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Bad Habits

Exploring visual objects as a means of extracting and creating material for music composition

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt arbete
Till dokumentationen hör även följande partitur:

- Kengai,
- Yose-ue,
- Segmented Saturation,
- Bad Habits
### Table of Contents

About myself .............................................................................................................. 2
Interest in visual arts ................................................................................................. 2
Early attempts .............................................................................................................. 3
Bad Habits – Conceptual drives .............................................................................. 7
Initial steps .................................................................................................................. 9
Musical form .............................................................................................................. 10
Object-derived motifs ............................................................................................... 13
Narrative-derived motifs ......................................................................................... 15
Narrative and development ...................................................................................... 16
Afterthoughts ............................................................................................................ 18
Possible paths ........................................................................................................... 20
Reference List ........................................................................................................... 21
Appendices ................................................................................................................. 22

### Table of Figures

Figure 1. A Blue Atlas Cedar bonsai in kengai or cascade style .............................. 4
Figure 2. Ken, m. 1 ................................................................................................... 4
Figure 3. Catlin Elm yose-ue or forest style bonsai ................................................... 5
Figure 4. Yose-ue, m. 1 ............................................................................................ 5
Figure 5. Art by Elizabeth Haworth ......................................................................... 6
Figure 6. Philip Guston, Studio Landscape, 1975 ...................................................... 9
Figure 7. Philip Guston, Painting, Smoking, Eating, 1972 ...................................... 10
Figure 8. Philip Guston, Divisions, 1975 ................................................................. 11
Figure 9. Philip Guston, City Limits, 1969 .............................................................. 12
Figure 10. Philip Guston, Couple in Bed, 1977 ......................................................... 12
Figure 11. Horizon/wall motif (strings), m. 1 ............................................................ 13
Figure 12. Clock motif (strings), m. 2 ..................................................................... 13
Figure 13. Clock motif (harp), m. 5 ......................................................................... 14
Figure 14. Cigarette motif (percussion), m. 11 ......................................................... 14
Figure 15. Light bulb flickering effect (winds), m. 30 ............................................. 15
Figure 16. Image and derived melody (woodwinds), m. 12 ...................................... 16
Figure 17. Clock and melody, m. 62 ....................................................................... 17
Figure 18. Machine-like pizzicati, m. 65 ................................................................. 17
Figure 19. Ending, m. 162 ...................................................................................... 18
About myself

I started my music studies fairly late in life, only giving them more serious thought when I decided to drop out of business school at the age of 18 in order to pursue a career in the music field. I bounced between programs and schools, having started as a major in music education at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, which was succeeded by a change to the composition program at the same institution. Shortly after, I decided to transfer to the Oklahoma City University, where I finally earned my bachelor’s degree in music composition.

It is interesting to note that I did not play any instruments prior to my university studies, and fiercely battled to keep it that way as I knew I would not be making my career as a performer any time soon. I also did not listen to classical music very frequently, and frankly did not understand modern and contemporary music one bit.

It was only after taking many theory courses, such as harmony, analysis, and counterpoint, that I started to understand how big a role the contemporary aesthetics would have in my life going forward, which coincided with the moment that I decided to switch music education for composition. I believe this brief introduction is relevant in the sense that it relates to my view, whether truthful or not, that I was – and still am to an extent – an outsider of sorts in relation to being a musician.

Interest in visual arts

I have always been interested in the subjective and the subconscious, and I believe that these fields are intertwined with the arts at all levels. It is my understanding that our environment and our experiences, which in a way are responsible for shaping us as people, will inevitably be reflected in our creative production. Perhaps because I lack experience in the sense of not being a performer, I always felt that I needed aid in the form of extra resources whenever I approached music writing. Without the skills to improvise on an instrument and with no possession of past involvement in ensembles and orchestras to fall back on, I would always seek new ways of tackling the act of composing.

One of the lines of thought that appealed to me more strongly was the unfolding of André Breton’s reasoning behind his Surrealist Manifesto. Breton proposed
a reasoning in which the conscious and subconscious would inherit equally important roles. His pursuit of liberation from the consciousness served as motivation for me to look beyond my limited tools in order to discover a way of going beyond my theoretical knowledge of music in search of new inspiration and results.

Because of my interest in visual arts, objects, and landscapes, I would often find myself seeking contribution in museums, art galleries, and nature. What started as the simplistic method of looking at objects to draw some sort of inspiration slowly developed into a more fleshed-out, yet, perhaps, just as naïve and contemplative practice of analyzing visual components in order to extract from them information that could be transformed into music. Needless to say, this practice also symbolizes my drive to get acquainted with new forms of art and thoughts. In my mind, any kind of experiences that we amass throughout our lives contributes directly or indirectly to what we produce.

This essay will travel through my early attempts at exploring this subject in order to define and explain the main artistic project of my master’s studies at the Royal College of Music, which is a piece inspired by the late works of American artist Philip Guston.

**Early attempts**

I believe the first time I incorporated visual elements as a tool for generating music material was when I wrote a series of short pieces for piano, which were each based on a specific style of bonsai. That project was started early in my music studies, and further developed while I was nearing the conclusion of my bachelor’s degree. Grouping bonsai into styles is essentially a way to categorize them according to the natural ways trees will grow in the wild, thus, characteristics such as the orientation of the tree, the number of trunks, etc., are taken into account during this process.

In a very direct interpretation of the elements presented to me by a specific style of bonsai, in this case, the *kengai*, or cascade (see figure 1), we can see how the cascading branches were, in a sense, translated into the initial descending melodic line (see figure 2). This exemplifies a very direct way of working with visual elements in the sense that I simply looked at the fundamental characteristics of a particular object and tried to infer what they could be represented as in the form of sound.

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1 W. Bohn, *Surrealist Conversations*, Romanische Forschungen, Frankfurt, Vittorio Klostermann GmbH,
Figure 1. A Blue Atlas Cedar bonsai in kengai or cascade style. Courtesy of National Bonsai Foundation, accessed 13 April 2021, https://www.bonsai-nbf.org/collections#Japanese

In a different fashion, I have also veered towards a looser approach, in which a visual object and its elements contribute to a general feel rather than a direct translation into musical material. We can see that, with the yose-ue, or forest style bonsai (see figure 3), I borrowed from the landscape quality of the trees to convey a denser and more unsettling atmosphere (see figure 4). In my mind, the holistic quality of a miniature forest, meaning that the full picture is at focus rather than each individual tree, demanded a more subjective approach with a more enigmatic musical result.
My interest in combining image and sound during the creation process was further developed when the possibility of collaborating with a visual artist was presented to me during my bachelor studies. For that project, I wrote one piece inspired by a student artist’s work (see picture 5). The method I utilized to approach that task during the early creation steps was largely a combination of both the idea of selecting visual objects that could be easily translated to music material, previously presented in *Kengai*, and interpreting the features that were of interest to me in a subjective manner to create a general concept for the piece, as shown in *Yose-ue*. 
I understood this balance to be of great assistance during the creation process, as creating an array of motifs provided me with the tools to be used and further developed, while constructing an overview gave me the ability to shape a preliminary structure, which included elements such as the music form, contrasts I would seek to achieve, and, in a sense, the narration I would associate with it. The resulting product – a piece for seven performers – can be loosely understood with the following excerpt taken from the program notes:

The piece consists of a slow, quasi-palindromic crescendo and diminuendo, in which the performers enter and leave the stage at different times. Although the performers have to pay attention to each other, there is no acknowledgement of their presence. It is as if the participants exist within different locations or dimensions. Only the piano and cello parts have written music, so those performers are the only ones who may use scores during the performance.³

A simplified explanation of my interpretation of the art piece is that the dots could be seen as places, times, or dimensions, and the lines could represent that they are somehow connected. In this view, the performers represent the dots, and the lines become mechanisms and the driving force behind their unavoidable connection. The whole idea of different spaces is represented by the performers who have independent and improvisatory roles apart from the piano and cello, which in turn portray the idea of the connecting lines.

It is worth noting that my intention in drawing inspiration from objects and art was never to give them any meaning they did not need, but instead to expand my possibilities as a composer by using elements outside of the standard music realm. At most, one could see my writing as an evocation or as homage to the things that inspire me. For that reason, it can also be inferred that my interpretations are only a few of many possible ones, and that explaining them to eventual listeners is not desirable for anything beyond curiosity and information exchange. I would, however, often explain my inspirations with a varying amount of vagueness to the performers involved, for I enjoyed observing the character that my pieces would acquire with their subjective understanding of the very same objects I used as inspiration.

Bad Habits – Conceptual drives

My main artistic project during my final year at the Royal College of Music’s master’s program is titled Bad Habits. The piece is written for orchestra, has a duration of approximately six minutes, and was created entirely by utilizing Philip Guston’s late works (1967 onwards) as a source of inspiration. In order to be able to discuss it in depth, however, it is important to briefly contextualize the subject.

Guston was one of the most prestigious members of the New York School in the fifties, though the fame did not stop him from questioning the role his contemporaries and he himself played during the period. His artistic progression was fairly linear in the way that it went from figurative art to abstract expressionism, and,

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during that trajectory, he was able to prove himself a skilled artist according to the period’s standards.\(^5\)

It is of no surprise that the War influenced Guston and his art in many ways. As a teacher at the University of Iowa, he established in 1942, along with the Department of Art, the “War Art Workshop”, which was a means of contributing to the war effort.\(^6\) The Workshop was responsible for producing instructional murals, relief sculptures, etc. Though he did not serve in the war, we can observe that Guston was by no means dissociated from the political scenario at the time, often being in close proximity with the soldiers in training.

It was only in the second half of the 1960s that Guston finally broke free from his abstract expressionist aesthetics and returned to figuration. That period, marked by the artist’s feelings of political impotence, would accompany Guston until his death in 1980.\(^7\) Following a personal crisis, which pinnacled into a refrain from painting, he gushed into an extremely prolific period of production, in which he totaled hundreds of works that drew light to more mundane themes, such as objects one would find inside a house.\(^8\) This phase is especially interesting for me, for it represents a fairly automatic process of creation in terms of productivity, which I believe serves to facilitate the effects of the subconscious that were defended by Breton. Another noteworthy trait in my eyes is that the works from this period, due to the protagonism of mundane objects, also contain a multitude of elements that can easily be converted into music ideas.

Looking at his figurative works, we can observe recurring themes such as light bulbs, clocks, cigarettes, nailed shoe soles, painting supplies, walls, body hair, and so on (see figure 6). In my view, the artist shows no concern for displaying beautiful scenes and aesthetically pleasing settings, an interesting trait, which I share, albeit as a composer. The referred paintings seem to be very on point, but also leave space for interpretation regarding each object’s meaning.


Initial steps

Following the reasoning behind my previous works that explored visual objects, I decided to select motifs that were interesting for me in the sense of providing valuable and perhaps more direct translations to music material. Looking over the list of objects and their possible symbology, while also taking into consideration the available instruments for which I could write was my first step towards writing Bad Habits. The result was a short list, of which not every item was selected to be featured in my piece:

- Clocks – the passage of time;
- Ladders – to rise from one level to another;
- Light bulbs – to put something in view, bring to light;
- Cigarettes – a quick relief, brevity of life;
- Nailed soles (facing outside) – an allusion to the massacres of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War;
- Hairy limbs – the unprotected self;
- Walls/closed horizons – to engulf or overwhelm the beholder.

In order to avoid a potentially problematic oversaturation of material, which was immediately perceived during my early sketches, I decided to settle for only a few of those objects. I, then, worked on defining how they could be intuitively converted into musical ideas. Clocks and walls were selected because I understood them to contain a
degree of synergy: clocks could be represented by a recurring pattern, while walls and horizons could be written as long lines, held notes, or chords. Cigarettes and light bulbs were chosen roughly for the same effect. Cigarettes are objects that are spent quickly, being lit up and then losing their use before being discarded. In this view, light bulbs only differ in the sense that they take longer to run out, meaning that they both share an ephemeral quality.

After selecting my initial motifs, the next step was to create a form or a narrative to be followed from a writer’s perspective. For that, I selected a few paintings that shaped a somewhat caricatured story of a day in Guston’s life. The narration borrowed from the feelings and habits that the artist revealed in his works, such as anxiety, depression, identity crisis, smoking, working through the nights, etc. It is important to notice, however, that this narration is only intended for the purpose of writing my piece as a compositional tool. I never had any intention of conveying a story to an audience.

Musical form

*Bad Habits* follows an “A, B” structure, in which “A” is represented by two paintings. *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (see figure 7) can be seen as Guston starting his day, cigarette already in his mouth and covered in food. As he is awakened and disturbed by the ever-ticking clock, he slowly gets to work, fueled by the constant images of paintings-to-be that present themselves to the artist inside his mind.

Still within the “A” section, Guston sits at his work desk, the horizon riddled with imagery that seeps into his paintings. This transition from sleeping to relentless productivity is represented by a gradual change in character as the piece becomes more and more dense and rhythmically active. His workstation is portrayed in *Divisions* (see figure 8).

The “B” section is represented by *City Limits* (see figure 9), in which we can observe members of the Klan driving in a very urban setting, hoods dirtied with blood. This image relates very closely to the artist’s words:

> The idea of evil fascinated me […] I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan (KKK). Then I started conceiving an imaginary city being overtaken by the Klan […] Then I started thinking that in this city, in which creatures or insects had taken over, or were running the world, there were bound to be artists. What would they paint? They would paint each other or paint self-portraits.⁹

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In *Bad Habits*, “B” contains a more urban character, which I perceive as having a mechanical feel of gears grinding. It is the most chaotic setting of my composition and it features different tempi, as well of a multitude of ideas that briefly come and go. It also symbolizes a breakthrough from the walls and horizons due to Guston diving into his conjectured world.

![Figure 9. Philip Guston, City Limits, 1969. Courtesy of Artsy, accessed on 13 April 2021, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/philip-guston-city-limits](image)

The “B” section and, therefore, the piece ends with a sort of lullaby that suggests the notion of those days of productivity and self-indulgence that came and went without a clear separation. This is denoted by *Couple in Bed* (see picture 10), in which we see the artist still wearing shoes and holding on to his brushes despite being tucked in bed.

Object-derived motifs

The horizon/wall idea was chosen to be the first to appear due to its static quality, for that would allow it to serve as a neutral foundation on top of which the piece would develop. It started as a single held note played by the string section in unison (see figure 11), but as the music progressed, the horizon/wall would start becoming thicker and more present by incorporating pitches from the other ideas.

Likewise, the clock figure appears very early in the beginning (see figure 12), as it also shares very similar qualities with the horizon/wall motif. It, too, can be present throughout the whole piece without taking over as the protagonist. It is shown, at first, loudly as a pizzicato effect in the string section doubled by the harp and accentuated by the glockenspiel. This motif potentially takes on the narrative role of forcing Guston out of bed in an annoying fashion. It, then, remains solely with the harp in a softer dynamic to represent the assimilation and mental distancing from the artist’s perspective (see picture 13).
The idea of the cigarettes soon follow, as it seemed very natural for it to do so given that Guston usually portrayed himself holding one seemingly at any moment of the day. It is represented throughout the piece as short events, often shared by the percussion instruments (see figure 14). A pattern between the objects mentioned so far is that their musical interpretations share a somewhat passive quality, which was especially interesting for me in the sense that they could all be combined in coexistence to create a single layer.

Unlike the aforementioned examples, the light bulb differs in the way that it is not so much a self-contained musical event that is easily recognizable, but instead an effect occurring on the musical ideas already taking place at specific times. It makes its way into the piece as an unfolding of its flickering nature, being represented by slight changes of dynamics and repeating chords (see figure 15). Naturally, one might say that a source of light is only noticed actively when it oscillates, which draws an interesting parallel to the use of these flickering chords as opposed to held notes. Another observation is that the effect of the light bulb is felt when an object is made more perceptible, in this case by the repetition of the pitches.
Narrative-derived motifs

Additionally, two main ideas were added to the piece as a means of creating a more directional voice to permeate the passive and recurring motifs. Those allude to specific quotes by Guston that were interesting to me:

- “When the picture takes form, the new structure elates and calms me.”
- “You’re painting a shoe; you start painting the moon, and it turns into a piece of bread.”
- “I mean there is a forgotten place of beings and things, which I need to remember. I want to see this place. I paint what I want to see.”

These ideas that I created can be seen as the images that appear inside Guston’s mind, which are represented by chord, pitch collections, and melodic lines (see picture 16), which themselves are derived from those images, representing the artist’s brushstrokes or, in essence, his goal to produce paintings out of them.

Narrative and development

As one of my main interests is to explore subjectivity, I aimed for a looser chronicity in the sense that the objects and events represented throughout the piece did not follow a strictly linear and precise timeline. Some examples of this statement are the cigarettes motifs lasting only a few seconds and the clock having an irregular, although repeating, pattern. If one sees it through Guston’s perspective in this allegory that I have created, he would be unlikely to remember at what point he lit another cigarette, or at what moment the lights would flicker. This freer way of writing also benefited my wish to avoid creating a narrative so didactic that it would lead to the listeners being able to identify every object and its unfolding throughout the piece.

I also wanted to delve into the feelings of anxiety present in Guston’s works, therefore I used compositional strategies, such as overlapping, pitch-sharing, etc., to make the motifs bleed into each other, almost as if an infection was spreading around them. Sometimes, pitches from the clock would make their way into the melodies that were instead supposed to draw material exclusively from the pitch collections presented as the image motifs. At other times, a new image would present itself quickly after its predecessor and taint the material that followed it with its own qualities.

As mentioned previously, the “A” section corresponds to the artist getting out of bed and working his way into producing several works. This is shown by having pitch collections appear and derive themselves into melodies that would, in turn, try to
ultimately form the presented pitch collections. These pitches eventually get assimilated by the horizon/wall idea to the point that it saturates and needs to reset, representing the completion of a work and the beginning of another. This process takes place three times in total, until we are finally able to break through the walls and peek into the chaotic, mechanic, and oppressive world imagined by Guston, which can be seen as the “B” section.

The new section is characterized by a much faster pace, a denser clock idea, fast *pizzicati* that allude to the mechanic and violent turnings of the urban settings he often painted, a thicker, yet intermittent, horizon/wall, and short melodic bursts that briefly overcome the multiple textures (see figures 17 and 18). It is interesting to note that, despite Guston’s settings being often harsh and full of negative connotation, the faster clock idea alludes to the exhilarating quality that they might possess. For me, it is a passage full of subjectivity, in which you have a personified voice trying to escape, while at the same time flourishing within this particularly chaotic environment.

As we progress into a smooth melody that can be seen as a strange lullaby, before being interrupted and finally making its way back, the piece arrives into the idea of a day ending into a deep, yet also anxious sleep. When the lullaby settles in, the walls
are gone and the clock can be heard very softly. At the very last moments, however, a long chord that, at that point, is virtually unintelligible in between the horizon/wall and the image ideas, presents itself. Depending on the interpretation, it could represent the impossibility of escaping one’s enclosure, or the looming need of productivity. Both scenarios are marred by feelings of anxiety, which is corroborated further by the clock ending on its first beat (see figure 19), implying a sense of something being unfinished, or as never-ending continuity in a broader sense.

![Figure 19. Ending, m. 162](image)

**Afterthoughts**

Drawing from visual arts in order to write music is hardly a new and revolutionary practice. In relation to the context of abstract expressionism and neo-expressionism in the United States, many artist-composer connections served as inspiration with their endeavors. For contextualization, Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* (1951) acted as one of the catalysts for John Cage to write a silent piece, which
ended up being 4′33″ (1952). Likewise, Morton Feldman wrote a piece in tribute to his friend Mark Rothko, who committed suicide before seeing the chapel, which would serve as a devoted space to his paintings, be completed. Naturally, both composers had their unique way of thinking and their own process of relating their compositions to the artists and paintings. Nonetheless, observing the works in question offered stimulus through my perspective in order to pursue my own results.

For me, Bad Habits signifies a personal development in my process of analyzing visual objects in order to subjectively attribute musical characteristics to them, as well as to extract a form based on interpretations and analogies that help to maintain a sense of integrity and cohesion to my writing. The opportunity to write for the orchestra also brought new angles and possibilities that were not present during my early experiments with this method.

Despite the fact that I present a somewhat clear narrative, the point remains that the goal of drawing from visual elements is not to tell a story, but simply to discover music material that would otherwise not reveal itself to me during the early stages of composing a new piece. The allegories that I create tend to be somewhat personal and oftentimes incoherent in the sense of having multiple potential meanings, which, in my mind, contributes even further to my wish of exploring subjectivity when writing.

I believe that the combination of those elements tend to yield a result far different from a more methodological approach, such as attributing parameters to the components of objects and strictly transforming them into music without any tampering or adjusting. I understand that my method still provides me with enough freedom to avoid enslaving myself to my materials of inspiration.

I do not claim to have developed a systematic method that boast efficiency and perfection, and perhaps that is precisely what still draws me to keep exploring it. I never understood my endeavors to be an attempt at constructing a series of programmatic procedures that could later be used in relation to any subject I deemed interesting. For me, the beauty of this practice is exactly the fact that I do not know how my reasoning will take shape every time I decide to explore a different material. Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, I see it as a welcome excuse to pursue a diversified knowledge that encompasses a multitude of fields. I believe that this drive serves to push me forward as an artist and to grow as a person.

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14 S. Johnson, Rothko Chapel and Rothko’s Chapel, Perspectives of New Music, Seattle, 1994, p. 6.
Possible paths

Despite the whole focus of this essay being the exploration of visual objects, one possible and very natural unfolding of this way of thinking is to broaden it to contemplate other senses and other forms of art. One could equally apply it to fragrances and flavors in a more synesthetic approach, or perhaps to a poem or novel. The possibilities of incorporating external objects into music are seemingly endless, and I believe that they will soon find their way into my writing. Another rewarding element of this topic is that it encourages me to seek collaborators in others, which is something that carries the potential to mutually benefit and enrich people and fields through knowledge and experience exchange.

Although I personally do not believe that every piece of music has to possess an ulterior meaning, I find it problematic to waste the chance to position myself as an artist, thus I understand this method of composing to be a channel through which I can communicate, directly or otherwise, some of my views and ideas. Whether in the form of political criticism and personal exposure, like Philip Guston, or via the desire to pay homage to a subject that I particularly enjoy, I intend to pursue and develop the same approach with my future pieces, and am genuinely curious to see where it will take me.
Reference List


Hollein, M., Pfeiffer, I., Philip Guston: Late Works, Cologne, Germany, Walther König, 2014.


Appendices

Documentation

Kengai (for piano)
Kengai.pdf

Yose-ue (for piano)
Yose-ue.pdf

Segmented Saturation (for mixed ensemble)
Segmented Saturation.pdf

Bad Habits (for orchestra)
Bad Habits.pdf