

Beyond the modern-postmodern cleavage: Xenakis' mythical thinking

Mihu Iliescu
Créteil, France
anca.iliescu@wanadoo.fr

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"I am a Classical Greek living in the twentieth century", used to say Xenakis, meaning that he was a man of his epoch who nevertheless remained attached to his mythical roots. In fact, Xenakis' musical approach is founded on a mythical thinking which tends to deny the notion of time and implicitly that of history. According to it, historical changes do not affect the essential true contained in mythical narratives and expressed in archetypal forms. Modernism and postmodernism thus can be both related to one immemorial substratum. This assumption helps understanding why Xenakis' music continues to interest various audiences even after the decline of the radical modernism which it was supposed to embody. The Greek mythology along with Pythagoras', Parmenides' and Plato's philosophy inspired Xenakis in various ways. *Oresteïa*, his highly original version of Aeschylus' theater, recalls Nietzsche's interpretation of the Greek tragedy as a synthesis between apollonian and Dionysian trends. Mythical thinking is in fact omnipresent in Xenakis' musical approach. It allows understanding his demiurgic posture, his manner of conceiving the musical creation as sonic cosmogony, his interest for archetypal morphologies. The harshness of Xenakis' noise-like sonorities also could be related to the sacred dimension of the mythical thinking. Like Varèse, Scelsi and Messiaen, Xenakis belongs to a particular class of Moderns that one could call "trans-modern". Their approach transcends the historically determined modernity of the twenty-eighth century. Prophets of a radically new music, they stood apart from the mainstream musical modernism. In their music, age-old archetypes arise beneath the radical modernity of the new languages, new sonic materials and new techniques of composition. This convergence of archaism and modernity finds an astonishing visual equivalent in the art of Brancusi, with whom Xenakis also shares an interest for archetypal essential forms.

Xenakis' life covers two epochs which are quite distinct: the late modern period of the nineteen-fifties and sixties and the postmodern period starting at the end of the sixties. The important cultural and aesthetic differences between these two periods allow us considering the modern-postmodern transition as a major shift in the recent musical history.

Yet, Xenakis' early music of the fifties and sixties continues to interest various audiences even after the decline of the radical modernism which it is supposed to embody. It continues to "speak" to the postmodern generations while a great musical output from the same period seems already old-fashioned. Why? Since Xenakis' musical work relies on a philosophic approach, I will try to give a philosophic answer to this question.

Xenakis' music and architecture reflect a unitary vision which largely surpasses the modern-postmodern cleavage as well as it surpasses the differences between arts and sciences. The present paper defends the idea according to which this unitary, all encompassing approach is rooted in a mythical thinking.¹

I will start by outlining the term "mythical thinking", then I will show how mythical thinking affects Xenakis' work. In the light of these considerations, I will conclude by evoking the particular place occupied by Xenakis in the recent musical history as a composer in the music of which modernity encounters archaism.

Aspects of mythical thinking

Mythical thinking is diffuse, non explicit and unconscious. It manifests itself in metaphorical forms, through narratives, artistic creations and daily activities. As Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, "*the myths think themselves through the humans and without their knowledge*".² Xenakis' approach convincingly illustrates this particularity as it can be associated to mythical thinking even if the composer never discussed this matter in his writings.

I will briefly evoke here the main aspects of mythical thinking which can be identified in Xenakis' work.

Archetypes

Mythical thinking manifests itself through archetypes. An archetype is a recurrent elementary form, shape, morphology or narrative scheme which can be analyzed in the artistic manifestations of different civilizations. The notion of archetype also relates to Plato's concept of an ideal form or model and to Pythagoras' philosophy of the number seen as a universal substratum. If archetypes are mostly associated with visual shapes, a number of sonic archetypes were also identified by François-Bernard Mâche.

Sacred

Mythical thinking includes a sacred dimension which is considered as intrinsic to the human species (Mircea Eliade thus identifies the human species as *homo religiosus*). Yet a distinction has to be made between the sacred and the religious. While the sacred represents an anthropologic dimension, the religious appears as a particular manifestation and as an institutional aspect of the sacred.

Cosmogony

Mythical thinking implies a cosmogonic story recalling a series of events which took place in a mythical "time of the beginning". This narrative is meant to furnish an explanation of the Creation of the World and of all the subsequent events which happened to gods and to humans.

Unity of the world

Mythical thinking offers a unitary vision of the world – of nature in the sense of the whole universe or of the cosmic infinity. It precedes and surpasses dichotomies such as those between rationality and irrationality, nature and culture, the celestial world and the terrestrial world.

Trans-historicity

Mythical thinking denies or minimizes the category of time, as suggested by Nietzsche's interpretation of the myth of the eternal recurrence. This "out-of-time" manner of deciphering the world induces an a-historical – or trans-historical – vision of history.

Convergence of archaism and modernity

Mythical thinking is characteristic of the man of the ancient civilizations. However, it continues to manifest itself in the behavior of the modern man, in a hidden, non ostensible way. As such, it is capable of inspiring audacious artistic approaches in which, as Jürgen Habermas remarks, "modernity encounters archaism".³

Xenakis' mythical thinking

Xenakis' approach combines two main ideas characteristic of mythical thinking. The first is that of the musical creation seen as a metaphor of demiurgic creation. The second is that of sonic morphologies related to immemorial archetypes.

Demiurgic gestures

Striving to act like a god. "We all shall be gods", Xenakis noted in one of his notebooks found at the French National Library (32/1). The expression "we all" means here "we humans and robots". Xenakis predicted in fact a time when humans, robots and gods would be equal. His work in a way anticipates this future stage in the evolution of humanity. In his view, being a god means being capable to create without any pre-existing causality, in other words inventing his own causality. This is impossible for a human, he admits – at least, this is impossible now. Yet, he remarks, there is a way to act almost like a god: the automatic composition. This means choosing a minimum of rules, arbitrarily giving the start of the operations – that is the initial impulse (as the gods generally do according to many mythical narratives) – and then letting the machines (computers, automatons) to work alone. This is the case of *Achorripsis* in respect to which Xenakis explicitly compared the composer's work with that of a god. Yet, Xenakis adds, Gods weren't always happy with their work, so they

used to review it in order to improve it. For this reason, he used to largely modify an automatically generated musical sequence in order to make it more interesting.

Imagining projects on a very large scale. During the seventies, Xenakis attempts to increasingly extend the scale of his projects. His strive to modify even a small parcel of the planetary environment in fact manifests a will to rethink and improve the whole cosmic environment. Xenakis thus proceeds as the gods did in the immemorial mythical "time of the beginning". This cosmogonic strive is particularly striking in some of his Polytopes (Mykonos, Persepolis), which can be viewed as a form of *land-art*. It is also visible in his ambitious project of a "Cosmic City" and in that of an enormous "World Polytope" meant to join all the continents. All these projects are less related to a form of political utopia than to Xenakis' demiurgic posture.

Adopting a demiurgic posture. Xenakis' modality of placing himself in the physical space during the rehearsals and the performances of the Polytopes also seems to reveal a mythical attitude. His posture during the performances of the Cluny Polytope was compared to that of a priest officiating a pagan ritual. As for the attitude he adopted while working for the Diatope, it was compared to that of a hermit retired on Mount Athos. The French philosopher Louis Marin remarked that the project of the "Cosmic City" shows Xenakis' need to occupy an exterior location, far and isolated, from which he would be able to have a global synoptic perception of his whole work.⁴ This exterior location is similar to that of the mythical demiurge who contemplates his creation from afar.

Rebuilding the musical edifice from nothing. According to Mircea Eliade, the idea of violently rejecting the traditions of the past, which is characteristic of the modern art, reasserts a mythical need: that to periodically destroy the world in order to better recreate it from nothing. Xenakis' commitment to rebuild the whole musical edifice starting from a completely new foundation manifests this mythical necessity. The dialectic of destruction and construction is visible in the xenakian interpretation of the dotted line as a metaphor of the unending succession of life and death. Most of the texts forming the literary argument of the Beaubourg *Diatope* evoke cataclysmic events which led to the destruction of the world and to the creation of a new world. They combine ancient mythical stories like that of Plato's *Légende d'Eer* and a modern scientific text about the explosion of a supernova. Works like *Metastaseis* or *Pithoprakta* have a strong demiurgic connotation. By the sole means of sound, they figure cosmogonic gestures: the separation between the Being and the Non-Being; the installation of an order within an initial disorder. The physical notion of entropy, to which Xenakis often refers, could be viewed as a synonym of the chaos preceding the demiurgic or biblical creation.

Harsh sonorities and mythical violence. The harsh noise-like sonorities which to a great extent characterize Xenakis' music pertain to a form of mythical sacred violence. They are sometimes explicitly related to the mythical prototype of any catastrophic event: the End of the world. Thus, the Christian apocalypse and the Last Judgment according to the Jewish apocalypse respectively inspired *La Légende d'Eer* and *Shaar*. Xenakis also makes audible the mythical violence in *Oresteïa*, his highly original version of Aeschylus' tragedies. His treatment of Aeschylus' text recalls Nietzsche's interpretation of the Greek tragedy as a synthesis between apollonian and Dionysian trends. It is particularly striking to distinctly hear the two contrasting musical worlds within a short span of time. While Dionysian irrational violence is represented by the rough voice of Cassandra, the steady declamation of the choir expresses apollonian rationality and serenity.

Archaic recurrence of archetypes and modern strive to be original

As a modern man which manifests a mythical thinking, Xenakis unites two distinct and quite contradictory attitudes: repeating the work of the gods and creating the uncreated.

On one hand, Xenakis frequently evokes in his writings various hypostases of God's *persona* such as Plato's Demiurge, the God of the Bible. The "Essential Man" of the Gnosis, Parmenides' Being and the Numbers such as they are considered in the Pythagorean mystic also can be compared to a deity. Xenakis in fact acts like the man of the archaic civilizations whose actions relate to a sacred reality, without pretending to be original. By repeating, on a human scale, a work supposed to have already been done by the gods, he then refers to archetypes. The basic

morphologies often discussed by Xenakis – spiral, straight line, point, cloud, arborescence – are such archetypes which can be indefinitely repeated.

On the other hand, Xenakis is a non religious modern man who regards himself as an atheist. He does not conceive of repeating in any way the work of anyone else, be it a god. On the contrary, he struggles to create something absolutely new, to create the uncreated. Originality is for him a condition of the very survival of the human species. This struggle leads him to surpass the limits of his human condition and to – symbolically and metaphorically – compete with the gods. He incarnates then the promethean man who defies the gods. Xenakis' world mirrors in fact that of the mythical Greece where gods, half-gods, titans, heroes and humans could communicate and interact.

Morphological archetypes

Xenakis often refers in his writings to basic morphologies such as the point, the curve, the dotted line, the spiral, the clouds or the dendrites. These morphologies, he remarks, are omnipresent in nature as well as in different artistic traditions. They inspired him sonic equivalencies like the glissandi, the mass sound or the arborescences, which became his musical signature. I suggest that this approach has a mythical signification inasmuch the fact of repeating sonic morphologies pertains to the notion of archetype. Xenakis' intriguing self-borrowings also could be construed as attempts to confer to some of his own creations the status of an archetype, by repeating them in different works.⁵

The “up world” and the “down world”. Mythical thinking implies the existence of two worlds or domains which are clearly separated: the “up” (high, celestial) world of the gods and the “down” (low, terrestrial) world of the humans. This partition is evident in the Cluny Polytope where the “up world” is represented by light spots and laser rays placed under the vault, while the spectators lying on the floor form the “down world”.⁶ The Polytopes express the mythical possibility, discussed by Ernst Cassirer, of a participation of the terrestrial world in the celestial world. They create a communication between the spectators and the night sky which symbolizes the universe (Mykonos, Persepolis) – or between the spectators and myriads of lights in the darkness figuring the sky (Montréal, Cluny, Beaubourg). The literary argument of an instrumental work like *Shaar* (inspired by a Jewish mythical narrative) also suggests that the two worlds can communicate, especially through ascending movements.

Xenakis and Brancusi. The convergence of archaism and modernity has an astonishing visual equivalent in the art of Brancusi, with whom Xenakis shares an interest for archetypal essential forms. Xenakis used to transpose shapes from the domain of sound to that of architectural forms (the relation between the glissandi of *Metastaseis* and the curves of the Pavillon Philips is well-known). The similarities between Xenakis and Brancusi also include their manner of considering the relation between simplicity and complexity. Brancusi is a sculptor of essential forms tending to the absolute purity and simplicity of the archetypes. His strive for simplicity however does not deny the complexity of real forms. Conversely, under the seemingly chaotic complexity of Xenakis' sound mass lies a morphological design which is quite simple.

At least two archetypes can be identified in the work of both artists. The first is that of the primordial egg, which in many works of primitive art figures the Creation of the World. Brancusi offers a pure expression of it in his “Beginning of the World” but also in “Sleeping Muse” and “Sculpture for the Blind”. This archetype can be associated with the beginning of *Metastaseis*, a work to which Xenakis conferred a cosmogonic significance, but also with the first sketch of the Pavillon Philips.

The second archetype is related to the mythical idea of the *Axis Mundi* (the Center of the World). The *Axis Mundi* is generally represented as a column, pillar or tower erected between the Earth and the Sky. This archetype of verticality is often associated with the idea of an ascending movement expressing the spiritual elevation. Brancusi refers to it in many works. The most significant are the *Magic Bird*, representing the essence of flying and the *Unending Column*, which symbolizes the *Axis Mundi*. The modular form of the *Unending Column* also recalls the archetype of the dotted line evoked by Xenakis as a metaphor of the perpetual succession of Being and Non Being, of birth and death. As a composer, Xenakis often referred to this archetype when writing ascending glissandi. Some of them are strategically placed at

the beginning of a work (*Cendrées, Jonchaies*), or at its end (*Kottos*). As an architect, he evokes the same archetype, in the Pavillon Philips and in the project of a Cosmic City.

Xenakis and modernity

There is a striking historical coincidence between two distinct approaches which both occurred in the fifties and sixties: that of Xenakis and that of most of the other prominent modern composers belonging to his generation. This coincidence can lead to confusion. To be sure, Xenakis shares with composers like Boulez and Stockhausen the same will to break with the ancient musical order, with tonality, the same radicalism and the same idea of the *tabula rasa*. But he is not a modern composer in the same way as Boulez and Stockhausen are. Their aims, their motivations and their cultural background are much different. In fact, one could say that Xenakis is not a genuine modern, but rather a trans-modern – an “out-of-time” composer who was accidentally born in the modern period.

Xenakis and Adorno

In order to clarify the difference between Xenakis and the genuine modern composers of his generation, I will briefly evoke Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Adorno’s seminal ideas represent the main philosophic reference for the mainstream musical modernism, from Schoenberg to Boulez. They shaped musical modernity. Yet, in his writings Xenakis never quoted or discussed them. It seems then more appropriate and more beneficial to construe Xenakis’ work in the light of mythical thinking than in the light of Adorno’s aesthetic theory.

I suggest that Xenakis’ trans-historical standpoint surpasses and includes the Adornian historical perspective. His music thus disproves Adorno’s theory, by unveiling the difficulties of notions such as “truth content” or “advancement of the material”, and by making evident the unsolved contradiction between an autonomous art and an art which reflects a particular historical, social and political environment.

Adorno’s historic perspective (modern)	Xenakis’ mythical perspective (trans-modern)
TRUTH CONTENT - changing - pertaining to social evolution	A PERFECT, ENORMOUS TRUTH - unchanging (out-of time) - pertaining to myths and religions
ADVANCEMENT OF THE MATERIAL - non recurrence - exhaustibility	ARCHETYPICAL MORPHOLOGIES - recurrence - inexhaustibility
SCHOENBERG’S DISSONANCES - uttering the violence of capitalist society	XENAKIS’ NOISE-LIKE SONORITIES - uttering an immemorial, mythical violence

Table 1. A comparison between Adorno’s and Xenakis’ perspectives on modernity

The table 1 shows that Adorno’s historically determined concepts do not fit with Xenakis’ musical approach which is trans-historic. For example, the concept of “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) could hardly be applied to Xenakis who evokes a rather “perfect and enormous Truth”. Also, Adorno’s historically determined concept of the “advancement of the material” is disproved by Xenakis’ trans-historical use of archetypal morphologies. Moreover, Adorno’s interpretation of Schoenberg’s dissonances cannot be extended to Xenakis. While Adorno sees Schoenberg’s dissonances as an utterance of a violence which is characteristic of capitalist society, xenakian noise-like sonorities are related to a primary violence which is characteristic of the mythical world depicted in various cosmogonic or apocalyptic narratives.

Adorno ironically said that time heals the most horrible wounds, even those which are provoked by Schoenberg's dissonances. One could not make a similar judgment in respect to Xenakis: the wounds and the sufferings echoed by the harsh sonorities of his music are impossible to heal, because they have a mythical connotation. In a mythical "out-of-time" perspective, a wound is everlasting, as was in a way Xenakis' wound (the loss of an eye). Such a wound has to remain open for eternity, as was Prometheus' belly, incessantly torn by the vultures.

Conclusion

Xenakis belongs to a particular class of "out-of-time" Moderns which also includes visionary composers such as Varèse, Scelsi and Messiaen, prophets of a radically new music who nevertheless stood apart from the mainstream musical modernism. Their heterodox standpoints reflect a vision which transcends any historic contingency, by relating to a kind of timelessness. In their music, age-old archetypes arise beneath the radical modernity of the new languages, new sonic materials and new techniques of composition. That's why these composers often confuse the historians of music, especially when they try to place them within preconceived schemes.

Xenakis' music thus cannot be reduced to the modern movement of the fifties and sixties as it cannot be confined to aesthetic categories usually associated with musical modernism such as: "experimental", "progressive", "radical", "formalistic", "abstract", "revolutionary", "utopian", etc. From the heights of his mythical perspective, Xenakis surpasses modernity and at the same time defies the "new" postmodern sensibility.

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Notes

¹ The notion of mythical thinking was developed by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade and, in the particular field of music, by the French composer François-Bernard Mâche. I often refer in this paper to the writings of these authors to whom I am much indebted.

² Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Le cru et le cuit*, Paris, Plon, 1964, p. 30.

³ Habermas, Jürgen, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 107.

⁴ Marin, Louis, « L'utopie de la verticalité », *L'Arc, Xenakis*, Paris, Duponchelle, 1990, p. 72-80.

⁵ Cf. Gibson, Benoît, "Self-borrowings in the instrumental music of Iannis Xenakis", www.iannis-xenakis.org/Articles/Gibson.pdf

⁶ *The Battle of Alexandre* (1529), a painting of Albrecht Altdorfer, also clearly represents the two worlds. Xenakis saw in it an example of figurative realistic painting which nevertheless shows an abstract approach.