discovery settles down upon an original meaning-founding evidence that becomes dormant in its "reactivation". Cf. Husserl, E. (1970). The Origin of Geometry, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 353-378.

2.   In The Fire of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility, Walter Benjamin asks: "What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be." Cf. it refers to the "here and now" which is the unrepeatable moment of the distance inherent in the "authentic" work of art, that is, an inapproachability, which grounds its capacity to exhibit a ritual value, as opposed to an exhibition value. Cf. Benjamin, W. (2008). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 23.

3.   Derrida approaches a critique of Western logocentrism by establishing a hierarchical dichotomy in which "speech" is given a primacy over "writing". Speech seems to guarantee the self-presence of thought, insofar as the voice seems to vanish precisely in the moment in which the idea emerges to consciousness. Writing, on the contrary, always implies an absence, a separation from the author and from the moment of inscription. Cf. Derrida, J. (2016). Of Grammatology, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

4.   Cf. Deleuze, Gilles, (1993). The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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