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# Lost In Translation

ByMute Editor

20-odd years after its original publication, Jacques Attali revised his book *Noise* in an attempt to retro-fit recent developments to his original predictions about the future of music and the political economy. Here, Paul Helliwell considers the critical reception of *Noise* version 2.0

In early 1977 PUF published Jacques Attali's *Bruits: Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*. Nearly a decade later, in 1985, it appeared in English as *Noise*, translated by Brian Massumi and bookended with essays by cultural studies and musicology heavyweights Frederic Jameson and Susan McClary. Its central thesis is that the form of music prefigures the future form of the political economy: superstructure prefigures base. Music, then, is not a mere superstructural distraction or mass produced bauble, it matters.

That music is the herald of the future is a powerful and popular claim. In Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* music calls into being a utopian society. In the double time structure of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* it causes the descent of Germany into fascism. When not predictive, it is central to many utopias. In the film *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra plans to transfer black people to a new earth by means of music. In the real world, d, Gabriele d'Annunzio (italian poetry) created the short-lived pirate republic of Fiume, where music was declared the central principle of the state.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001 PUF/Fayard published a substantially rewritten French edition of *Bruits* which Attali promoted by appearing, ahead of publication, at the ICA. There was an article in *Mute*, then *The Wire*,<sup>2</sup> and then... silence. All at a seemingly propitious time for the theory, when the political economy of music was changing due to digital forms of production and distribution.

So, in light of this and a recent conference NOISE/THEORY/NOISE#1 held at Middlesex University, it seems timely to ask how Attali's theory is faring.<sup>3</sup>

The theory itself is a fertile conflation of anthropology, information theory, economics and musicology. The 'intellectual milieu' that gave rise to the book is clear-post-situationist French sociology, later cut with internet boosterism in 2001. There are few surprises in Attali's bibliographies but some omissions. When the translation of the new version is published, doubtless more sources will have been unchained from the radiators in the basement of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (Attali's former fiefdom) and led blinking into the light of day.

The theory, unfashionably, has stages, two of which should have been born out in the years 1977-2001:

1) Repetition-a dystopia where overproduction and stockpiling of recorded sound (and the very nature of music) lead to a complete destruction of music's social function. For Attali, in line with Levi-Strauss, music acts to bring the community together and to manage violence, but music's commodity status hampers this until a crisis is reached.

2) Composition-a change in the political economy of music heralding change in the wider political economy; a utopia, where music is now improvisation but its social function has been destroyed, at least according to the 1977 version.

Adorno is a major source for Attali's thinking, as is Baudrillard. Jeff Schwartz reads Attali as a critic of Baudrillard who embraces his pessimism yet provides him with a happy ending, a utopia, a major attraction of the theory.<sup>4</sup>

In the theory's reception we find strong clues as to its longevity. The theory gathers support from the disparity between the important position people feel music holds in their lives and its lowly position in current theoretical and popular discourse.

Jameson and McClary valued Attali's 'orientation towards the future' because it enabled them to dispense with 'pessimistic', 'retrospective' Adorno (whose method McClary memorably describes as 'a coroner performing an autopsy') when connecting music with wider society. It is in making this connection that the theory's strength resides, and its predictions are the strongest form of this. McClary is, perhaps for this reason, prepared to buy into Attali even though she recognises the theory's 'spottiness' in terms of historical example and her own study contradicts his timeline.

While Jameson liked Attali's role as a 'close advisor to president Mitterand and a central figure in France's current socialist experiment', *notbored* magazine did not, and quipped that the translation was not published for its content but as a plot to curry favour for French style 'socialism' in the US.<sup>5</sup> Attali's closeness to power has frequently led to dismissal of his work, even now that the danger of an acceptance of the French Socialist Party in the US has abated.

For most critics the main problem was that composition was so sketchily theorised that just about any form of new music or technology could be claimed as annunciatory, e.g. punk and the New York downtown scene for Susan McClary. Sinker, in *The Wire*, thought this was its attraction. At the ICA, the group of musos, academics and digerati invited to discuss the economic implications of Noise had no problem tying MP3s and file sharing communities to the 'economy of the gift' - weakly present in Attali's original text, but made much more explicit in the 2001 version as a response to that trend. Three years later, MP3s look less utopic. Conversely, the ICA's invited speakers had great difficulty in making sense of Attali's description of music's social function. This is the part of the theory that I find most shocking since, despite the alienated ways that we produce and consume music (the walkman, the digital download of glitches), the patterns of consumption are *still* social (the charts, raves, gigs), entailing vestigial remnants of music's social function.<sup>6</sup>

The 2001 version leans less heavily on the destruction of music's social function - perhaps because it hasn't happened, and perhaps because Attali now has more exemplars of composition than free Jazz (he never really believed that people would want to listen to improvisation). To the 'improvisation of music' he has added that 'of words' in 'rasta et dreadlocks', 'of life' in rap and 'of perestroika' in soviet underground rock. Attali is not the best source on these and his schema distorts their significance. There is good material here, for instance on MP3s, composition and copyright, but it's nothing you couldn't generate yourself between the original and the news.

As Scanner said in summing up, NOISE THEORY NOISE should have been named ADORNO THEORY ADORNO with most sessions name checking his work, and many people left expressing the pious hope of actually reading him. The 1985 translation of Attali's theory on composition remains central, but its ideas have sadly not so much been rewritten as disappeared. It is symptomatic of Attali's role as a hobbyhorse that no-one has, in the three years since its publication, translated, discussed or even read the new text. Whether Adorno will take anyone further in this, or whether Attali's theory can be saved, his sources unshackled and set to work, remains to be seen.

The cover of this new edition claims to have accurately predicted the last 25 years of music and Attali is reduced to censoring his own text to justify this. What was productive in the original has been erased. Perhaps it would be better if it remains lost in translation - the future has not been kind.

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