Attack/Affect: System of a Down and Genocide Activism

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Abstract: This article problematizes the affective capacities of popular music to perform tactical and sometimes violent disruptions in conventional thought, especially when these capacities are oriented toward political activism. I offer a critical analysis of "Attack" and "Holy Mountains" (Hypnotize 2005), two songs by Los Angeles heavy metal band System of a Down. I also examine the melding of the disruptive aesthetics of heavy metal with socially conscious lyrics, and contestations over historical memory, specifically the recognition of the Armenian genocide. I ask what potential this music has to signal new and different ways of (re)thinking history and inquire into the questions that arise from such a strategy.

As has become common among many popular music artists, the band devotes significant on- and off-stage energy to a variety of social justice causes. Due largely to their shared Armenian ancestry, System of a Down's central activist concern is unique among popular music causes: the official US recognition of the Armenian Genocide. System of a Down's music foregrounds the disruptive shifts in timbre, dynamics, and rhythm that are characteristic of much contemporary heavy metal. But the band's sound is able to transcend the generic in large part in light of their widely known political investments and the overtly politicized content of their lyrics. More specifically, it is when these two discursive arenas enter into an assemblage with the ostensibly familiar heavy metal investment in the liminality of disruptive shifts in timbre, dynamics, and rhythm that the sound undergoes an alchemic transformation. Such a transformation traces a path away from heavy metal as a conceptually domesticable or even cliché genre and opens toward a potentiality for rethinking both generic convention and political investments in history, memory, and truth. System of a Down's compositional aesthetic thus reveals an incipient politics of discontinuity and rupture, which is built upon on a strategy of disruption traditionally associated with the rebellious authenticity

of rock'n'roll since its earliest days and the anti-authoritarian politics associated with heavy metal.

The work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Deleuze and Félix Guattari is crucial for understanding the interrelation and efficacy of aesthetics and political activism within global systems of late capitalism and culture. System of a Down's musical treatment of the violent politics of genocide denial reflects Foucault's troubling of teleological portrayals of history and the establishment of truth through a causal metaphysics. By performing a disruptive intervention into quotidian reality the band's aesthetic challenges an "official" history that denies the genocide and offers in its place an alternative truth of the atrocities perpetrated against the Armenians. The proposition of an alternative truth is itself problematic, especially since System of a Down's music appears to challenge the immutability of history and memory by seeking to displace what is seen to be an erroneous truth, no matter how widely that truth has been accepted. I shall discuss this potential paradox later in this article. System of a Down's ruptures are affective moments of possibility—not stasis—that have an affinity with Deleuze's concept of the "virtual," a realm unbound by structure and within which resides all the possibilities for actuality/actualization (our daily lived experience of things "as they are") (Boundas 2005:296-98). Deleuze, both with and without Guattari, rejects teleology and holds that difference and a constant process of becoming are the defining characteristics of existence. As such, there is no "being" but only a constant process of "becoming." From this perspective, while System of a Down's music can certainly be interpreted as representing the violence of genocide, it is also hostile to the application of an assumed stable sign system and thereby it pushes beyond easy categorization and rationalization, thus opening up possibilities to (re)orient listeners towards critical reflection on processes involved in the construction of historical truth and those of their own becoming-aware.

Popular Music and Activism: From Representation to Affect

Popular music has engaged in various ways with a panoply of social justice and political causes ranging from expressions of racial pride and empowerment performed by African-American jazz musicians during the Harlem Renaissance, to the lyric-focused protest music of the 1960s folk-revival, to the benefit concerts and celebrity activism that emerged in the 1970s and hit their zenith with Live Aid in 1985. Since the 1980s, musicians have publicly and privately devoted their time and resources to causes and issues ranging from animal rights to those surrounding the nature and direction of "globalization."

Recently, popular music activism has penetrated deeper into the globalized political economy, with some artists appropriating strategies formerly reserved for actors in other areas of cultural production, humanitarian aid, and national politics. For example, with a foray into brand management, Bono, lead singer of U2, spearheads the charity brand (PRODUCT) RED ™; Eric Clapton, in a humanitarian posture, sponsors the Crossroads drug rehabilitation clinic; and former Fugee member Wyclef Jean has, in the realm of national politics, recently mounted a controversial and ultimately failed bid for the presidency of Haiti.

So too has System of a Down found their place within this culture. Their website features links to several activist organizations with which they are involved. And along with Rage Against the Machine/Audioslave guitarist Tom Morello, the band's lead singer, Serj Tankian has co-founded Axis of Justice, an organization concerned with genocide awareness and prevention and combating issues such as poverty and corporatization. For a heavy metal band this level of visible political activism is unusual. Mainstream metal bands have rarely mounted their own charitable or activist tours, and despite heavy metal's popularity during the halcyon days of the benefit concert in the 1980s, metal artists were in the main absent from such political and humanitarian events, though their absence may be attributable as much to metal's social marginalization and perceived offensiveness as to any apoliticism or apathy inherent in the music or culture.[1] Metal bands have thus historically been understood as somewhat non-ideological or, even, apolitical. Sociological studies of metal audiences have largely stressed a greater investment in the aesthetics and enactment of individual and group rebellion rather than in political activism in the traditional sense (Weinstein 1991; Straw 1993; Arnett 1996). However, metal is not incapable of doing political work, and musicologists have shown that it reveals and at times challenges culturally inscribed understandings of gender and class, especially in relation to homosociality among men, the genre's appeal to working class youth, and the participation (or lack thereof) of women in the genre (Fast 2001; Walser 1993).

Despite popular music of all genres and styles occupying a central role in the semiotic economy of activist causes since the latter-third of the twentieth century, the archetypal mass-music activist aesthetic in Western popular music has become the 1960s "folk revival" that emerged in the heady climate of the Civil Rights movement and amidst Cold War anxieties over potential nuclear Armageddon. Drawing on largely Western European folk traditions, at times mixed with a modicum of African American blues, the aesthetics of folk revival music and its derivatives were conditioned by aspirations to preindustrial innocence (a distinctly modernist sentiment) and Habermasian

(1984) notions of communicative rationality reinforced by an affective/emotional distance between vocal timbres and lyrical content: the politics of the music was carried through the lyrics, the transmission of the message relied on the rational system of language, while the desired outcome was the fomenting of a critical consciousness within the audience.[2]

Many of System of a Down's lyrics explicitly address their political orientation and activist goals, but my focus here is on the possibilities for expressions of activist positions through non-lyrical/non-representational musical features. In the case of System of a Down, this does not mean discounting the role of lyrics; rather it means attending to how their lyrics combine with the music to create an assemblage that disrupts sedimented patterns of thought in order to create the conditions for political action. Here, the rational element of linguistic expression enters into a tense dialogue with those aspects of music that register within the viscera and are pre-rational, that act upon and between the senses, and which often resist emotive categorization and linguistic description. My analysis thus draws inspiration from the political potentials of funk music and its emergence alongside a renaissance in African philosophy and culture in the mid-1960s expressed in the various contours of the Black Power movement (Ramsey, Jr. 2005:154). In funk, repetition, harmonic stasis, and the foregrounding of rhythm and communal music making challenged the aesthetic dominance of white musical priorities (evident in folk-revival music) such as melody, harmony, perpetual change, and organic compositional development (Gates and Higginbotham 2004:112; Snead 1984:68). Funk's repetitive bass lines and interlocking grooves acted on the body and signaled a rejection of Enlightenment priorities and European aesthetic sensibilities in favour of a pre-slavery West African aesthetic and philosophical paradigm. Funk thus mounted an ontological challenge to the axiomatic Adornian proposition that repetition was the harbinger of regressive listening, alienation, and the depoliticization of consciousness within industrial age mass culture (Adorno 2002). Though funk lyrics may or may not explicitly engage with anti-racist themes, the sonic characteristics of the music are political in so far as they cue different and new individuations, alternative ways of being in and engaging with the world.

System of a Down perform a similar intervention but, in contrast to funk, their music foregrounds disruption and vertiginous change as opposed to rhythmic and melodic stasis.[3] And rather than drawing on the re-discovery of an estranged musical history for aesthetic inspiration, their music deploys extant genre conventions of heavy metal, at times pushing them to extremes. At the level of disruption and change, System of a Down's music does not significantly drift from the extant genre conventions of contemporary heavy

metal. Indeed, it is one of the hallmarks of heavy metal to foreground disruption, and in its modern variants this has been pushed to ever greater extremes in sub-genres such as thrash-metal, death-metal, and black-metal.[4] It is the potentialities of heavy metal's generic codes to disrupt and rupture that System of a Down seizes upon by pairing them with explicit activist stances, especially around controversial topics such as the Armenian Genocide, discussed here, or the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[5] Their invocation of heavy metal conventions and subsequent recasting with intensely political lyrics is precisely that which allows them to move beyond generic cliché and to push past representation in the hopes of jolting listeners toward a new awareness. Their music effectively de-links these conventions from a perceived apoliticism in order to create affective moments of rupture in which listeners are challenged to reflect upon and ultimately question received wisdom and dominant worldviews, especially those that surround the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide

The Armenian Genocide is often referred to as "the Forgotten Genocide" for various reasons, including a lack of documentary evidence and a politically and economically motivated systemic suppression of historical facts.[6] The plight of Armenians within Turkey in the early twentieth century has been debated fiercely among invested parties. Generally, Armenians seek historical justice in the form of recognition that the early twentieth-century events constituted a systematic ethnic cleansing. Modern Turkey, for reasons of both historical guilt and political aspirations to join the European Union, refuses to recognize the events as anything other than the natural course of history and a response to the political necessities of the time. Since knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the events is only now becoming more widespread, some brief context is necessary.

From the late nineteenth century despotic rule of Sultan Hamid II through the Young Turk revolution, Armenians had long been unwelcome within the Ottoman Empire. During WWI, Armenians were accused of being Russian sympathizers; forced deportations turned into torture and mass murder, and an estimated 300,000 to 1.5 million Armenians were killed.[7] Turkish and American refusal to recognize the events during World War I as systematic ethnic cleansing has been informed by Turkish nationalist movements (Akçam 2004), Turkey's geopolitical strategic importance during the Cold War (Bal 2004) and in the present turmoil in the Middle East (Dakwar 2003), and more recent negotiations to join the European Union (Tannock 2005). Socially and

culturally, the situation in contemporary Turkey assumes a repressive character. There are laws against "insulting Turkishness," under which one can be arrested for merely suggesting there was genocide (Rainsford 2005); the plight of the Armenians is not on Turkish school curricula—some even allege that anti-Armenian sentiment is common—and thus many Turks have a sanitized understanding of their own history (Rainsford 2009); and the Turkish government consistently publicly rebuffs the international community's efforts to obtain an acknowledgement of genocide ("Turkish anger…" *BBC News* 2010). In the US, activist groups apply significant pressure on the federal government to recognize the genocide and though H.Res. 252 was narrowly passed by the Congressional Foreign affairs committee and awaits a full vote, the Senate has yet to address S.Res. 316, and strong opposition to recognition still exists.[8] Thus, for many the matter is far from satisfactorily resolved. Crucially, what is under dispute in the debate about the Armenian Genocide is not that there were deaths and displacements—the question is whether these constituted a "reasonable" response by a country caught amidst geopolitical turmoil and dealing with an internal enemy of the state through what is officially today known in Turkey as a "relocation," or whether the events were an intentional attempt at ethnic cleansing. The primary concern of genocide activists is thus symbolic and seeks recognition in the form of official state proclamations, which are imbued with a potent authority to correct the historical record.

"Attack"

"Attack" is a song of anger and rage that describes a provocative reciprocal justice that revisits up on the oppressors all the violence that they themselves have perpetrated. The song's lyrics evoke images of displacement and the material effects of violence, murder, and torture, cataloging the variety of ways in which violence has been perpetrated against the Armenians both during the time of the Genocide and since. The brute violence and "cold insincerity of steel machines" of the verses is juxtaposed with a more abstract violence, expressed in the choruses, which adjure an "attack" on "all the years of propaganda." Censorship, and the ultimate "muting" of the lost lives into abstract "dreams" results from the foreclosure of open discourse regarding the genocide in contemporary Turkey. System of a Down's music appears to confirm the rational and symbolic deadlock that characterizes the genocide debate—the lack of recourse to satisfactory semiotic representation—by performing sounds whose excess cannot be tamed by status quo political rhetoric or language as such. In this sense they seem to affirm that a pre-rational sonic

violence may in fact be the only honest response.

"Attack's" musical codes are easily associated with heavy metal: it is a relatively fast song at 165 bpm; guitars and vocals are largely distorted; and virtuosic unison riffs are the cornerstone of the song. In heavy metal convention, riffs are repeated, making them the most easily recognizable part of a composition; they provide stability and, importantly, a sense of continuity.[9] This continuity is characteristic of what Deleuze and Guattari call the "chronos," "the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject" (1987:262). This is a "striated space," characterized by structure, order, and rigidity, and is the time of the "actual," our lived, everyday experience (Boundas 2005:296-98; Colebrook 2005:9-10). Indeed, musical composition as such is an ordering process, and as such all compositions serve to actualize the potentials of sound. However, though riffs do serve to sectionalize and order "Attack:" the rapidity and intensity with which they shift from one to the next frustrates stability; their dis/appearances rupture any emerging sense of continuity.[10] For example, as the song's cleanly articulated ostinato verses cede to the regularity of the march-like ascending pre-chorus riffs, there is little in the way of preparation but for the

Figure 1: "Attack," Verse/Pre-Chorus (guitar), 0'17"- 0"45"[11]

slight intensification of the 4/4 meter (ex. 1).

Also, Dramatic shifts in timbre, dynamics, and performance intensity further serve to destabilize and subvert the embodiment of continuity, as is the case in the shift that takes place between the introductory riff and the first verse (ex. 2).[12]

The rapid sixteenth-note figurations and distortion of the opening ostinato riff effect an acute forcefulness and immediacy—after a quarter-note pause filled by a snare drum hit, the riff is thickened with the addition of a second guitar, bass, and drum set each playing the riff in rhythmic unison. But, this incipient pattern and sensory bloc are urgently foreclosed by the verses' clean, open guitar chords, atmospheric vocal harmonies, ostinato bass, and the drums' muted time-keeping role.

As a liminal space, the evanescent and groundless transition *between* a given sonority and the next ruptures habitual ways of thinking and opens up experience to new and different possibilities for thought and existence. This marks a brief passage into the "aeon," that which Deleuze and Guattari note is:

> the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened. (1987:262)

Figure 2: "Attack," Intro/Verse 1 (guitar), 0'0" – 0'20"

Introduction (Guitar I, Distortion on)

P.M. (Palm Mute) ------| P.M. ----------------|

P.M. ----------------|

(Guitar I & II, Bass, Drums)

4x

P.M. ----------------| P.M. ----------------|

Verse 1 (Clean)

[Breath - ing each oth - er's ...]

Figure 3: "Attack," Chorus Riff (guitar)

The aeon is the time of the virtual—that realm, immanent always to the actual, which presents the myriad possibilities that form part of the larger process of becoming. This is not a linear, teleological process, though rendering it in the conventions of music may make it appear so. Rather, becoming is a temporal dynamism. It opens experience onto a plane of potentiality where what is "given" in history may be challenged and rethought. The evental time of the virtual performs a deterritorializing function, it frustrates regularity, and (re)orients the listener away from what is definite (the regular meter, the predictable unfolding of a musical composition that adheres to traditional forms) and toward that which is just beyond control and order—toward the processual and that which has yet to come. The virtual also offers possibilities for reterritorialization: the virtuality animated at, and by, the point of rupture always cedes to the ordered space of an actual/real, for a time striated in the riff, texture, rhythm, or timbre that marks a succeeding formal section, a section that may repeat, alter, or build upon previous material or present brand-new musical actualities.

Rupture is also prominent in the internal construction of some of the riffs. The chorus riff is a sixteenth-note ostinato punctuated by a short rhythmic flourish that accents the final upbeat, carrying it over the barline and signaling the end/beginning of the repetition (ex. 3).

In these macro and micro renderings of disruption—at the level of compositional form and riff construction—"Attack" seizes upon the radical possibilities contained within heavy metal aesthetics and the moment of rupture—moments that can be heard to represent the violence of genocide, but that also enact their own violence on the senses of the listener in that they both present the listener with a grounded "rational" lyrical rendering of events while simultaneously frustrating continuity and displacing any regularity or semiotic purchase the lyrics may offer. It is in these moments where the insufficiency of discursive and conceptual representation to capture the violence of genocide ultimately (or necessarily) produces a performance at the edge of and beyond representation that can envelop a listener into a temporal and conceptual chaos. Thus, affective capacities of rupture derive from and ultimately move beyond representation as the combined effects of both interrelated economies of meaning urge us to move beyond past violence and into a space where thinking and feeling can and must begin again.

"Holy Mountains"

"Holy Mountains" foregrounds the geography of the Aras River, which for Armenians has historical and religious significance. From its surrounding plains rises Mount Ararat, known as the "home of the gods" in Armenian mythology, and in Christian mythology perhaps better known as the post-diluvian resting place of Noah's Ark. The Aras also has contemporary geographic significance as it forms part of Armenia's international borders with Turkey and Iran. "Holy Mountains" is acusatory and paints a picture of the Armenian Genocide as a dark historical moment that persists, as the lyrics note, through the "haunting presence" of the lives that were taken.

The song's most unsettling moment is the violent interruption of the chorus that follows the *sotto voce* of the introductory verse. Throughout, the verses feature clean guitar arpeggios treated with a subtle chorus effect supported by nimble 4/4 drum grooves. However, any sense of continuity that the verses' lush accompaniment melodic vocals may have established is abruptly punctured by the viscerality of the heavily distorted unison power chords that underscore the screamed vitriol "Liar! Killer! Demon!" (ex. 4).

Repeated four times throughout the song, the phrase's dramatic effect is further heightened in its final two iterations. In its initial appearances the first measures of the phrase remain rhythmically balanced, mimicking the even syllabic content of the lyrics. In its later appearances the phrase is altered slightly:

Figure 4: "Holy Mountains," Verse-Chorus (guitar)

Figure 5: "Holy Mountains," Verse-Chorus (guitar)

it emerges less out of contrast—the sonorities that precede and follow it are filled with distorted guitars, and are relatively loud at full performance intensity—and it has become more urgent (ex. 5):

Having come to anticipate its reappearance after the earlier repetitions, this emergent continuity is now further interrupted by the internal rhythmic imbalance of the phrase, a result of the rhythmic diminution necessary to accommodate additional syllables in the lyrics "Honor! Murderer! Sodomizer!"

To augment my earlier Deleuzian interpretation of disruption, such an aesthetic can also serve to foreground historical contingency and the centrality of power in the creation of subjectivity. Foucault's methodological approach sees history as mutable since it is contingent on the discursive construction of subjectivities and historical events as they unfold within a given episteme, the fundamental conditions that allow for the conventions, norms, or truths of a given period (Foucault 1989:xxiii-xxiv). I read System of a Down's pairing of genocide activism with the disruptive aesthetics of heavy metal as suggestive of the mutability of history because by foregrounding the moments *between* riffs, timbre, and dynamics—which provoke a turn toward the processual via performed disruptions of the flow of music—each change punctures clichéd disinvestment in the politics of genocide recognition/denial**.** These spatio-temporal re-orientations subvert, however momentarily, standard teleological experiences of music (and history) by frustrating listeners' attempts, and even enculturated desire, to connect with the familiar. Interruptions such as those performed by "Holy Mountains" suggest the potential for rupturing subjective experience, the upshot of which is the potential for the actualization of a receptiveness to questioning official narratives and the sedimentation of subjective reality.

Lyrics-Music Assemblage

The assemblage of the disruptive instrumental features and the direct topicality of the lyrics in both songs are crucial to understanding the political sensibilities of System of a Down's aesthetic. The liminal spaces of rupture lift us out of the habitual and the patterned, and following Foucault, they imply the contingency of the historical narrative that official discourse has captured and sedimented. Yet, System of a Down's music is anything but open and contingent; music territorializes sound by structuring and ordering sonic experience, while the lyrics turn our attention toward the band's specific activist project, which is at root a symbolic one: recognition of the Armenian Genocide through the institutions of state policy. Support for genocide recognition,

however, does not necessarily follow from disruption; the music presents us with a possibility, not an absolute. Following Deleuze and Guattari, "words do not represent things so much as intervene in things" in order to perform transformations (Bogue 2004: 108). While the intervention of the lyrics "narrow[s] the sound's range of affective associations [...] [and grounds it] in concrete situations" (ibid.), it is the irreducible totality of lyrics-music, the interplay between the de- and re- territorialising dynamics of linguistic representation colliding with sonic affective disruption, that ultimately stands to shape new circuits of music cognition and experience. The difference, openness, and radicality of these new circuits are themselves arguably the conditions necessary for re-approaching and interrogating current discursive conventions that have long informed our understanding of the politics of genocide recognition.

Instrumental textures and the content and performance of the lyrics are thus inseparable. The rhythmic diminution and extreme distorted timbres of "Holy Mountains" or the rapid succession of discrete riffs of "Attack" combines with the lyrics to create a tension between what is said and how, a tension that further expresses the complexities of the fight for genocide recognition. On the one hand (the "what"), the principal focus is the macropolitical field of international political discourse: governments are encouraged to speak in order to actualize and thus represent truth. On the other (the "how"), micropolitical strategies such as those deployed through music trouble the acceptance of clichéd symbolic and representational political discourse as the only arena in which truth claims can be asserted and contested. In looking to how the band's musical efforts to foster genocide recognition are concerned to actualize a specific historical truth (the reality of the Armenian Genocide), it is thus conceivable that through engendering affective experiences that might challenge habitual (non)investments in historical states of affairs, System of a Down's music may indeed suggest methods for challenging accepted and predictable modes of doing politics, modes which include the contemporary spectacle and pseudo-legitimacy associated with more mainstream popular music activism.

Resistance and Discontinuity

System of a Down's will to realize official state recognition of the Armenian genocide appears to exist in tension with the rejection of teleology and radical openness and contingency expressed by Deleuze and by Foucault. To adapt Nancy Fraser's (1981) critique of Foucault, System of a Down appears to reject normative frameworks for assessing historical truth only to simultaneously reinstitute the necessity of a normative framework (i.e., state recogni-

tion) in order to make their particular claim to the truth of the Armenian Genocide. Though I do not wish here to rehearse debates about Foucault and performative contradictions, we can seize the opportunity raised by this tension to ask crucial questions about what the mobilization of an aesthetics of rupture and discontinuity means for thinking about political activism through music.[13] Can such an aesthetics intervene into the regulation of energy flows and the striation of contemporary life? And in so doing, can it open up the possibility, not for simply replacing one truth with another, as appears to be the case with System of a Down, but for creating the conditions for continued disruptions through which we might approach history on a more critical and reflexive basis?

A first problematic, of many that might be deduced, is revealed in Slavoj Žižek's critique of contemporary activism: "Instead of undermining the position of the Other [activists] still address It: they, translating their demand into legalistic complaint, confirm the Other in its position by their very attack" (1997). System of a Down may be in a conundrum: their activism casts the state as complicit in perpetrating genocide denial by refusing to "recognize the facts," which calls into question the legitimacy of the state as guardian of historical truth. At the same time, demands for state recognition potentially re-confirm the legitimacy of such institutional structures, which Deleuze and Guattari argue "constitute [...] the form of interiority we habitually take as a model, or according to which we are in the habit of thinking" (1987:354). In Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2009) rendering of contemporary global political organization, the question of the role of the state is a crucial one. The liberal democratic state and its historically competitive economic organizational strategies—free-market versus state socialism—are cast as limiting the potentials inherent in the emerging paradigm of immaterial labour, the production of ideas and affects, which would include such endeavours as popular music (132-133). For Hardt and Negri what is essential to moving towards a productive regime oriented toward the common good is the removal of state and economic structures that threaten to limit these possibilities (266-270). If System of a Down's aesthetic is to be read as creating and producing affective moments that hasten a becoming-aware and a challenging of sedimented (institutionalized) reality, then their reconfirmation of the state's structuring role emerges as an impasse. If their aesthetic is oriented toward the production of an alternative and ostensibly more legitimate historical truth, then the structures that have given rise to the truth they seek to displace are left fundamentally unchallenged. Indeed, we are left with largely the same closed and non-productive "for or against" logic that characterizes contemporary state politics. And in terms of the genocide debate this logic prevails, marking one,

in a very material sense, either an enemy of the state or its faithful subject.

Compounding this first problem is a second question regarding whether or not an aesthetics of disruption can facilitate resistance, given the role that disruption and discontinuity play in both the genre conventions of heavy metal and in contemporary life more generally. Firstly, System of a Down's sound is readily recognized as heavy metal, which, as noted above, has long been perceived as apolitical, or at best centered on instantiations of rebellion and resistance at the level of the individual or subculture. Thus, despite the affective capacities of their music remaining intact, there exists the possibility that System of a Down's "message," their desire to have the Armenian Genocide recognized and accepted as the sole historical truth, could be discounted amidst mainstream perceptions that, since they are a heavy metal act, they necessarily circumvent overtly politicized music. Or even more to the point, upon hearing the music, it is not entirely unreasonable that a listener's aesthetic prejudices against and negative associations with heavy metal will come into play: they may not even listen to the interplay between the lyrics and the music.

Secondly, it is important to situate demands for genocide recognition within their larger political, economic, and military context. Risk and precarity are contemporary exemplars of the embeddedness of disruption and rupture in everyday lives; they are increasingly salient features of modern existence as neoliberal states have largely absolved themselves of their responsibilities to citizens and summoned forth an individualized politics and a moralized social inequality. As an increasing amount of time is spent guarding against the disruption of future poverty or sickness, and where the resulting discontinuity of precarious short-term and part-time employment creates conditions for further exploitation, disruption becomes the rule rather than the exception (Hardt and Negri 2009:293). The disruptions caused by man-made and natural crises further intensify the situation; the "disaster capitalism" of privatized rebuilding efforts in New Orleans and Iraq or the ongoing commandeering of public wealth into private hands under the guise of crisis and austerity stand as two rather potent examples of exploitation in the wake of disruption (Klein 2008; Hardt and Negri 2009:266). A potential disconnect thus exists between System of a Down's aesthetic and their clear intention to overturn the exploitative status quo: it is entirely possible that their aesthetic is lost against an already discontinuous political economic background and may even risk contributing to its further entrenchment.

Finally, though we must be careful not to conflate the intentionality of musical composition with the disruptions of the quotidian aural environment, there are sonic analogues here, too. Though space prevents a thoroughgoing analysis of the different experiential registers of recorded music and live

performance, it should be noted that the experience of System of a Down's music as it circulates in the form of radio play or piped in music—a ubiquitous soundtrack—is a qualitatively different experience than that of their live performances. An aesthetic of disruption, especially a recorded one that is expressed through the pulsed time of music, struggles against the constant interruptions of canned announcements, mobile phones, the pitch and wail of modern machinery, and requests for attention from our computers and other tools of labour and diversion. Though these sounds may sound aleatoric at times, they are, in essence, structuring sounds, aligned with the 24-hour, seven days per week global business "day," and thus they dogmatically sediment the hegemonic regularity of the contemporary world, foreclosing the engendering of affect. The possibility for disruptive interventions to hasten the search for, and articulation of, alternative truths, and the maintenance of freedom within such a striating aural environment are made extremely difficult as we are kept at attention, overwhelmed by the sounds that structure and limit the possibilities of thought and of living.

Musicking, a priori Freedom, and the War Machine

How then to begin to address these problematics? By engaging with a heavy metal audience with the hopes that they will likely be receptive, at least on some level, to rebellious and resistant practices, System of a Down are re-imagining the space of the stage and challenging the operational logic of main-stream music performance in advancing their political goals. In this way the band negotiates the potential for their music to be lost amidst the generic conventions of metal with the potential that *some* fans will become aware and potentially act upon their newfound interest in genocide recognition. Indeed, I had little knowledge of System of a Down, let alone the debate surrounding the Armenian Genocide until I attended their headlining performance at the Toronto stop on the *Ozzfest* tour in 2006. The results of such a wager—the risks of using the mainstream stage as a political podium—are precisely what comes to be played out in fan discourse around System of a Down's involve-ment in genocide recognition campaigns. For example, "graveland" writes in a comment on *metalunderground.com* that:

> This [the band's call for recognition] is stupid for the following reasons:
> 1) SOAD fans will enjoy this mainly because they like their music, and they will support their opinions ONLY because they are fans

> of their music, not necessarily because they have strong "political" feelings.
> 2) Mainstream america [sic] will dismiss SOAD because they are a "metal" band who say the word "f***" and attract annoying fans (redaction in original).[14]

These statements reveal the complicated relationship that an activist band has with its fans. The first concern revolves around the notion of an "authentic" political consciousness and whether or not it is possible for such a thing to arise given that a fan may be predisposed to supporting a favourite artist's cause. Of course, this is likely not of great concern in a project of awareness and support building, since the end goal is to pressure states into symbolic recognition and not, at least immediately, to develop activist consciousness among fans (though this may indeed be a desired byproduct). "Graveland's" second concern reinforces my point about the possibility that aesthetic prejudices may in fact be a significant deterrent to the band's desire for awareness since certain listeners may immediately dismiss the music and the culture surrounding it as irrelevant or even "annoying."

Nevertheless, others that commented on the same article demonstrated a coming to awareness, and took opportunities to educate and make historical links:

> The Turkish government has spent bundles to prevent our government from recognizing the Armenian Genocide [...] like Germany during WWII [they] slaughtered 1 million plus of it's [*sic*] own inhabitants ("RememberMetal?").
> I'm not an SOAD fan, but I'm for their cause. It puts an awareness out their [*sic*] that not only Nazis have done this. And as far as starving children go, that's a terrible tragedy, but this should further a cause for that as well. They may be 80 years apart but they're related, and they should coincide, like a domino effect ("DIEcon").

Other rejected the "political" aspects of the music or saw the band's cause as remote from the concerns of mainstream America. "Body Hammer" notes "I am so sick of politics in music. A little is fine but when is enough, enough?" while "BIGG_Perm" asks rhetorically "[...] what does the Armenian Genocide have to do with the United States? Why should we have to recognize it?" Still others appeared merely angry and somewhat confused:

> fu ck [*sic*] turkey [*sic*] or what ever wierd [*sic*] country there [*sic*] from them f***ing liberals f*** that crying bullsh** it happens it happens get over it ("eddie is real"). (redactions in original)

Quite aside from the individual reactions of fans and non-fans, their declarations of support or otherwise, System of a Down appears to have been somewhat successful even getting a heavy metal audience to willingly engage in debates about something that seems so far from traditional heavy metal concerns with individual rebellion, independence from an abstract yet oppressive "system," or visceral expressions of violence. Though it may seem odd that an audience we traditionally perceive of as anti-authoritarian would react negatively to a call to challenge sedimented ways of thinking about the world, these reactions suggest as much about the heterogeneity of heavy metal audiences as they do about any inherent relationship to radical politics.

System of a Down engage in a similar balancing act as regards the generally disruptive aural environment and its structuring relationship to the status quo. In contrast to their recorded music, it is the further ordering of System of a Down's aesthetic through the structured concert experience—the ticket purchase, the queue to enter the performance space, the various rituals and traditions enacted at a metal concert (or what Christopher Small [1998] would refer to as "musicking")—that sets their music apart from the ringing of mobile phones and car alarms. But it does so at the cost of potentially reinscribing status quo modes of behaviour and engagement. Popular music performances' reinforcement of the status quo via profit-oriented concert tours was on full display during my own experience at the Toronto stop of the 2006 *Ozzfest* tour. I was struck by the level of conformity as fans accepted the over-priced soft drinks, willingly conceded to being frisked before allowed entrance to the venue, and tacitly accepted the monotony of the queue that formed from the resulting delays. It was the array of merchandise, however, that fomented in me the greatest cognitive disconnect. The sale of overpriced and likely sweatshop-produced T-shirts, typical of most popular music performances, stood in stark contrast to the anti-authoritarianism displayed on the T-shirts themselves, the most notable of which took aim at the repressive status quo of city names that do not fully exploit the creative possibilities that exist in their syllabic interstices. Ozzfest tour stops were thus appropriately renamed: "De-fucking-troit; India-fucking-napolis; San Fran-fucking-cisco ..."[15]

In performance, however, metal festivals are filled with possibilities to subvert the capitalist spectacle that, in part, makes them possible. System of a Down are one such group that works within and against the traditional promotional and stage spectacles associated with heavy metal (though not against

spectacle as such). Their performances are characterized by a surprising lack of pyrotechnics, muted light show, and the large display screens, normally reserved for close-up shots of various band members, instead often display static abstract images. These subtle alterations to heavy metal spectacle result in an intimate focus on the musicians, regardless of the size of venue. Such a focus invites us to consider that the actualization of System of a Down's disruptions requires an elevated level of virtuosity and tremendous amounts of rehearsal time and technical proficiency both in performance and in the studio. What are apt to manifest as surprising and jolting musical gestures have been well-planned beforehand during compositional and rehearsal processes and are further augmented by the use of studio techniques designed to accentuate their disruptive sonic character—a process that would not be lost on heavy metal fans or even the most casual listener.[16] In this case, the tension between the apparent surprise and the material concerns of musical composition and recording further sets System of a Down's music apart from a generally disruptive aural environment.

Regarding the potential political problems encountered by the disruptions of aesthetic experience, a first approach may be to follow Foucault's later consideration of the ethical and critical elements of historical contingency by reflecting further upon the nature of power relationships. It is the continued struggle over the maintenance of an *a priori* freedom that marks resistance for Foucault, who argues that:

> There is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight [...], at the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. (1983:142)

No power relationship exists without first the existence of free subjects and expressions of freedom's refusal to submit to domination: power and freedom are thus inseparable (Foucault 1983:139). As System of a Down performs the perpetual agonism of a haunting state of affairs that repeatedly fails to be attached to an official discourse of truth, the band underlines the freedom to mount a challenge to institutionalized forms of domination over memory. Thus, perhaps the potential for reinscribing the state's role as arbiter of truth is subverted first by the acknowledgement of an extant freedom prior to the state's ordering role and second by the acknowledgement that the institutionalization of historical truth is always already in lock step with contestations of that truth. Thus, the truth that System of a Down advocate is dependent on the acknowledgement of its opposite, and recognition that a fundamental aspect

of "truth" as such is its contestation.

A second, complimentary approach is to take the very form of System of a Down's protest, *despite its rational and symbolic assertion of alternative truth claims*, as a refusal to engage via accepted structures for enacting political change. The decision to engage in protest via music, especially one that foregoes putatively rational political discourse for the production of affects which are not simple appeals to emotion but the building blocks of new emotion, marks a resistance to traditional styles of politics that perform specifically within the coordinates of symbolic representation. It is in this way that System of a Down's tactics arguably exemplify Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "war machine," a logic that is a "pure form of exteriority" (1987:354). The war machine agitates and rubs against order and structure and is constantly threatened with cooptation as it aids in the constitution of the smooth space of the virtual. It is through the "inventiveness of the war machine" that "new forms of sociality, instituent practices and constituent power, the creation and actualization of other, different possible worlds" can evolve (Raunig 2010:71). Thus, System of a Down's musical interventions consistently irritate, nomadically treading the fine line between the agitating of the war machine and the possibilities for its appropriation. The possibility that the disruptive affects created by their music may melt into a white noise and become part of a hegemonic discontinuity, or be too readily associated with some of their less politicized heavy metal colleagues, is tempered by the wager that genocide recognition will ensue.

Recognition appears as the primary goal of System of a Down's sonic strategy. They wish to actualize a new regime of truth, one that firmly places the Armenian Genocide as an immutable historical fact. However, their musical aesthetic works in tandem and in tension with their goal. The affects they engender open experience toward potential, and are then harnessed as a means to assert their particular claims to the truth of the Armenian Genocide. But that same opening also challenges the axiomaticity of historical truth as such, leaving us with the possibility that despite their specific goals, their aesthetic reaches beyond the simple recognition of historical fact. Indeed, their sonic ruptures do not merely *represent* to us the real of the Armenian Genocide, bidding us to confront that which is familiar but repressed—they *defamiliarize*, shattering our quotidian disinvestment in genocide politics and making it appear strange and even grotesque to our own eyes. In so doing System of a Down pushes beyond simple recognition and instead facilitate a critical reflexivity having "attacked" the generic codes of heavy metal, the history of the Armenian Genocide, and the clichéd conventions of politics. By thinking through the maintenance of an a priori freedom and the possibilities of the war

machine, we might begin to see that the virtuality of the constant disruptive affect of System of a Down's music *is* the resistant political gesture, however much we may fail to recognize it, or however much the aesthetic register might be dismissed as not properly political.

Notes

1. Judas Priest and Black Sabbath are notable exceptions, both having played at Live Aid. Documentary filmmaker and anthropologist Sam Dunn does an excellent job of tracing metal's historically marginalized status within popular music in his film *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (Dunn, McFadyen, and Wise 2005).

2. I think that it is no coincidence that folk-revival music and contemporary derivatives often find their performance home in intimate coffee shops and salons, which Habermas identified as crucial in the historical development of a politically conscious bourgeois public sphere. See Habermas (1989).

3. Such a shift away from stasis doesn't necessarily see System of a Down's music conforming to Adorno's aesthetic requirements for politicized art music, however.

4. At times, this aesthetic has been linked to "political" topics, notably Metallica's preoccupation with war and violence expressed in "Disposable Heroes" (*Master of Puppets*, 1986) and "One" (*...And Justice for All*, 1988); Megadeth's critique of the US government on their album *United Abominations* (2007); and even the notorious anti-colonial and anti-Christian sentiments expressed in much Norwegian Black Metal (see Campion 2005).

5. For example, in their song "B.Y.O.B. (Bring Your Own Bombs)" (*Mezmerize*, 2005).

6. The following brief overview is compiled mostly from Balakian (2003), Dadrian (1995), and Hovannisian (1991).

7. Exact figures of the dead and displaced are remote since so many of the documents of the time period were lost or intentionally destroyed.

8. See "Key Legislation." *Armenian National Committee of America*. http://www.anca.org/hill_staff/ key_legislation.php.

9. For an in depth discussion of the importance of the riff in heavy metal, see Fast (2001:115-144).

10. Contrast with, for example, Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" (*II*, 1969) or Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" (*Paranoid*, 1970) two paradigmatic examples of riff-based heavy music. In these compositions, the repetitiveness of the riff is never sacrificed and, in fact, rarely changes at all save, in the former, to make way for psychedelic studio tricks and vocal eroticisms and, in the latter, to sectionalise the song through the introduction of new, secondary riffs. Note, too, in both of these examples, that virtuosic guitar solos are featured, something which is very rare

in System of a Down's music, betraying the band's affinity with punk. System of a Down seem to be remodelling metal's generic characteristics by stacking the riffs up in quick succession, thus frustrating the listener's ability to find stable ground from which to experience changes in the song's structure.

11 The musical figures in this paper are transcriptions by the author.

12. We might contrast this strategy with Metallica's anti-war epics: the slow dynamic build of"One" or the monodynamic "Disposable Heroes."

13. For two canonical critiques of Foucault's position ,see Fraser (1981) and Taylor (1984).

14. This, and the comments below taken from "darkstar," 2006.

15. Inexplicably, Toronto was missing from the list of tour dates. Should we presume that "To-fucking-ron-fuckting-to" was too much of a mouthful? Also, note how any rebelliousness or anti-authoritarianism associated with heavy metal and, indeed, the potency of the disruptions I am arguing are, for the expediency of capital, reduced here to the realm of the semiotic: packaged and commodified via the inclusion of a sole curse that has itself become cliché.

16. My thanks to Dale Chapman for bringing up this excellent point in his comments on the version of this essay presented at the Society for American Music conference, Ottawa, 2010. Thanks also to the anonymous commenter who raised the same point at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Canadian Chapter conference, Regina, 2010.

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