In this talk I would like to explore a series of associations from the implications of the possibility that we are living in a posthistorical era (the late twentieth century to the present), to the implications for Lacanian psychoanalysis of such a possibility, to the notion of *bare life* from Giorgio Agamben, to evidence of traces of bare life in musics of the late twentieth century to the present.

In 2013 in the west we are perhaps still too close to be able to say precisely what kinds of histories have changed course, if at all and to any permanent extent, in the mid twentieth century; so rather than argue whether or not such changes have occurred and are occurring, I shall be speaking as if to ask what it would mean if they in fact have occurred and are occurring as perhaps a perspective at some point in the future might illuminate. To me these are issues with urgent implications for subjectivity formation, social policy, the arts and arts criticism.

I would like to explore the idea that no matter what has happened, is happening, to the Cartesian subject, to its teleological histories and representations in the arts and arts criticism, something is *opening up*, becoming uncovered, loosening its hold upon itself, both in the subject, in the fabric of social life, and in its representations and embodiments in the arts. For me, one feature of this opening is the *bare life* described by Giorgio Agamben. In his book *The Open: Man and Animal* from 2004, Agamben discusses the early twenty first century in terms of a troubled relationship between man and animal: “We must try to grasp what is at stake…. Perhaps not only theology and philosophy but also politics, ethics, and jurisprudence are drawn and suspended in the difference between man and animal. The cognitive experiment at issue in this difference ultimately concerns the nature of man—or, more precisely, the production and definition of this nature; it is an experiment *de hominis natura*. When this difference vanishes and the two terms collapse upon each other—as seems to be happening today—the difference between being and nothing, licit and illicit, divine and demonic also fades away, and in its place something appears for which we seem to lack even a name." Agamben finds that name at the end of the following passage: “Like every space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew. What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*." This talk implicitly explores the possibility that bare life and a posthistorical opening in the subject and its social spaces have already been with us, have already been represented, embodied since the mid twentieth century (very roughly).

One manifestation of this stripping away can be heard in the new minimal music of Adams, Reich, Glass and others. Their music is actually built upon extensions of accompaniment patterns that have been ubiquitous since the eighteenth century; it's possible to hear this music as based upon common practice accompaniment patterns stripped of the melodies to which they had been subordinate for centuries. I'd like now to touch upon musical examples from the late twentieth century to the present for evidence of a certain stripping away, a certain laying bare of music. For me these musics each sound like an acoustic version of a body stripped of its skin.

John Cage’s Organ2/ASLSP is being performed in Halberstadt, Germany. The piece involves a short piece that John Cage wrote in the 1980s to be played “as slowly as possible.” The performance in Halberstadt is designed to last as long as an organ that plays it can last—639 years—well beyond the lifetime of any person. See Example 1 for my transcription of one segment of this piece.

[Example 1: John Cage, Organ2/ASLSP transcription]

What a listener to this piece hears is a musical signifier which has been drawn out to the extent that it never even closely approach its meaning within the lifetime of anyone. This practice is a radical extension of a common phenomenon in music, particularly opera—the stretching out of music, from single pitches to entire melodies. It is one of many procedures that has been thought to obscure meaning in music. This performance of Cage’s Organ2/ASLSP stretches the listener’s ability to relate a musical moment either to a past which one has just heard or a future one is about to hear; the musical present is so vast that the most anyone can hope to hear in the piece is a small percentage of the work’s notes in a lifetime. The listener is locked in a present moment, and the performance puts into very sharp relief how the time of musical comprehension (withheld for the most part in this work) relies both on memory of the past and anticipation of the future.

The time of comprehension relates to Lacan’s well-known sophism of logical time. In a nutshell, three prisoners are given a challenge. Among five disks (2 are black and 3 are white), each gets one placed on his back. Each prisoner has a white disk on his back. The prisoner who can logically determine the color of the disk on his back will be freed. In his *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, Lacan discusses the necessary thought process that involves three levels of time: “Logical time is constituted by three stages. First, the moment of seeing—which is not without mystery, although correctly enough defined in the psychological experience of the intellectual operation that is called *insight*. Secondly, *the stage of understan*ding. Thirdly, *the moment to conclude* [emphases Lacan’s]." Here is how Lacan understands this sophism. First—the perfect solution:

I am white, and here is how I know it. Since my companions were whites, I thought that, had I been a black, each of them would have been able to infer the following; “If I too were a black, the other would have necessarily realized straight away that he was a white and would have left immediately; therefore I am not a black.” And both would have left together, convinced they were whites. As they did nothing of the kind, I must be a white like them. At that, I made for the door to make my conclusion known.

In this sophism, Lacan shows us that subjectivity is the product of a network of social relations that can be described logically in the field of the other. And this field crucially connects observation of the other and the assumption of the logically-posited thoughts of the other in a temporal sequence in which past, present, and future are implicit elements in the production of inter-social subjectivity. In his *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI* Lacan reiterates his well-know assertion that “[a] signifier is that which represents a subject. For whom?—not for another subject, but for another signifier." The Halberstadt performance of Cage’s Organ2/ASLSP radically forecloses this circuit of signification as its first term signifier declares itself to persist in sound beyond the lifetime of any subject.

Ed Osborn did a piece called *Hilo Noon* (2003); the work is a sound piece with no visuals. The work is based on a popular song recorded on wax cylinder. There is much audio artifact of the original wax cylinder on the work, reminding the listener of the noise produced by technology in an era before sound could be produced with no accompanying artifacts. You never hear more than a second of the original recording. Osborn has isolated clips, repeats them, at times reminiscent of skips of phonograph records. In the online documentation, Osborn uses the word “nostalgia” in reference to this work. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek refers to nostalgia as a looking at looking—a divided gaze: “Let us take what is probably today the most notorious case of nostalgic fascination in the domain of cinema: the American film noir of the 1940s. What, precisely, is so fascinating about this genre? It is clear that we can no longer identify with it…. [W]hat fascinates us is precisely a certain gaze, the gaze of the ‘other’ of the hypothetical, mythic spectator of the ‘40s…. For that reason, our relation to film noir is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance." Applying this notion to *Hilo Noon*, Osborn (via Žižek) invites us to hear a kind of musical nostalgia—a (contemporary and highly mediated digital) hearing of (an archaic and also highly mediated analog) hearing.

Despite the highly mediated, fragmented nature of the work, you can still hear that the piece is in A-flat major. The vocal line is clearly focused on a-flat1 (the one on the second space from the bottom of a treble clef); the range is for low soprano. There is a chorus, an orchestra, and an organ in the background. The last note you hear in the work is a C-natural, a major third above A-flat. It clearly sounds like Mi of Mi / Re / Do—a highly conventional last note for a song in A-flat major.

When one discusses the sung voice in music, a deep historical and aesthetic debate often arises—the issue as to relationship between the sound of sung music as aesthetic object and sung music in the service of the clarity of the text upon which it is based. This issue was of acute importance in church music of the Renaissance; the sixteenth-century Council of Trent resulted in a papal edict that required that the excesses of vocal music be cleansed to avoid sin on the one hand and let the clarity of the text emerge untainted, on the other.

Another take on the issue of sung music as aesthetic object and sung music as vehicle for textual communication has to do with temporality—a lag time between the impact of sung music striking the ear, and its semantic encoding. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar refers to a passage from Freud which I reproduce in full both because it represents a clear sense of the importance of the time lag between auditory experience and comprehension and because it suggests that such a lag lies at the heart of subjectivity itself. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud says “I have gained a sure notion of the structure of a hysteria. Everything points to the reproduction of scenes which in some cases can be arrived at directly an in others through a veil of intervening phantasies. The phantasies arise from *things heard but only later understood* [emphasis Freud’s]…. They are defensive structures, sublimations and embellishments of the facts, and at the same time serve the purpose of self-exoneration…. A second important insight is that the psychical structures which in hysteria are subjected to repression are not properly speaking memories, because no one sets his memory working without good cause, but impulses deriving from the primal scene. I now see that all three neuroses, hysteria, obsessional neurosis and paranoia share the same elements….”

For Dolar, “…there is a temporality, a specific time-loop, which Freud never tires of mentioning: *the time lag between perception and understanding* [emphasis Dolar’s]. There is a voice which constitutes an enigma and a trauma because it persists without being understood, there is a time of subjectivation which is precisely the time between hearing the voice and understanding it—and this is the time of fantasy. The voice is always understood *nachträglich*, subsequently, retroactively, and the time-loop of the primal fantasy is precisely the gap between hearing and making sense of what we hear, accounting for it."

These passages from Freud and Dolar invite us to understand the experience of hearing *Hilo Noon* as the establishment of a threshold precisely between the poles of semantic encoding. Recall the example I provided from Conrad above; if one could imagine not a threshold between the impact of visceral experience (“sticks”) and their semantic encoding (“Arrows by Jove!”), but a prolonged span of time poised right between the two—that would be the effect that Osborn has created in this work.

We hear in *Hilo Noon* fragments of sung words, most less than a second long—enough to almost grasp their meanings, but not long enough for a word to come clear as the vehicle of the text. Freud and Dolar offer a context for understanding *Hilo Noon* not only as an early twenty-first century work of highly mediated sound art, but a work as well that relies on archaic fantasies upon which our subjectivity rests—the primal scene and its necessary time lag between hearing and understanding in the structure of symptom formation. I would argue as well that such a time lag is inherent in the acoustic mirror fantasy described in such detail by Didier Anzieu in *The Skin Ego*. According to Anzieu, the child is bathed in a sonorous bath of the mother’s voice, undergoes a number of stages of ego-formation as his / her skin encloses his / her body in a series of envelopes (thermal, olfactory, tactile, and acoustic). The emergence first of the cry for attention, the mirroring of voices between the self and the (m)other, the visual mirror stage, and full language acquisition all involve a massive and ongoing semantic encoding of the acoustic dimension that pervades the entirety of subjectivity.

For me, however, there is something about meaning in music that is less binary than meaning in language. It is perhaps an over-simplification, but an over-simplification that can illuminate what I mean may be helpful. Let’s say (to over-simplify) that language is either encoded or not, along a binary, bit-flipping axis. Let’s say that the language of the text of *Hilo Noon* is withheld as encoded as an embodiment of the deep-seated semantic encoding that Freud and Dolar have pointed out to us. What about the music? I would argue that music encodes along a continuum and not a binary of bit flips. Here is what I mean.

The fragmentation of Osborn’s work has clearly chopped up the rhythm of the song; it’s impossible for me to hear its meter. The chopping up of clips of less than a second also blurs the large-range vocal direction of the melody. But what his techniques cannot destroy is the key of the song; it is absolutely, obviously in A-flat major. Thus music encodes along a continuum (having over-simplified the encoding of language and leaving that aside for a moment) from maximal meaning on the one hand (say a key is audible, a meter is audible, and an entire melody and textual settings are audible—say in a performance of the “Star-Spangled Banner” in A-flat major), to only the artifact of tonal orientation on the other (the presence of A-flat major at the end of *Hilo Noon*, in the present example). All we hear as a coherent signifier is A-flat major—a key to be sure, but a key that is a bare remainder—the total (not sum) of shattered pieces.

Diamanda Galás created *Vena Cava* in 1993; it is a work dedicated to her brother who died as a result of HIV infection and AIDS. The work embodies the hallucinations produced by HIV-induced AIDS dementia, memories and imagined memories, audio tapes of the artist’s brother performing music, the sounds of medical equipment, and a highly-expressionist evocation of mourning. The work is a monodrama in which flat declamation is punctuated by high-register pitches / cries / screams.

In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, Lacan describes the cry in relation to *Das Ding*—the Thing: “*Das Ding* is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified. It is as a function of this beyond-of-the-signified and of an emotional relationship to it that the subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression;" and “the way in which the stranger, the hostile figure, appears in the first experience of reality for the human subject is the cry."

Lacan locates in Antigone “an irreplaceable word”—*Atè*. In his *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII* he says “the limit that human life can only briefly cross." For him, it is associated with the atrocious, the monstrous dimension of Antigone’s refusal not to mourn the death of her brother: “[t]he order is given to scatter the dust once again [the dust that covers Antigone’s brother’s corpse]. But this time Antigone is caught in the act. Upon his return the messenger describes what happened in the following terms: first, they removed the dust that was covering the body, and then, they placed themselves up-wind so as to avoid the awful smells, because it stank. But a strong wind began to blow, and the dust started to fill the air and even, the text tells us, the heavens themselves. And at the very moment when everyone tries to escape, to cover their heads with their arms, and to go to earth at the spectacle of the change in nature, little Antigone appears at the height of the total darkness, of the cataclysmic moment. She appears once more beside the corpse, emitting moans, the text says, like a bird that has just lost its young." At the core of the voice of Antigone is the cry of mourning, and it is this voice that Galás captures in *Vena Cava* and throughout her works.

In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, Lacan reaches back to Freud to locate the importance of the cry for subjectivity: “Freud tells us that a hostile object is only acknowledged at the level of consciousness when pain causes the subject to utter a cry. The existence of the *feindlicher Objekt* as such is the cry of the subject…. The cry fulfills the function of a discharge; it plays the role of a bridge where something of what is happening may be seized and identified in the consciousness of the subject. This something would remain obscure and unconscious if the cry did not lend it, as far as the conscious is concerned, the sign that gives it its own weight, presence, structure. It gives it as well a potentiality due to the fact that the important objects for a human subject are speaking objects, which will allow him to see revealed in the discourse of others the processes that, in fact, inhabit his own unconscious."

David Stout and Cory Metcalf have been working on *NoiseFold* for several years.

*NoiseFold* is a live performance of sound and image on multiple screens; data from sound and image cause representations of each to evolve. The sounds span the entire spectrum of noise, from very dry and “white” to very wet and “pink”; the images span the color spectrum and suggest clean, geometric shapes, from “flat” to very “deep” and at times the images are dirty and organic. The work is a representation / embodiment of autonomous systems and is a dynamic extension of the feedback techniques described above.

In *NoiseFold*, a balance is achieved so that feedback loops neither stop, nor spin out of control. For me, this is a crucial quality of the human voice (an Imaginary voice with a lower case “v” as opposed to the symbolic Voice with an upper case "V"). What happens when you sing a note is that you exert pressure on the vocal cords and emit air across them; in order for a note to emerge, there must be enough pressure on the vocal cords and enough air to make the cords vibrate. If there is too little pressure and / or too little air, no sound is produced. If there is too much pressure and / or too much air, no sound is produced. To sing involves finding and articulating a point along an imaginary line—a threshold if you will between absence of sound at either extreme.

Producing any sound on any instrument can be thought of precisely the same way. If you are playing a stringed instrument, too little pressure of the bow and too little speed of the bow will produce (near) silence as will too much pressure too much speed. The environment in *NoiseFold*, has found such a point; there is just enough feedback to produce a loop without falling silent or spinning out of control. Finding and articulating this threshold either along the imaginary line with silence at each end (one under-, the other, over-determined), or along a new axis of transformations produces a dimension of a strange, autonomous, disembodied voice.

The autonomy of the *NoiseFold* suggests on the one hand, a separation from the consciousness of a subject (as in “the thing has a mind of its own”) and, paradoxically, a new form of life (as in “I have made it, and look at it go!”) For me, a consideration of autonomous systems must reside between these poles of a system’s independence, on the one hand, and its heritage, on the other.

In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book IIII,* Lacan points out that “[i]f we go straight to the signifier, that is to say on this occasion with all the reservations that such a reference comprises, straight to etymology, we see that *automaton* is what really thinks by itself without any link to that beyond, the *ego*, which gives thought its subject [emphases Lacan’s]." Watching / listening to *NoiseFold*, it is easy to understand what one sees and hears as the product of a system that “thinks by itself;” a program has been written, a description of geometrical shapes has been provided as elementary data, and within limits that contain the images and sounds, transformations occur. Lacan’s reference to the automaton as that beyond ego “which gives thought its subject” implies that an automaton represents / embodies thought without mooring it in a subject. This inflection recalls the well-known question of whether robots can feel, so powerfully evoked in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, mentioned initially in the first chapter of this book. One of Žižek’s points developed in *Tarrying With the Negative* is that on the surface the movie explores the ways in which replicants are like humans; through various interventions in this binary, the movie (in its Director’s cut ending) seems to invert the terms; humans are seen to be like replicants.

Let me consider the implications of such a switch on how one can look at / listen to *NoiseFold*. Let’s assume that watching *Blade Runner* and understanding it as an exploration of how replicants are like humans is like looking at / listening to *NoiseFold* and finding it an autonomous system separate from the subject. Let’s further assume that understanding the inversion that takes place at the end of the Director’s Cut of *Blade Runner* (in which humans are like replicants) is like… what? Looking at / listening to *NoiseFold* as an expression of a subject? Which one? The viewer / listener’s? The composer / programmer’s? It would be like understanding the images and sounds of *NoiseFold* as something else than simply not of a subject. What could that be?

For one thing, one could understand *NoiseFold* as a representation / embodiment of the Lacanian Real. Of course there is, and cannot be, a simple equal sign between any object or representation and the Lacanian Real; in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, Lacan “[w]e have translated it [*tuché*] as the encounter with the real. The real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automaton [emphases Lacan’s]." As such, *NoiseFold* enables the viewer / listener to sense the Lacanian Real lingering just out of sight and earshot behind its constantly transformed images and sounds, behind the data that drives them, behind the coming into being of data that transforms itself. Such a glimpse of the Lacanian Real is perhaps not unlike the Kantian sublime whose affect mixes pleasure and fascination with fear and dread. For Kant there are two sources for the sublime—the dynamical and the mathematical. The former is evoked by the immensity of natural forces; the latter is evoked by infinitely large, and small, numbers. *NoiseFold* suggests a mathematical sublime of data that is not simply entered by keystrokes on a computer from a programmer, but code that transforms itself within limits, governing endless transformations of noise and shapes, wet, dry, geometrical, organic, familiar, unfamiliar, all on its own.

Just as we are invited to understand humans as like replicants (inverted from replicants being like humans in the Director’s Cut of *Blade Runner*), so, too, we are invited by the dimension of the Kantian mathematical sublime and / as a version of the Lacanian Real to understand *NoiseFold* as transformations of data along an inscrutable continuum of visual and acoustic stimuli that lie just beyond but always out of reach of our subjectivity. But this formulation doesn’t yet reach a clear inversion.

To understand how in *NoiseFold* we can see and hear something quintessentially human, we can look, with Lacan at machines and pre-cybernetic machines at that; for Lacan, one can look over Descartes’ shoulders at the clock. In his *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*, Lacan says“I can’t recommend too strongly to you the reading of a book by Descartes called *Of Man*…. Flip through it, and confirm that what Descartes is looking for in man is the clock. The machine isn’t what a vain people think it is [sic]. It isn’t purely and simply the opposite of the living, simulacrum of the living. That it was constructed so as to embody something which is called time and is the mystery of mysteries, should put us on the right track. What is in play in the machine? That at the same time someone called Pascal busied himself constructing a machine, still very modest, making additions, shows us that the machine is tied to radically human functions. It isn’t a simple artifact, as could be said of chairs, tables, and other more or less symbolic objects, among which we live without realizing that they make for our own portrait. Machines are something else. They go much further in the direction of what we are in reality, further even than the people who build them suspect… The machine embodies the most radical symbolic activity of man…." One of the dimensions of this idea is that machines are embodiments of the self-regulating function of energy consumption and production that modern man (also) embodies, particularly the slave: “[i]t took machines for us to realize they [slaves] had to be fed. And more—they had to be looked after. But why? Because they tend to wear out. Slaves do as well, but one doesn’t think about it, one thinks it is natural for them to get old and croak. And later on, it dawned on people, something which was never thought of before, that living things look after themselves all on their own, in other words, they represent homeostats."

In *NoiseFold* one can recognize the shapes and sounds of human subjectivity unfolded, revealed, par excellence.

Susan Philipsz did a work entitled *Lowlands* (2008 / 2010). The work is a sound installation in which Susan Philipsz sings the Scottish folk song “Lowlands”; the sounds pervade spaces under a bridge covering a waterway. One can make out throughout various lines from the text, including “Lowlands, Lowlands, away my John.” One of the most evocative qualities of this work is the pervasive echo—at once in the recording and in the spaces in which the music reverberates—a quintessentially acoustic mirror of sounds echoing underneath bridges, over water, and over walkways—all hard surfaces of stone and paving. This work evokes the concept of acousmatic voice from Michel Chion and Pierre Schaeffer. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, For Dolar suggests that “[t]he acousmatic voice is simply a voice whose source one cannot see, a voice whose origin cannot be identified, a voice one cannot place." The acousmatic voice is often used to refer to voice-overs in film; the essential thing about an acousmatic voice is that it is a disembodied voice for which it seems like it should be possible to see the voice, but one can’t. Philipsz’ voice in *Lowlands* is acousmatic in this way.

In a related fashion, “[t]he voice, separated from the body, evokes the voice of the dead." Philipsz’ voice is acousmatic in this sense as well, given the repetitive evocation in the text of the death of a beloved.

The notes in the online documentation of the work are long, drawn-out, ametrical. The piece is based on a conventional tonal structure in which the first phrase moves from tonic D major to the dominant. The second phrase begins on this dominant and resolves the music to D major. The third phrase is an afterthought, prolonging D major. This simple tonal structure makes it an ideal piece for an acoustic mirror. The echoing effect of the space will bring out the overtones on the fundamental D of D major. Most of the piece involves the first six partials of the overtone series that outline a D major triad: D-natural / F-sharp / A-natural.

In his *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*, Lacan associates the voice with the *objet petit a*: “this little [*objet petit]* *a* that is the human voice." In *Encore, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, Lacan suggests that the *objet petit a* “only dissolves…owing to its failure, unable, as it is, to sustain itself in approaching the real." On the one hand, Philipsz’ voice resonates and fills the spaces under the bridge, over the water, on walk and roadways; on the other hand, the beauty of the work for me resides in the constant disappearance of the voice; notes and phrases are isolated, sung, drawn out, followed by silences. It is as if the entire point of the work is to embody the dissolving voice and to invite us to hear each note, each phrase, as it sinks into the immediate thingness of surrounding sounds.

This last citation mentions the Real—that elusive category of the brute thingness that necessarily supports all Imaginary binaries and the signifiers of the Symbolic. Throughout this work, Lacan uses the term "reel" to refer to a more colloquial sense of reality and as that special thingness of experience that is always in the same place, to which we never have direct access. Lacan seems to me to refer to "reel" as anecdotal reality when he refers to situations chosen by a subject or subjects in social space; reality in this sense is the mise en scène of daily life—the transference for example. What we have come to think of the Lacanian Real is that pulp thingness that we never see, hear, touch, smell, taste, or think. For me the Real can almost seem to appear in moments at which an element of the Symbolic and / or Imaginary come under sufficient strain.

Such is perhaps the case with bare life. Agamben used the term in reference to the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay—bodies torn free of their home countries in a state of prolonged limbo as the effects of the post-911 states of exception ran their asynchronous course. I have thought for some time that Agamben's insight obtains to a wide variety of posthistorical conditions, within the subject, in social spaces, and in the arts. For me works that evoke opening, revealing, laying bare the machinery of construction, a body without skin, without adornment, point to bare life.