

From Noise to Image: The Technology of Composition

Like representation and repetition, composition needs its own technology as a basis of support for the new form of value. While recording was intended as a reinforcement for representation, it created an economy of repetition. As with the preceding codes, the technology upon which composition is based was not conceived for that purpose. If representation is tied to printing (by which the score is produced), and repetition to recording (by which the record is produced), composition is tied to the instrument (by which music is produced). We may take this as a herald of considerable future progress, in the production and in the invention of new instruments.

Once again, music appears to me to be premonitory. The current burgeoning of instruments in the expansive field of sound—as great as that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which announced the industrial revolution—foreshadows a new mutation in technology.

In this context, there is an innovation that is only now beginning to play out its role, a herald of this mutation: the recording of images. Today, the recording of images is intended to be an instrument for the visual stockpiling of concerts and films and as a means of pedagogy, in other words, as a tool of repetition. Soon, however, it may become one of the essential technologies of composition. Television, the prehistory of image recording, did not succeed in giving visual status to music; the body disappeared, and individual image recording emerged as an innovation devoid of music. In a preliminary period, it may become a means of stockpiling access to films, on an individual basis or in the form of a central memory bank. But the essential usage of the image recorder seems to me to be elsewhere, in its private use for the manufacture of one's own gaze upon the world, and first and foremost upon oneself. Pleasure tied to the self-directed gaze: Narcissus after Echo. Eroticism as an appropriation of the body.

The new instrument thus emerging will find its real usage only in the production, by the consumer himself, of the final object, the movie made from virgin film. The consumer, completing the mutation that began with the tape recorder and photography, will thus become a producer and will derive at least as much of his satisfaction from the manufacturing process itself as from the object he produces. He will institute the spectacle of himself as the supreme usage.

The Political Economy of Composition

Composition belongs to a political economy that it is difficult to conceptualize: production melds with consumption, and violence is not channeled into an object, but invested in the act of doing, a substitute for the stockpiling of labor that simulates sacrifice. Each production-consumption (composition) entity can call its program into question at any moment; production is not foreseeable before

its conclusion. It becomes a starting point, rather than being an end product; and time is lived time, not only in exchange and usage, but also in production itself.

The bulk of commodity production then shifts to the production of tools allowing people to create the conditions for taking pleasure in the act of composing. We can see—in the makeup of musical groups, in the creation of new instruments, in the development of the imaginary through the planning of personal gardens,¹³⁷ in production using rudimentary tools—an outline of what composition can mean: each person dreaming up his own criteria, and at the same time his way of conforming to them.

Just as the enjoyment of music no longer passes through exchange or stockpiling, the enjoyment of production is exterior to its insertion in a market or system of allocation. It is thus necessary to conceive of other systems of economic organization, and especially other political institutions. For violence is no longer channeled into sacrifice; it no longer mimics itself in representation; it is no longer threatening, as it was in repetition. The wager of the economy of composition, then, is that social coherence is possible when each person assumes violence and the imaginary individually, through the pleasure of doing.

Composition liberates time so that it can be lived, not stockpiled. *It is thus measured by the magnitude of the time lived by men, which takes the place time stockpiled in commodities.*

One may wonder whether a model such as this, composed of liberated time and egoistic enjoyment, is possible. And in fact, on closer inspection, seemingly insoluble problems of coherence arise: first, others' noise can create a sound of cacophony, and each difference thus created, between units of composition, may be felt as a nuisance. Second, the complementarity of productions is no longer guaranteed, because compositional choices are not confronted by a pricing system (the market in representation) or ranking (planning in repetition).

Thus this social form for the recreation of difference—assuming it does not fall back into the commodity and its rules, in other words, into representation and repetition—presupposes the coexistence of two conditions: *tolerance and autonomy*. The acceptance of other people, and the ability to do without them. That being the case, composition obviously appears as an abstract utopia, a polar mode of organization that takes on meaning at an extraordinary moment of cultural climax.

Even then, composition may be considered an impossibility. There are several reasons for this. First, as Pierre Boulez writes:

It is necessary to deny all invention that takes place in the framework of writing. . . . Finally, improvisation is not possible. Even in a baroque ensemble, where the laws were more or less codified, where you had figures instead of chords, in other words, where you could place them in a certain position but not in just any way—even in this period improvisation did not produce exclusively masterpieces. People

speak of Bach's improvisations, for example. I believe that Bach wrote on the basis of what he had improvised, and that what he wrote was the more interesting of the two. Often, these improvisations are nothing more than pure, sometimes bizarre, samplings of sound that are not at all integrated into the directives of a composition. This results in constant arousal and appeasement, something I find intolerable. . . . The dialectic of form takes precedence over the possible; everybody arouses everybody else; it becomes a kind of public onanism.

The impossibility of improvisation thus forbids composition. The second reason is given by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who writes that it is difficult to concede that there exists in each person the potential for musical creation:

Theoretically, if not in fact, any adequately educated man could write poems, good or bad; whereas musical invention depends on special gifts, which can be developed only where they are innate.¹³⁸

If both Boulez and Lévi-Strauss, or either one, are right there will be no composition. But nothing in modern biology confirms the validity of these value statements, which confuse creativity with the present code of creativity. Neither will there be composition if it is not clearly willed as a project to transcend repetition, in other words, if the State does not stop confusing well-being with the production of demand. Any policy that valorizes the usage of objects instead of the means of producing them retards composition. On the other hand, a massive decentralization of power would accelerate it. In this case, then, the transition from one network to another is very different from the two preceding transitions. For the first time, it is not in the interest of the economic apparatus. For the first time, the requirements of the accumulation of commodity-value are reactionary and demand policies that are objectively conservative, even if they are camouflaged as an equalization of the conditions of access to commodities. In this sense, the creators themselves are in a precarious position, because composition contains the germ of their disappearance as specialists. So what noise will arrive to create the new order? We have seen that musicians' regaining their music is not enough. There is only one way: recovering—in the units of production and of life, in undertakings and collectivities—some meaning for things. The State can play a positive role only by encouraging the extensive production of means of doing rather than objects, the production of instruments rather than music. A profound mutation, delocalized and diffuse, that fundamentally changes the code of social reproduction, thus leading to a radical challenge to the somber power of the managers of repetition.

But the dangers are immense, for once the repetitive world is left behind, we enter a realm of fantastic insecurity.

Music no longer recounts a mastered, reasoned history. It is inscribed in a

labyrinth, a time graph. After the third stage of the attainment of power described by Castaneda has been passed, the stage in which man has conquered power, the relation to technology and knowledge changes, because the relation to the essential has changed. Three moments interpenetrate and stand in opposition to one another.

Perhaps the reader will have remarked what mysterious and powerful links exist between technology and knowledge on the one hand, and music on the other. Everywhere present, lurking behind a form, knowledge molds itself to the network within which it is inscribed: in representation, it is a model, a schema, the value of which depends on its empirical suitability to the measurement of facts; it is the study of partitions (*partitions*, also “scores”). In repetition, it is genealogy, the study of replication. In composition, it is cartography, local knowledge, the insertion of culture into production and a general availability of new tools and instruments.

Composition thus leads to a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable, in which labor no longer advances accumulation, in which the object is no longer a stockpiling of lack, in which music effects a reappropriation of time and space. Time no longer flows in a linear fashion; sometimes it crystallizes in stable codes in which everyone’s composition is compatible, sometimes in a multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies become more burdensome, and rules dissolve.

In composition, stability, in other words, differences, are perpetually called into question. Composition is inscribed not in a repetitive world, but in the permanent fragility of meaning after the disappearance of usage and exchange. It is neither a wish nor an anxiety, but the future contained in the history of the economy and in the predictive reality of music. It is already present—in its fragility and instability, in its transcendence and fortuitousness, in its requirement of tolerance and autonomy, in its estrangement from the commodity and materiality—implicit in our everyday relation to music. It is also the only utopia that is not a mask for pessimism, the only Carnival that is not a Lenten ruse.

It announces something that is perhaps the most difficult thing to accept: henceforth *there will be no more society without lack*, for the commodity is absolutely incapable of filling the void it created by suppressing ritual sacrifice, by deritualizing usage, by pulverizing all meaning, by obliging man to communicate first to himself.

Living in the void means admitting the constant presence of the potential for revolution, music and death: “What can a poor boy do, except play for a rock ‘n’ roll band?” (“Street Fighting Man,” Rolling Stones). Truly revolutionary music is not music which expresses the revolution in words, but which speaks of it as a lack.

Bringing an end to repetition, transforming the world into an art form and life into a shifting pleasure. Will a sacrifice be necessary? Hurry up with it,

because—if we are still within earshot—the World, by repeating itself, is dissolving into Noise and Violence.

Five people in a circle. Are they singing? Is there an instrument accompanying them? Is Brueghel announcing this autonomous and tolerant world, at once turned in on itself and in unity?

For my own part, I would like to hear the Round Dance in the background of *Carnival's Quarrel with Lent* as the culmination, not the inauguration, of a struggle begun twenty-five centuries ago. I would like to hear it as the forerunner of postpenitence, postsilence, at the back exit of the church, not the rear-guard of the pagan Carnival, supplanted by capitalist Lent in the foreground.

Unless Brueghel, by making the field interpenetrate, rooting each within the other, wishes to signify that everything remains possible and to make audible, as though by a message coded in irony, the inevitable victory of the aleatory and the unfinished.