This paper takes its clue from a phrase used by Linton Kwesi Johnson, the well-known British pop poet and musician, who talked about the ‘destructiveness’ of his own Reggae music in relation to his lyric texts which were meant to carry a message of political protest. The paper identifies four functional contexts or preconditions under which music may, or is likely to, develop such a ‘destructive’ quality towards the words with which it is combined. These are related to the ‘logogeneous’ (vs. ‘pathogeneous’) character of the verbal text; the ‘non-interpretive’ (vs. ‘interpretive’) approach of the music to the underlying text; the specific audience constitution (mass audience vs. intimate group or individual) in the performance situation; and to the ‘melocentric’ (vs. ‘logocentric’) mental disposition of the individual listeners.

The central notion to be discussed in this paper, the ‘destructiveness of music’, has nothing to do with such legendary effects as the sensational destruction of the walls of Jericho through the power of music – it refers to one particular aspect of the intermedial relationship between words and music, namely the possible danger that the music, when it is combined with words, may in some way ‘destroy’ the words. This implies that music, in a multimedia situation, as far as its effect on an audience is concerned, possibly overrules, displaces, absorbs the words and what they have to say. This notion is likely to disconcert people who are accustomed to believe, in a traditional ‘romantic’ context, in the cumulative, Gesamtkunstwerk effect of the arts when combined, and who tend to trust in the powerful reinforcement of words by accompanying music.

The phrase of the ‘destructiveness of music’ was used by Linton Kwesi Johnson during a phase of his artistic life and served him as a bitter comment on his experience when he performed his poetry, accompanied by reggae music, before audiences all over Europe1. LKJ – as he is usually referred to – is a

1 Johnson regularly used the phrase in conversation and during performances. A written reference can be found in “SG” 1985: 51.
Jamaican poet, born in 1952 and living in Great Britain, who became the leading voice of London’s West Indian community in the 1970s and 1980s. He has been described as “the acknowledged head of the new wave of performance poets, whose words welded politics and social conscience with a potent challenge to those in power” (Online 1); he is considered “one of the world’s foremost black poets” (Online 2) who has developed “the newest and most original poetic form to have emerged in the English language in the last quarter century”, one who is “Britain’s widely acclaimed cult hero” (Online 3) and has even been called “the alternative poet-laureate” (Online 4) of our days.

In his earlier years he was an active member of the Black Panthers Movement. Fighting for the political rights of his community, he was involved in the legendary Brixton riots and became a highly articulate spokesman of anti-racism in Thatcherite Britain. Yet in spite of his political activism he has always considered himself above all a poet, and his several publications attest to his stature as a highly gifted and sensitive user of words. His reputation rests on the fact that, although Johnson’s works are suffused by “seething political anger”, they are “never undone by simple vituperation. Johnson is, if anything, a thoughtful radical, more analytical than simplistic” (Online 5). He had begun by writing poetry of an intimate, private character, partly based on biblical language, but he soon realized that poetry was “not only a private, contemplative art form” but “a public arena for opinion and debate” (Online 6), and so he began looking out for better means of reaching a wider audience than a volume of lyric poetry can do. It was natural for him to remember his own native Jamaican tradition, with its popular form of reggae music, which led him to invent what is now called ‘dub poetry’.

The term ‘dub poetry’ is far from clear, and the definitions one can find – also by LKJ himself – are anything but consistent or unambiguous. Basically, ‘dub’ refers to one of the most decisive developments and conceptual shifts in music recording history, namely when studio engineers stopped merely re-producing or imitating performance situations in the studio and began re-mixing existing recordings, thereby producing new ‘artificial’ soundtracks of far greater variety than ‘real life’ performances ever can achieve (cf. Online 7). ‘Dubbing’ was first practiced by reggae DJs, and they also introduced another