1977: A Sense of the Future

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Our music foretells our future. Let us lend it an ear.
—Jacques Attali, *Noise: Political Economy of Music* (1985)

Around thirty years ago, French economist Jacques Attali asked whether one could "hear the crisis of society in the crisis of music?"[1] But that was only the conventional side of his argument. More singularly, he inquired whether turbulent transformations within the world of music were in fact prophetic of political or economic crises to come. Beyond controversially suggesting a basic intersection between music and violence, Attali formulated a kind of stilted audio futurology. Around the same time, there were certainly other compelling and engaging approaches to the future in circulation. Most potent, cyberpunk fiction and cinema, in their revision of science fiction's imperialist perspective on the future, found clues in the present and extrapolated from them, visualizing a near future.

The sonic as portal, on the other hand, as a sense of the future, is a thread that runs from the Italian futurists' art of war in the art of noise at least to Jacques Attali's book *Noise.* Instead of straining the eye toward the distant horizon or even making short-term projections or prophecies, the idea of sound as a sense of the future keeps its "ear to the ground," listening for microsignals, in an immediately present future, where the present virtually coexists with the resonances and vibrations of the past and opens on to its futurity. A closer listen to the sonic dimension of the affective sensorium reveals a model for challenging the time

lines that underpin many traditional futurisms and futurologies. Instead of gazing to the far future, attention returns to the futurity folded into the present. The sonic encounter opens out onto an achronological nexus. Anticipation, sensing the future, has always been more a preoccupation of the ear, of audio culture. The ear probes the future through listening for those clues that pass so quickly they could not have been present: phantoms, hallucinations, initiated by affect, or anticipation, or perhaps dread, because as one critic argued toward the end of the last century, "by the time we get to cyberpunk, reality has become a case of the nerves—that is, the interfusion of nervous system and computer matrix, sensation and information—so all battles are fought out in feeling or mood, with dread exteriorized in the world itself."[2] The future probes us through hearing, before any encounter with that which strays into the visual field. In film, you hear the pounding of impending doom, the seductive allure of the new flesh, and the gut-wrenching tension of imminent catastrophe long before you see its face, if it has a face. But does this cinematic convention of sonic affect also map onto the wider audiosocial milieu?

Everyone knows that in uncertain times, a species looks for clues to its future. For example, in *War and Cinema,* Paul Virilio traces the co-evolution of technologies of the eye with the arm, of vision machines with killing machines in an attempt to understand the significance of the human race passing through the virtual threshold of nuclear obliteration under the watch of a planetary vision machine. As he notes, "Seeing and foreseeing . . . tend to merge so closely that the actual can no longer be distinguished from the potential. Military actions take place 'out of view,' with radio-electrical images substituting in real time for a now failing optical vision."[3] Yet in describing the auditory culture of the Inuit, Marshall McLuhan pointed out that "to them, the ocularly visible apparition is not nearly as common as the purely auditory one: hearer would be a better term than seer for their holy men."[4] But in the acoustic spaces of the early twenty-first century, what are we to make of Attali's implied audio prophecy? Perhaps it is more productive to understand Attali's futurological argument and theory of noise as based on recurring audio hallucinations, premonitions brought to him by sound. Through seeking some clarity in Attali's sometimes hazy apparitions, some broader questions can be approached concerning the contagious affective networks of sonic warfare.

While intended as an argument in political economy, of changes in cultural superstructure preceding those in the economic base, Attali's futurology indirectly raises the affective issue of hearing's particular relationship to anticipa-

tion and dread. He locates sonic culture's future-sensing analytical power in its liquidity compared to other cultural fields, a suppleness that attunes it to rhythmic and morphological potentials: "It explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future."[5] In refutation of Attali's historical claims, some critics have bothered to disprove his chronologies. In *Noise, Water, Meat,* for example, Douglas Kahn attacks him where he points to the modern connection of music and war through the Italian futurist concept of noise. Kahn, in his critique of the basic claims of his audio futurology, quotes Attali when he writes that "it is not by coincidence that Russolo wrote his *Art of Noises* in 1913; that noise entered music and industry entered painting just before the outburst and wars of the twentieth century, before the rise of the social noise."[6] Kahn, however, points out that in fact, the reverse was true; music was echoing war: Russolo's signal had already been delivered by Marinetti in 1911 in his possessed data bursts from the trenches of the Italian-Turkish war in Libya.[7] But taking Attali's argument as the utterings of someone encountering audio apparitions, Kahn is perhaps shooting at the wrong target.

Aside from wonky chronology, Attali's theory rests on a series of problematic conceptual mappings. First, he formulates the relationship between music and noise as that of coded sound to uncoded sound. Noise, as the outside of a regime of coded sound, continuously perturbs music, threatening its regulation of sonic flow. Noise, in fact, as it scrambles music's signal, destroys, for Attali, the coding regime, transforming the relationship between inside and outside and spawning a new musical order in the aftershock of its arrival. For Attali, noise brings with it the future seeds of a new musical regime. At several points in his text, Attali abstracts this theory of noise and music into one of chaos and order, whereby noise, as an agent of chaos, trashes harmonic and metric structures while delivering an emergent order out of the shadow of the old. From here, Attali transposes his concepts of order and chaos onto the parallel social dynamic of violence and social order: noise and music, chaos and order, dissonance and harmony, violence and social order, war and peace. Cutting across this conceptual matrix, he points to four modes of sonic organization, at once both historically successive and virtually synchronous, which he terms *sacrifice, representation, repetition,* and *composition.* These modes, respectively, can be understood as corresponding to tribal, sovereign, disciplinary, and cybernetic

networks of power. Noise, in Attali's theory, not only plays a crucial role in the creation-destruction cycles of musical evolution, setting in motion the mutation of sonic culture, but also, he argues, anticipates broader social crises and transformation.

Attali's final audio-social order, the one that is emerging from repetition, he dubs *composition.* Attali's depiction of the incoming regime is vague. He does, however, make some speculations on its likely characteristics. So, for example, he notes that "composition proposes a radical social model, one in which the body is treated as capable not only of production and consumption, and even of entering into relations with others, but also of autonomous pleasure."[8] Composition "would be done first and foremost for ourselves. . . . It lies primarily outside of communication. . . . The tools of composition will be tools that are linked to the body: prostheses."[9] Here the listener becomes the operator and the consumer the producer: "The future is no longer to listen to music, but to play it."[10] Attali is correct to focus on the body-machine in this new mode of composition, but this prophecy certainly needs untangling from his solitary, masturbatory conclusions.

While Attali is vague about the audio-social system that composition will herald, some of the details of his audio hallucinations can be filled in through looking elsewhere at some of his futurological writing on the topics of cyberspace and global war. In *Labyrinths,* he remarks that "time itself does not flow but is spread out in space with comings and goings, with spirals and blind alleys, and distant proximities as well as illusory distances."[11] The concept of the labyrinth encapsulates, for him, the fractal nature of cybernetic power. He goes further to assert that the "the labyrinth is the material manifestation of a collective unconscious."[12] Cybernetic culture for Attali is continuously producing what he calls "virtual nomads," within a planet destined to become an "ecolabyrinth." Moreover, the body is itself a labyrinth ("brain, ears, viscera, nervous system, fingerprints, reproductive code").[13] Cyberspace parallels this physical and physiological labyrinthine patterning, with networks of microprocessors and software whose binary instructions and structures are an incessant series of bifurcating, forking paths and logic gates. This labyrinthine mode beckons what Virilio would describe as the logistics of deception of the electronic phase of warfare. As Attali describes, "Military strategy is always an affair of decoy and misdirection. And in trench warfare, what more perfect labyrinthine form than the network of trenches. . . . War and violence will once more depend upon a labyrinthine art of ruses, detours, the creation of dead ends, and blockages

of networks. Terrorism will be exercised above all in attacking power through systems of transportation, computer, and media networks."[14] If Attali's audio futurology is pushed further, particularly his depiction of the emergent mode of composition, then it should reveal at least a premonition of the global turbulence of the age of asymmetry.[15]

Notwithstanding the fact that his post-*Noise* prophecies hardly constitute a revelation in the early twenty-first century, in the depiction of the emergent fourth mode of audio-social organization, Attali has also been charged with vagueness by the followers of all major pretenders of late-twentieth-century audio futurism, from punk to hip-hop, from industrial to techno, from glitch to generative music. It is necessary to rely on others to fill in the blanks and take his theory forward. In the section of *Energy Flash* entitled "Ghost in the Machine," music critic Simon Reynolds addressed Attali's audio apparitions and his sense of the futurological, predictive power of sonic culture. Quoting Arthur Kroker, "Just like the virtual sound-objects in sampler music technology, subjectivity today is a gaseous element, expanding and contracting, time-stretched, cross-faded, and sound accelerated," Reynolds offered "sampladelia" as prophetic of cyborgian mutation. He located DJ culture at the threshold of Attali's modes of repetition and composition: "DJs are chronic consumerists and collectors who nonetheless use their stockpiling exercise as the basis for composition in the literal sense, 'putting things together.'" Reynolds goes further than most others in unraveling Attali's allusions in the context of late 1990s rave culture: "If music is prophecy, as Attali contends, what kind of social organisation or disorganisation is heralded by dance music? The transformation of music into a mass marketed commodity (sheet music, records) anticipated the late twentieth century triumph of what the Situationists called the spectacular-commodity society (with its alienated, passive consumer/spectator). Rave culture's decentered networks—cottage industries, micro-media, and temporary one off gatherings—may herald some post-corporate heterotopia of the late twenty-first century. Then again, sampladelia might equally be a component of a Krokerite dystopia of 'cold seduction': a cool hallucinatory culture of special effects personalities moving at warp speed to nowhere."[16] If Attali is construable only in this way, as yet another (musical) prophet of the ethico-aesthetic impasse of postmodernity, then ultimately his audio futurology disappoints.

1913: The Art of War in the Art of Noise

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Cut away the future, and the present collapses, emptied of its proper content. Immediate existence requires the insertion of the future in the crannies of the present.

—Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1993)

What is left of the futurist thought of sonic invention in an age when the military-entertainment complex cuts to the micrological core and control operates flat with becoming? Did the future get lost in the labyrinth of Web 2.0, in the rhizomatic networks of ubiquitous computation? At the turn of the twentieth century, the thermodynamic machines that were transforming the landscape, particularly the train and the automobile, obsessed futurism. At the end of the twentieth century, the model was instead the machines of cybernetics, whereby human thought and perception could be conceived of in terms of information processing. The futurist orientation to time was not so much futurological, that is, of predicting that which was to come, but rather of developing tactics to accelerate out of the tedium of the present. As Russolo laments in *The Art of Noises,* "Each sound carries with it a tangle of sensations, already well known and exhausted, which predispose the listener to boredom, in spite of the efforts of all musical innovators."[1]

Futurism here is a frustration with the sonic present: "Our ear is not satisfied and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions."[2] The art of noises for the futurists was a battle over the modern sensorium: "By selecting, coordinating, and controlling all the noises, we will enrich mankind with a new and unsuspected

pleasure of the senses."[3] The futurist plight was of sensory intensification. Energized by their affective experience of World War I, they felt the possibility of enlivening the arts through the integration of their detritus. Through the deployment of noise-sound, "Our multiplied sensibility, having been conquered by futurist eyes, will finally have some futurist ears."[4] Despite the turgid, conservative hold on the arts with the "marvellous and tragic symphony of the noises of war," man, for Russolo, could "still find something there at the front to amaze him. He will still find noises in which he can feel a new and unexpected emotion."[5] He included Marinetti's letter from the trenches in his noise manifesto: "Violence ferocity regularity this deep bass scanning the strange shrill frantic crowds of the battle Fury breathless ears eyes nostrils open! Load! Fire! What a joy to hear to smell completely taratatata of the machine guns screaming a breathlessness under the stings."[6] As with his peers, the sonic experience of war for Russolo was overwhelming, rendering the inertia of both bourgeois visual art and music pathetic: "In modern warfare, mechanical and metallic, the element of sight is almost zero. The sense, significance, and the expressiveness of noise, however, are infinite."[7] Navigation and orientation become both synesthetic and piloted by the poisonous embrace of the sonic encounter: "From noise, the different calibres of grenades and shrapnels can be known even before they explode. . . . There is no movement or activity that is not revealed by noise. . . . But noise, which conquers the blackest gloom and the densest fog, can betray as well as save."[8] The battlefield becomes a vectorial force field in which sensory experience is dominated by the trajectory of dopplering ballistic projectiles, the whistling of shells, the murmur of artillery just out of range, and the meow of shrapnel, all marking enharmonic passages from one pitch to another, performing a kind of imminent Bergsonian critique of the cinematographic error of classical music's frozen pitches.

In *Speed and Politics,* and much more recently in *Art and Fear,* Paul Virilio attempted to go beyond futurism's dual obsessions with noise and speed, to formulate an aesthetico-political analysis that he termed *dromology.* Etymologically, *dromology* comes from the Greek word *dromos,* meaning a race, or the pursuit of speed. Virilio's starting point was the ancient Chinese martial dictum of Sun Tzu that speed was the essence of warfare. Sharing Walter Benjamin's concern with the fascist aestheticization of politics, Virilio's dromology was recurrently possessed by the ghost of Marinetti and the Italian futurist celebration of the "beauty of speed": in a typical exaltation, Marinetti wrote that "one must persecute, lash, torture all those who sin against speed."[9] For Marinetti, the ma-

chines of military-industrial capital initiated the "acceleration of life to today's rapid rhythm. Physical, intellectual and sentimental balance upon a tightrope of speed stretched between contrary attractions."[10] Virilio concluded that "futurism in fact comes from a single art—that of war and its essence, speed. Futurism provides the most accomplished vision of the dromological evolutionism of the 1920s, the measure of superspeed!"[11] Virilio's melancholy apocalyptic dromology, while clearly, alongside Friedrich Kittler, key to this investigation, proves, however, too one-dimensional, as he seems, under the spell of Marinetti, overly obsessed with acceleration, fastness, and the noisy sonorization of art rather than with the broader ecology of sounds and speeds. The error of both the futurist politics of noise and the reactionary politics of silence (detectable in both Virilio and the acoustic ecology movement) is that both tend to restrict sonic intensity to the confines of a directly proportional relation to loudness or fastness instead of engaging the more complex affective profile of frequency dynamics and the polyrhythmic composition of speeds and slownesses. A rhythmanalytic method is preferable here to the dromology of the Marinetti-Virilio axis. It would note vibratory coalescence marked by a more "complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles" rather than the fetishization or critique of the nexus of noise and speed.[12]