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Jacques Attali's Revision of Baudrillard in Noise

Jacques Attali is the author of over fifteen books, and the former chief economic advisor to Mitterrand. However, he is best known in American academic circles as the author of Noise: The Political Economy of Music. His other books in English translation are Millennium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World Order and A Man of Influence: The Extraordinary Career of S.G. Warburg. Noise has been primarily read by music scholars such as Susan McClary, Alan Durant, and John Corbett, however, in this paper, I intend to read Attali not as a theorist and historian of music in society but as a critic of Jean Baudrillard's critical theory.

Noise draws heavily on Baudrillard, particularly on his Symbolic Exchange and Death. Baudrillard's theories of symbolic exchange are the primary source for Attali's analysis of the commodity status of music.

Attali in Noise may be the most significant critic of Baudrillard, because he neither tries to dismiss Baudrillard's work by testing its fidelity to its sources (Marx, Marcuse, Barthes, McLuhan, Debord, et al) nor to reattach it to any of the utopian traditions Baudrillard has broken from. Instead, as I will show, Attali accepts the full fatality of Baudrillard's work, its apocalyptic character, and is still able to tease out a thread of hope. In the remainder of this paper, I will synopsise Noise, pointing to its debts to and deviations from Baudrillard.

The main thesis of Noise is that music has what Attali calls a "prophetic" character. Because music is less concrete than other art forms, it is able to more rapidly move through modes of signification and exchange, so its organization as text and commodity anticipates future social structures. As Attali puts it:

Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society

because 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 (11).

This understanding of music as prophecy puts Attali, as political economist, in a prime position to theorize about the future, since contemporary avant-garde musical practices should point to the emergent modes of social order.

First, Attali plots the history of music as commodity in four stages: sacrificing, representing, repeating, and composing. In the first stage, Attali, like Nietzsche, finds the birth of music in ritual sacrifice, paganism, Classical tragedy, and Carnival. He writes "before the commodity, music was a simulacrum of the sacrifice of the Scapegoat" (26). Music as sacrifice functions as the channeling of noise, of disorder, into forms such as tragedy and Carnival which affirm society's bounds by providing an outlet for chaos. Under the system of music as sacrifice, music is "centralized on the level of ideology and decentralized on the economic level," (31) meaning that, although the social function of music is fixed, its production is not. The musician as shaman/priest/etc. is not a specialized professional. The production of music is not yet the production of a commodity, instead, music as sacrifice has only use-value (25); it cannot be the object of exchange.

The stage of music as sacrifice can be compared to Marx's idea of primitive communism. Music, like all other products, is created only for the needs of the community. It is not stored or exchanged but is held in common.

Music becomes professionalized when it enters the next phase, that of representation. As Attali writes:

Music becomes a spectacle attended at specific places: concert halls, the closed space of the simulacrum of ritual—a confinement made necessary by the collection of entrance fees. In this network, the value of music is its use-value as spectacle. This new value simulates and replaces the sacrificial value of music in the preceding network. Performers and actors are producers of a special kind who are paid in money by the spectators. We will

see that this network characterizes the entire economy of competitive capitalism, the primitive mode of capitalism (31-32).

The regime of representation is that of Modernity: the artist is a professional who produces on command, turning out pieces and performances as a baker would pies or a cobbler shoes. Attali's chapter on representation (46-86) is his most extensive piece of historical work, tracing the musician as worker from full-time domestic servant at a noble court, to freelance performer/composer, selling his work to many clients, to a position of relative independence and autonomy, no longer dependent on commissions for most work, writing instead for publication (53-54). Attali compares the working conditions of Bach, Handel, and Beethoven to exemplify this change. Bach's working contract (quoted 47-48), is exactly that of a butler or cook. He is expected to live with his employer, maintain certain standards of decorum, and perform on command, in return for a modest salary. This is "a relation of domesticity and not one of exchange" (48), analogous to the difference between a chef in a private home and one in a restaurant, since Bach's music was only for the pleasure of his master, not for resale.

The quoted letter from Handel, one of the first composers to work outside the court system, discusses his success at promoting his own concerts, though he clings to the court in that he finds it much more respectable to sell subscriptions for a series of concerts than to sell tickets at the door, which might lead to a lower class of patron (50-51).

Finally, Beethoven is also represented by a letter, in which he negotiates with his publisher (69-70). By the nineteenth century, composer and performer have become separate professions and the composer has become the figure of the Modernist artist, following a vision alone, then attempting to market the resulting text to an insensitive industry.

Again, there is a parallel here with Marx's work. Under representation, the musician/composer generates surplus value, which is appropriated by is/her employer, whether this employer is Bach's master impressing visitors with his skill, Beethoven's publisher selling his

works and paying him a minimal royalty rate, or Handel's promotion of his own concerts.

Technological change ushers in the system of repetition at the end of the nineteenth century when sound recording technology emerges and rapidly becomes the dominant form of musical experience (85). These changes were somewhat anticipated by changes in the role of the composer from performer to conductor to simply creator of the text, so that the score came to be something to be commonly understood, performed, and interpreted in the composer's absence. However, the effect of recording was far deeper than this move from spectacle to text.

Under the mode of repetition, music becomes an object and its experience becomes private. The initial intended use of recording: the preservation of performances (89), rapidly vanishes, so that "today the performance is only successful as a simulacrum of the record" (85).

It is in the chapter on repetition that Attali's debt to Baudrillard becomes clearest. First, Attali's first three stages of political economy can be mapped onto Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra: the counterfeit, production, and simulation (Baudrillard 50). Under the regime of sacrifice, music takes place in circumstances which require its ritual authenticity. When musical skills and knowledge become secularized, it becomes possible for music to have the quality of the counterfeit. The possibility of the inauthentic performance inaugurates the order of representation, which clearly fits Baudrillard's "production." Finally, as the last quotation from Attali makes clear, repetition, the order dominated by the commercial exchange of sound recordings, is the condition of simulation. As has been extensively demonstrated by Andrew Goodwin, John Mowitt, and myself, recording simulates performance. Especially in contemporary popular music, it is very rare that a recording represents a performance in real time and space, but live performers are expected to replicate this hyperreal text. This is truly a case of the copy replacing and erasing the original.

However, simulation is not the only significant Baudrillardian concept in the repetition chapter. More significant, because more original, is Attali's use of Baudrillard's linkage of

commodification with death.

For Baudrillard, capital is not only the objectification of workers' time, as for Marx, it is also the control of their deaths. A provocative comparison can be made to the "Power over Death and Life" section of Foucault's History of Sexuality. For Foucault, power not only appropriates its subjects' lives as labor; their deaths too are produced and regulated, while Baudrillard, contrarian that he is, writes:

Labour therefore everywhere draws its inspiration from deferred death. It comes from deferred death. Slow or violent, immediate or deferred, the scansion of death is decisive: it is what radically distinguishes two types of organisation, the economic and the sacrificial. We live irreversibly in the first of these, which has inexorably taken root in the *différance* of death.

The scenario has not changed. Whoever works *has not yet been put to death*, he is refused this honour. And labour is first of all the sign of being judged worthy only of life. Does capital exploit the workers to death? Paradoxically, the worst it inflicts on them is refusing them death. It is by deferring their death that they are made into slaves and condemned to the indefinite abjection of a life of labour.

The substance of labour and exploitation is indifferent in this symbolic relation. The power of the master always primarily derives from this suspension of death. Power is therefore never, contrary to what we might imagine, the power of putting to death, but exactly the opposite, that of allowing to live—a life that the slave lacks the power to give. The master confiscates the death of the other while retaining the right to risk his own. The slave is refused this, and is condemned to a life without return, and therefore without possible expiation (39-40).

It is this quality of commodities, that they are encoded with the deferred deaths of their makers, which leads to the crisis in the phase of repetition. Attali offers two versions of this crisis, one dystopic, in the style of Baudrillard's many apocalypses, and one utopic, which is Attali's great contribution to the criticism of Baudrillard.

Attali's apocalypse, which he captions "The Political Economy of Repetition," is a variation on the Marxist classic of overproduction (128-130). As production becomes more and more efficient, a greater variety of products must be made to maintain demand. The music industry already displays this in a heightened state with the constant introduction of new recording media (CD, DAT, Mini-Disc, DCC) and enhanced reissues (gold CD, 20-bit remastering) aimed at

compelling consumers to upgrade their collections by repurchasing music they already own. Similarly, the increased availability of imports, bootlegging, archival work, and other reissues make sure that, even if one's musical tastes are quite narrow, one cannot stop consuming. There will always be a new product, even if there's only one song a person likes, there will always be a remix, a new cover version, a live take, or at least an import with a different picture on the sleeve. Production has already grossly outstripped consumption. It would not be difficult to buy more music than one could listen to in one's lifetime; any serious fan already has a backlog of CDs that have never been played. Attali predicts that:

The few aspects of life that still remain noncommercialized now (nationality, love, life, death) will in the future become trapped in exchange. Their spectacle will be put up for sale, but also their accessories, and afterwards their stockpiling. The usage of services (entertainment, health, food) will thus be transformed into a hoard object (129-130).

and sees two possible responses to this inflation of production and subsequent imperative to consume. The first is that:

Consumers—a necessary detour in commodity consumption, until it is discovered how to produce them as well—could be replaced by machines to use and destroy production, eliminating human beings once and for all from the repetitive economy they still encumber today. The commodity could also disappear: just as money has become the accountable substitute for dialogue, the commodity could be replaced by the pure sign, a convenient way to stockpile—record jackets; tickets for travel, restaurants, clothes, life, death; passports; love certificates. The political economy of nonsense will have been founded: without man or merchandise (130).

Attali's other possible response to the crisis of over-repetition is that death will become the ultimate collectable. As every experience becomes stockpilable and overproduction makes every consumer an obsessive collector, people will begin to accumulate the means of their own deaths.

Repetition today does indeed seem to be succeeding in trapping death in the object, and accumulating its recording. This is a two-step operation: first, repetition makes death exchangeable, in other words, it represents it, puts it on stage, and sells it as a spectacle. [...] Then in the second step, not yet realized, death will become repeatable, capable of trapping use-time; in other words, purchasing the right to a certain death will become

separable from its execution. Thus people will collect means for killing themselves and "death rights," just as they collect records-rights to different deaths (happy, sad, solitary, collective, distant or with the family, painless or under torture, in public or in private). (126)

One's own death is the ultimate absurd collectable, because no one needs more than one death, yet overproduction compels the hoarding of every possible object. The deferred death of the worker which Baudrillard finds in capital becomes the deferred death of the consumer.

Attali goes beyond Baudrillard in offering a utopia, a fourth stage of musical/political economy, which he calls composition. For Baudrillard, resistance is only possible by means of what he calls "fatal strategies." To break down the system, one should not proceed through subversion or resistance but through excessive submission. Working from Mauss and Bataille's work on potlatch and the gift, Baudrillard writes that, since authority maintains itself through unreciprocable gift-giving, as in the gift of life given the slave by his master previously described, one can only fight back by refusing to take these gifts seriously.

Power, faced with this symbolic "blackmail" (the barricades of '68, hostage-taking), loses its footing: since it thrives on my slow death, I will oppose it with my violent death. And it is because we are living with slow death that we dream of a violent death. Even this dream is unbearable to power (43).

Terrorism and suicidal recklessness are not grounds for utopian transformation. While one may see in practices such as body modification, substance abuse, daredevil sports, and unsafe sex a kind of resistance to the definition of the self as labor and the command to maintain the mind and body as efficient machines in the service of capital, as Chalmers argues in his essay on heroin, this does not lead to hope for social change, only acts of symbolically rich yet futile defiance.

Attali's vision of composition is much more accessible. New forms of symbolic exchange can emerge from the crisis of overproduction/over-repetition. While the chapter on composing is the shortest in Noise, it resonates with many developments in underground music scenes, where music making attempts to escape the circuit of commodification and repetition. For Attali, the

stage of composition will be a return to that of sacrifice, when music will be created within communities for immediate use.

This can be seen in a neo-primitive, anti-technological form in the work of Hakim Bey. He advocates "immediatism," the practice of art which is temporary, intended for immediate use, and which attempts to create and address a community, without mediation between artist and audience. Bey's work has gained considerable popularity among musicians working in free improvisation, especially those also inspired by non-Western musics.

On the other hand, I am suspicious of the desire to work outside of "media." After, guitars and crayons are media much the same as computers and camcorders. A more interesting example of the move towards composition can be seen in recent dance club music. While the DJs play records, they mix, sample, loop, and otherwise alter these records in such extreme ways that the DJs themselves are the artists while the musicians who make the records are usually unknown, the recordings themselves are uninteresting to listen to unaltered and are usually not even available to the general public. Techno, house, or ambient music begin to move outside the system of repetition, just as free improvisation can, in that the music has so far resisted being reduced to a stockpiable sign.

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