

**Noise:
 The Political Economy of Music**
 by Jacques Attali
 Minneapolis: The University of
 Minnesota Press, 1985

First published in France in 1977, *Noise* is available for the first time in English as part of the University of Minnesota Press series, *Theory and History of Literature*, a collection of writings pertinent to current literary and cultural criticism.

As a professor of economic theory at the University of Paris, and a special counsellor to President François Mitterand, Attali's approach immediately diverges from critical theory's insistence that music be understood as simply "reflecting" or following in the wake of social developments. In positing the opposite, Attali brings fresh insights to a critical analysis of music's social role.

His theoretical and philosophical divagations commence with the noises which have constantly accompanied our work and play; the clues this random orchestration provides to an understanding of our social nature and the relationship of noise to the exercise of power.

Music is essentially a herald, indicative of approaching changes in the social forces of production. It has arisen out of historical attempts to shape the natural and social sounds which have been humanity's collective experience of the world. In delineating the development of the political economy of music as four codes or "networks," that of sacrifice, representation, repetition and composition, Attali confirms this function. His networks can be seen as modes of distribution in which the social role of music serves as both social integrator and also as harbinger of subversion. Music has always had a twin element inherent to its character and Attali's argument does not overlook this.

The author succeeds in examining each of these successive stages from the standpoint of music's relationship to changing political economies, providing a commentary that moves between historical detail--the *jongleurs*, position in French society, their evolution into the minstrels with the development of capitalism--and his own metamorphic *mélange* of post-structuralist discourses.

The point of departure for Attali's thesis, the framework through which the networks of musical distribution are discussed and assessed, is contained in a meditation on Brueghel's great painting "Carnival's Quarrel with Lent." The images, the conflicts with polarities depicted here, and the author's interpretations of a "pagan" Carnival and a "capitalist" Lent, in fact serve as a mediation through which the changing character of music's relationship to the politico-economic application of power is examined.

Brueghel's painting as a tableaux for our apprehension of a changing political economy of music is, mostly, daringly effective. Occasionally it is, as well, exceedingly oblique.

In the sacrificial stage, music was heard in all places of labour and was a daily feature of life. Crucially, however, music had a ritual aspect which led to its operation as a simulacrum of the ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat. Attali's accounting clearly demonstrates that music's role as a social integrator was the reconciliation of people to social order and, equally, to efface memory, to make people forget the general violence with which they were surrounded. Simultaneously, it served to stir revolt, fuel passion and subversion, in the expression of the festival spirit signifying humanity's freedom.

A conflict between two social orders--Carnival and Lent, Festival and Austerity, two relations to power--is revealed through Attali's rendering of Brueghel's masterpiece.

"But Brueghel, in his meditation on the possible forms of noise, could not have failed to hear how they hinge on systems of power. He thus outlined everything it was possible to outline; he showed that we must not read into the painting a meaning of history; that we must use it instead to listen to music, which creates a ritual order, then is represented as a simulacrum of order, finally passes over to the side of Lent and is sold like fish, compulsory nourishment (p.23)."

In the stage of "representation," music has become spectacle, attended at specific places. While in the earlier, sacrificial stage it did not generate wealth, here the musicians have become producers, enrolled in a division of labour. In this period the monarchy's exclusive possession of musical performances at court was eventually superseded by the rise of a merchant bourgeoisie, which purchased outright the performing rights of the musicians. Musicians ceased to be itinerant performers in village festivals to become the man-servants of royalty; later they no longer performed exclusively for their lord and master but for many clients, who now purchased a

non-exclusive commodity. As representation, music served to enforce belief in the order and harmony newly established by mercantile power.

Attali's stages in the history of music's political economy, it should be noted, are not presented as fixed, immutable categories on vigil as new dogmas of musicological canon. The overlapping nature of these networks is such that the uneven development of music's distribution becomes a succession of "orders," each violated by noises prophetic of a nascent order carried within the old. This analysis is always a refreshing break from the formalistic theories and notions of genius--those inevitably divorced from the social and political realities behind them.

The advent of the ability to record sound, the repetition of the object in mass production, eclipsed music's representational function from within.

This stage of "repetition" encompasses our own era. It contains some of the more trenchant observations on music's position in a technocratic capitalism to have been advanced in some time (excepting selected writings on the social role of music in commodity culture by British music critic, Simon Frith).

Attali states that changes in musical production announced in the process of repetition constitute a whole new political economy, a significant "mutation" of man's relationship to history. Quite accurately, the main efforts of production are seen as no longer inherent to the creation of an object, but as occurring outside it, residing chiefly in the creation and recreation of a demand for the replica. In Attali's framework this is a herald of anonymity, of non-differentiation, and finally of death.

"For death, more generally, is present in the very structure of the repetitive economy: the stockpiling of use-time in the commodity object is fundamentally a herald of death. In effect, transforming use-time into a stockpileable object makes it possible to sell and stockpile rights to usage without actually using anything, to exchange ad infinitum without extracting pleasure from the object, without experiencing its function (p.126)."

The author's final stage of development, "composition," is meant to demonstrate future possibilities inherent within the subversive element always present in music--the emancipatory side which is presently being silenced in the anonymity of commodity culture's repetitive circus. Composition concerns our potential ability to compose music that is a response to this enforced silence, an entry into communication and political practice.

"Today, in embryonic form, beyond repetition, lies freedom: more than a new music, a fourth kind of musical practice. It heralds the arrival of new social relations. Music is becoming composition (p.20)."

This brief, final chapter sheds much light on one of Attali's introductory assertions that "this book is not theorizing about music, but through music." Following well-documented historical observations and penetrating analyses of music's role in our epoch, his stage of composition has all the romantic idealism of a retrospective attempt to re-establish an age of lost innocence. Is Jacques Attali, born in 1943, still enthralled by the "unfinished dream" of the 60s?

This is not a mere anti-sixties slam. Except for some comments on jazz, Attali at no point shows any indication that the popular music of the post-sixties period is anything but the natural outcome of the age of repetition. Repetitive and meaningless noise. "Jimmy" (some things are always lost in translation!) Hendrix, Janis Joplin, etc. all serve as exemplars of an era when the compositional or subversive element in music was at its height.

While that historical period may be much of what Attali claims for it, the relationship of politics to music (of a political awareness and response to the commodification of music) has undergone considerable positive change in the intervening twenty years. Today--in Third World musical influences, critical voices from punk to pop, and musicians' responses to political issues from apartheid to the elimination of farmland by Agri-business--the compositional nature of music is finding expression in areas Attali disregards or views as mere noise, providing further demonstration that the imposed silence of the well-oiled machinery of repetition is indeed doing its job well.

Throughout the book, Attali's prose is often a mix of apostrophic rhetoric combined with metaphoric flourishes. This trans-coding is accomplished in an eclectic post-modern style, which transforms theory from brittle pedantry to an associative exercise in establishing connections between one set of provocative ideas and another. As earlier stated, this makes for fascinating but always difficult reading. Paralleling the thesis on music's twin role as social integrator and subverter, Attali's language also operates on two levels. Often where his analysis calls for precision, apostrophic polarities are substituted, reducing much of the thrust of his argument to the ethereal, utopian postulates.

The final chapter raises a necessary, evaluative, question: has this entire book all been "noise signifying nothing"? Well not quite. Despite its tendency to implode toward the end, Attali's work stands out as an adventuresome analysis of the political economy of music. Its challenge to calcified critical thinking is undeniable. It can only revitalize discussion on the connections between political power, ideology and the role of music in the current cybernetic phase of capitalism's twilight years.

It is out of such explorations as Attali's that the collective freedom to compose may gain a stronger political articulation.

James Dennis Corcoran is working on a book about the jazz scene in Toronto in the 1950s.

CANADIAN BROADCASTING: A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY
(\$16.00 PER COPY)

Designed as a tool for those interested in the present and past debates on broadcasting policy, the bibliography comprises English language writings on the Canadian broadcasting system. It addresses both programming and distribution, and includes books, magazine articles and scholarly texts, as well as government documents on the technological and the cultural facets of broadcasting. Over 900 entries are included, organized into 28 major 'keyword' areas, as well as an alphabetical author index.

MEDIA, PEACE AND SECURITY: A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY
(\$7.00 per copy)

This bibliography is designed to aid the investigation of the relationship between the work of the news media and the construction of disarmament, peace and security as public issues, political problems and social causes. The texts listed in this bibliography are selected to help the reader understand the industrial structures of the news media, their relevance to the reporting of the pertinent issues, and the dominant ways in which disarmament, peace and security issues are spoken by the media. Some 400 titles are catalogued in this bibliography, including books, magazine articles, scholarly works and conference papers.

ARMS CONTROL AND THE MEDIA
(\$10.00 PER COPY)

The discussion of how the media covers issues of arms control, disarmament and security has to locate itself between empirical statements and political/ethical judgements. This text provides the empirical data acquired through a comprehensive study undertaken by the Centre (over a six month period) to examine the coverage of security issues, superpower arms negotiations, and the cruise missile tests, in 15 English dailies across Canada. Each section starts with a brief time-line of the events as they were reported, followed by a more detailed historiography, also included are quantitative data regarding the distribution, placement and extent of the coverage. The analysis of main story actors, institutional sources, and dominant themes concludes the presentation of findings.

To place orders, please write to:

THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNICATION,
CULTURE AND SOCIETY
CARLETON UNIVERSITY
OTTAWA, ONTARIO
K1S 5B6