

6.2. The social meaning of accelerated noise in speedy capitalism

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Abstract

In this work, we study the parallelism between the acceleration of the rotation of the Capital and the hastening of the rhythm of music. The modernity was the time for the development of *Total Artworks*, able to reflect the essence of their unhurried time. Beethoven could be considered as an example of it: the era of *Total Sound*. When the 20th century began, Italian futurists perceived the arrival of noise like a form of art; they claimed for the velocity, the energy and the rush of the industrial city. Progressively, the rhythm of the music becomes more accelerated. On the second half of the century, electronic, punk, and industrial music makes explicit the noise (and the speediness) of their own time. But this noise aspires to be sound, even if lack of communication is what it wants to communicate: the *Sound of Noise*. Today, accelerated capitalism of the 21st century turns into the fragmentation of the historical time, and together with its postmodern logic, the cultural products get empty: the era of *Total Noise*. As a result, nowadays, the social meaning of music is not about differentiation or strong construction of group (sub)cultural identities. Now its main function is that of sharing, providing a common language for sociality.

Keywords: capitalism, music, noise, acceleration, subcultures.

1. The essence of modernity and total sound

1st Premise: *Total Art*, art which captures the *essence* of its historical age; works of art which reflect their periods' profound, defining characteristics. What type of sounds may appear in connection with this premise?

In order to examine this idea, the first task is to look at the conceptualisation of essence: is there an essence to our developed world? If there is, what are its principal characteristics, ones which can be reflected in specific works of art? In order to develop this premise, we are going to take the configuration of the modern world, as conceived in Europe, as our starting point. From the end of the 18th century onwards, the world created by the combination of industrial capitalism and nation states gave rise to a distinct, revolutionary essence (Bergeron, Furet and Koselleck, 1969). With a completely new structure, it was a revolutionary way of organising the world in political and socio-economic terms. The birth of a new world, the delivery of a new society, total art and total musicality can be distinguished between and shown to be different: *Total Sound*.

In Jean Paul Sartre's words, there is liberating action before essence, action which, in fact, defines all human beings' existence: so it is active action which defines essence (Morey, 2015). Therefore, humans are ontologically linked with freedom even if throughout our lives, in practice, that freedom is not real in many areas. When applied to socio-cultural groups and to peoples, an active subject's liberating action must also be an action which can create a renewed essence; in that respect, it may be linked with a particular historical, collective political revolution such as the French Revolution; an event which gave birth to total essence, made possible by the liberating action of the people. The sounds of this revolutionary event must be as large as the situation itself.

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Total historical events have made total music possible, a part itself of the renewed (and, in this case, modern) essence.

It can be suggested, therefore, that the French Revolution (*a total collective action*) formed and gave shape to the modern world and the birth of this new historical essence. The idea of the people's sovereignty prevailed over traditional aristocratic power, the yearning to spread ownership to different sectors of society, becoming an organizing power. The idea of the nation, as well as its messianic political side, tried to include different social classes in the transformational project of the renewed state (Bergeron, Furet and Koselleck, 1969). Ideally, what we have here is a heroic, revolutionary, transformational project; a total historical essence which forms heroic personalities and works of art. An example of total artistic expression at this level is a distinctive musical hymn, Beethoven's 3rd Symphony⁴, the *Heroic Symphony*. Published in 1806, it expresses this historical model and total essence's musicality, creating *Total Sound*.

Initially, the symphony's title was a homage to Napoleon: the idealised model of a liberator and revolutionary, the personified essence of a hero (*total historical personality*). Shortly afterwards, Napoleon — with his militarist, expansionist nature — became an imperialist tyrant for many European countries and people. Beethoven soon became aware of this transformation and swiftly removed Napoleon's name from the title of the symphony⁵. However, the personality's ideal heroism and epic quality can be heard in the music's tonality: a complete, total sound which is brought to us about a new essence, a new spirit.

As with human beings, it seems that freedom will not become real in the transformation of modern history, either, to the extent to which the roots of a revolutionary historical period rot. In Adorno and Horkheimer's words, the liberating project of the Enlightenment which has its roots in the essence of Modernity can take us to tyranny and mass alienation. In fact, a period configured by artistic expression which neither reflects nor criticises the essence of the period, as has happened with the mass culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1994). A distinct total essence which is at the opposite extreme from individual and popular emancipation, and which offers fascism, can be imposed in this situation of mass consumer alienation.

In Beethoven's case, the essence born from the beginning of the modern, revolutionary world was to make profound, heroic melodies possible (*total works of art*). From this perspective, it is in the Heroic Symphony itself that Romantic music is born, and it can be seen as the artistic correlation of a total historical creation. The unavoidable reality in the world at that period was to be shown through emotions, feelings and intuition, and Romantic music was to reflect those emotions. As was to happen later with modern art, the objective was to reflect eternity, show time and its elusive nature (Harvey, 1988). The transformation of a revolutionary era was to be expressed through total emotions and whole, powerful symphonies: the complete sound and artistic expression which announces the arrival of a new age. A deep, thrilling emotion, emotion which is created in the face of a new age and essence.

The Heroic Symphony reflected that total sound, with its slow rhythm and progression (heroic rhythm and essence). For the moment, we are in the period previous to technical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin puts it. Beethoven's was a time in which whole musical pieces mattered: they were not divided up into smaller parts, but played live with their slow rhythm and dominance of everything. Choral works: we are still in the period of auratic musical works of art which express "the here and now", a unique existence, which cannot be technically reproduced (Benjamin, 1989). Throughout the 20th century, as industrial techniques began to be used in the world of music, pieces of music's slow, progressive rhythms started to speed up, and whole works began to be cut into shorter pieces. Progressively, along with the arrival of faster capitalism, music began to take

⁴ The symphony can be heard by clicking on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbGV-MVfgec>

⁵ We have taken this data from Wikipedia (27/08/2016). Retrieved from https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinfon%C3%ADa_n.%C2%BA_3_%28Beethoven%29

on the accelerated speed made possible by industrialised noise (which humans, by themselves, cannot achieve), and pieces of music began to be broken up.

The slow rhythm and tonality associated with total sound were weakened in this situation. At the same time, as the 20th century advanced, the revolutionary nature of the West was not apparent and, along with that, the idea of its *essence* was weakened. Contrasting each other, on the one hand the model of active, free people and countries (which may be defined as renewed total essence); on the other hand, the reality of the passive, alienated mass, meek people who have only been transformed in order to consume (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1994). Along with that, the ideal of the progress of Modernity has also been wounded. *Total works of art*— works of art which are profound, critical, which go down to the roots of the age, expressions of collective and individual reflection on people's place in the world and (self) reflections on the historical situation — will have difficulty in resisting the oncoming devastation.

Starting with the destruction of the First World War, throughout the 20th century the lineal upwards evolution of modern ideal has been broken, and this has had direct influence on artistic expression (Hobsbawm, 2003). This meant that the heroic tonality and slow, gradual, progressive, complete rhythm of music (which follow the model of the Heroic Symphony) had no chance of surviving in the wounded, broken-up and accelerated world of the future. The accelerated industrial noise model is part of the modern ideal, with the distinguishing characteristics which the Italian futurists saw in it and used expressively. The superficial anti-essence with no depth in terms of expression, and connected with the acceleration of the rotation of capital, has yet to arrive; this configuration will arrive when general social time accelerates and is split up and, consequently, it will have a direct impact on expressiveness in works of art and music. In this context, a distinguishing characteristic of the 20th century can be examined: are changes taking place in a social time which are so fast that they can hardly be digested? Are individuals' sensual and self-conscious experiences taking place in a period which is overflowing? Can total art (total sound) be produced in this context? These reflections and doubts lead us to our second premise.

2. The sound of noise

Theoreticians of totalitarianism have argued the need to forbid subversive noise because it emphasises the need for cultural autonomy and promotes differences; an interest in maintaining tonalities, the prevalence of melody and distrust of new languages, codes and instruments is common to all regimes of this nature (Leónidas Martín Saura, 2006, p. 18).

2nd Premise: If total sound is imposed in an era in which total essence (revolutionary total action) is not imposed, this may lead us to totalitarianism. Together with the criticism and rupture of lineal, progressive modernity, harmony becomes noise. The acceleration of capitalism brings the sound of noise (fractured works of art) with it, along with expressiveness which is able to express its contradictions. The words we say are also accelerating.

Modernity itself brought a contradiction with it, the position of popular culture:

The Enlightenment believes that the people who must be appealed to in order to legitimise a secular, democratic government are also the bearers of that which reason wishes to abolish: superstition, ignorance and turmoil. Because of this, in Martín Barbero's words, a complex system has been developed 'with abstract inclusion and specific exclusion'. The people are of interest in order to legitimise bourgeois hegemony, but are irritating because of their lack of culture (García Canclini, 2001, p. 197).

High culture and popular culture. Modernity introduced this dichotomy. High culture is the only one which is considered to be culture, the only legitimate culture. Culture was an area for dividing classes. In Europe, in particular, this mechanism has long been in place (Bourdieu, 1999). In the world of music, classical music and tonality are the paradigm of art music.

The Romantics, in fact, realised that very quickly. They held onto that contradiction and tried to develop it: politics and daily life, culture and life (García Canclini, 2001). They bought back popular culture and music. In the 19th century, Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt expressed an interest in popular music. This increased at the beginning of the 20th century: Debussy with Balinese music; Manuel de Falla submerged himself in Iberian folklore; Igor Stravinski got involved with the essence of Slavonic rituals and took them into classical music; Béla Bartók collected popular melodies from the streets, squares and church festivities (Kyrou, 2006). In this very attempt, however, popular culture was abducted, made a myth of with people-nations, with its messianic politics; marginalisation, complicity and domination were wiped out (Martín-Barbero, 1993).

Anarchists and Marxists broke down the Romantics' cultural ideology: they politicised the concept of the people, emphasising the results of history and signs of oppression and struggle.

From different perspectives and with different ideologies, the three thinkers of 'suspicion' (Freud, Marx and Nietzsche) denounced that behind the formation of the modern spirit a historical process of unusual violence and barbarity was also hidden, incorporating and internalizing social structures, cultural norms and sensual contexts which were alienating, extremely cruel and repressive. These three writers, in their turn, feed (and sometimes in a highly contradictory way) cultural modernism's sensibility and *tout court* protest (Casanovas, 2012, p. 47).

In fact, in cultural terms the break was going to be deeper, more radical and total. This started happening after 1848, it being difficult to keep up the Romantics' mystical approach:

The bourgeoisie's pacts with the aristocracy after the 1848 revolutions were the perfect expression of their fear of continuing to be judged by revolutionary ideas at a time when increasingly organised popular forces were appearing on the historical scene, aware of their own revolutionary force and their interests, which were antagonistic to those of the bourgeoisie. Many artists and intellectuals were trapped by this contradiction and reacted against their class origins, distancing themselves from social conservatism and bourgeois pragmatism (Casanovas, 2012, p. 36).

During the First World War, the bourgeoisie lost its innocence once and for all. The Enlightenment's progressive dreams and promises; the Romantics' heroic, popular, nationalist epics; all of that was destroyed in a giant trench in France. The vanguards at the start of the century — Dada, Constructivism and Futurism — destroyed all types of mystification: cultural, national, existentialism... Total works of art can bring totalitarianism with them: the Dadaists would say that all the Western culture only serves for you to die in a trench with a book by Goethe in your backpack. Attack the culture, destroy the art.

Duchamp: good taste is art's greatest enemy. Limitless creativity, drunkenness, madness, spontaneity, the absurd music of syllables and words, it was all undone and put together again every night in Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire. Dada. Western culture was no more than a gigantic farce, brought about by the bloody slaughter of the First World War in Europe. It had to be destroyed, to start from zero; because, on the stairway to the heaven of Art, a single copy of Faust was of greater importance than the million people who had died for it to carry on being published (Marcus, 1990).

After a period of madness and upheaval, governed by bandits who had destroyed the whole of Europe, art had to take on the healthy task of dismantling itself, it had to get rid of what remained of a blood-thirsty civilization, and rid individuals of a Western cladding which had made them accomplices of barbarity. (...) Art was of no value: life was much more interesting (Granés, 2011, p. 43).

For the Russian Constructivists, the 1917 revolution was the opportunity to create a new society and being. They made their proposals and experimentation known while Lenin was alive.

Destroy museums, libraries and all types of academic institutions. The Futurists saw new technology as the utopia for a new society: machines, movement, a starting point. And some of

them believed that war could be the way to “relaunch” culture. In 1913 Luigi Russolo applied Futurist ideas to music in his famous essay *L'arte dei Rumori*:

Ancient life was all silence. During the 19th century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and dominates the feelings of people. (...) The art of music looked for and found, firstly, the purity and sweetness of sound, later on amalgamating different sounds, although taking care to caress the ear with soft harmonies. Today the art of music, which is becoming gradually more complex, is trying to amalgamate the most dissonant, strangest and harshest sounds for the ear. We are getting closer and closer to sound-noise. This evolution of music is in parallel to the multiplication of machinery, which helps man in all areas of life. (...) We futurists have a deep love for the harmonies of the great masters and have always enjoyed them. Beethoven and Wagner have affected our nervous systems and hearts for many years. We have now had enough of them and enjoy ourselves much more by combining, if possible, the noises of trains, combustion engines, buses and shouting crowds, than listening, for example, to the Heroic or Pastoral symphonies once again. (...) So we are sure that by choosing, coordinating and mastering all sounds we will enrich people with a new, unexpected voluptuosity. Although noise's characteristic is to send us brutally back to life, the Art of Noise must not be limited to imitative reproduction. Its greatest power to move emotionally is acoustic pleasure in itself, which artists' inspiration will know how to extract from the combined noises.⁶

1937. John Cage starting composing *Construction In Metal*: gamelands, metal sheets, brake pads... In 1948 Pierre Shaeffer created concrete music, and Pierre Henry soon joined him, later to be joined by others: Luc Ferrari, François Bernard Mâche and Bernard Parmegiani. They do not play pianos, they break them; a comb or a file, metal sheets, springs, industrial waste. The 1960's: La Monte Young, the Fluxus group, John Cale and The Velvet Underground... Noise, continual music, repetition (Kyrou, 2006).

And their influence. *The Krautrock* movement in Germany in the 1960's, the children's of Karlheinz Stockhausen. Can, Neu!, Faust, Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk. Rock and electronic instruments, plus Eastern and African sounds; sounds from machinery, robotic dances. England in the 1970's, Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire: “industrial music for industrial people”.

And the explosion at the end of the decade: punk. In England, the Basque Country... Keep it simple, make it fast; Simple noise, sharp words; the crisis of capitalism, denial and rupture, asking for neither permission nor forgiveness; savage, strong, direct, provocative, immediate, spontaneous, existential; abolishing the boundaries between audience and music. *Do It Yourself!*

More than trash bags or torn shirts, punks wore Adorno's morbid rash; they inked or stenciled it over themselves in regular patterns. As Adorno's prepared corpses, more consciously prepared than he could have imagined, they exploded with proofs of vitality — that is, they said what they meant.

In so doing, they turned Adorno's vision of modern life back upon itself: Adorno had not imagined that his corpses might know what they meant to say (Marcus, 1990, p. 74).

The working class musical sub-cultures after the Second World War — Teddy Boys, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads and Punks — expressed cultural contradictions. There was a double articulation: on the one hand, with their parent's working class culture; on the other, with the mass culture. In this way, contradictions were going to be “magically” resolved on the symbolic level. They were going to be the symbolic resistance to the bourgeois culture, helping young people to construct their everyday spaces in which they would have the possibility to construct their own autonomy, self-esteem and subjectivity (Hall and Jefferson, 2006; Hebdige, 2004).

On the other side of the ocean, the spirit of the *sound system*, brought from Kingston in a suitcase, was going to mutate on the marginalised streets of The Bronx: Hip-Hop. They were also the mad years of Disco music in New York: the desire for hedonism, pleasure and fame.

⁶ Retrieved from <http://www.uclm.es/artesonoro/elarteruido.html> (26/08/2016).

On the polluted shores of Lake Huron, in Detroit, surrounded by the sounds of the automotive industry, a trio of black men — Juan Atkins, Kevin Sauderson and Derrick May — created new Electronic sounds at the end of the 1980's: Techno music. This was to be taken forward by a second generation: Carl Craig, Kenny Larkin, Richie Hawtin. And by Mad Mike and Jeff Mills' Underground Resistance: noises for creating interference in the system. At the same time, and in connection with them, in Chicago, *House* music rose from the ruins of Disco, a *minimal* revolution in a drum machine. It spread to Europe at the end of the 1980's at *raves* and *free parties*, bringing life to industrial wastelands. In some pirate areas, Techno became radical, getting down to the skeleton of its rhythm and noise: *Hardcore*. Then some Hip-Hop DJs put *breakbeat* effects into Hardcore and *Breakbeat* rhythm was born. Between 1991 and 1994 *Breakbeat* rhythm became *Jungle* and, later on, *Drum'n bass* (Kyrrou, 2006).

Along with the development of club culture, Sarah Thornton (1995) saw the way to surpass structural — class — determination. Turning high culture and Bourdieu's cultural capital around, the style and its sub-cultural capital were to give young people the opportunity to escape from their parents' class characteristics, something like *classlessness*. Sub-culture capital was to be considered *cool*, participating in *underground* tastes' legitimacy, differentiated from *mainstream* tastes. The influence of the media can be seen in these mechanisms (Muggleton, 2010).

Adorno said that the period of technical reproduction brought with it the death of the aura of works of art (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1994), submerged as he was in cultural pessimism. He hated jazz, he was probably physically sick the first time he heard Elvis Presley, and there can be no doubt that he would have thought the Sex Pistols to be a return to *Kristallnacht* if he had not had the fortune to die in 1969 (Marcus, 1990). Benjamin, on the other hand, started from another point of view: forms of perception, along with the *sensorium* which brings changes with Modernity. Within great historical spaces of time, along with the whole existence of human groups, the way and manner of sensory perception change, which means that we are dealing with uncovering the social transformations which found their expression in these changes of sensibility (Benjamin, 1989).

For Benjamin, 'experience' is above all a question of 'tradition'; in other words, that which enables the restoration of a personal and collective 'counter history' in the human *sensorium* (in both collective and personal settings), making sense in the context of isolated, atomized experience in current capitalism (Casanovas, 2012, p. 23).

In fact, the new sensibility which is approached along with the death of the aura of total works of art makes use of and enjoys works of art. This new sensibility brings petitions with it, the abolition of discrimination and privileges. And dispersion: the image of diversity and collage are the mechanisms of these new forms of perception. In this new *Sensorium* there is another important ingredient, derived from Baudelaire: pleasure from being with people, many people (Martin-Barbero, 1993).

Noises against tonality, against high music. Cultural autonomy, the democratisation of music and culture; the noise-sounds of daily life; do it yourself. Noises, speed. An opportunity for homology: along with the acceleration of the rotation of capital, social time, the rhythm of music, too, have become faster. The basis for Industrial Music, Punk and Electronica is the noise (and speed) of the age.

Now noise is the essence (or semi-essence; not a strong essence, not a total one, but a split one). But, at the same time, these noises want to become sound, communicating the lack of communication of their age as well. The sounds of daily life, novelty and improvisation. The noise-sounds of industrial society. Technological utopias and dystopias. The shouts of revulsion or rage, or escape. Or, in sub-cultures, an expression of the structural contradiction of young working class people. Noise brings sound.

3. Total noise?

3rd premise: Strengthened capitalism and its post-modern cultural logic promote division, things being used and thrown away, the breaking up of cultural products. Therefore, the social meaning and sensory sensibility of music change.

Following the crisis of the 1970's, which influenced the Punk explosion, the new phase of capitalism which developed over the following decades split up Fordist companies by introducing sub-contracting, increasing profit rates and weakening trade union power at the same time. Post-Fordism and the Schumpeter competitive State model were imposed (Jessop, 2008). Uniform markets and mass products appeared saturated, and from now on, globally segmented markets and personalised products were to be developed. Production cycles also accelerated, getting shorter and shorter, deepening the processes of acceleration and rupture.

The cultural logic of this new phase of capitalism was going to be the post-modernism (Jameson, 1995); it is based on acceleration and rupture too. The sensibility of Post-modernism was developed by the avant-garde (Dada and Situationism), and Punk itself, and, of course, Hip-Hop and Electronic music: the collage, combining things in different ways. In fact, post-modernism includes many of the ideas, images and sensibilities put forward by cultural criticism. Except for one: the criticism which the avant-garde makes of the mercantile process, and people's self-managed cultural movement in practice.

In this neo-liberal phase, in fact, processes of assimilating commercialisation increase in all areas of cultural production, putting the independence and semi-autonomy of culture at risk (Bourdieu, 2011). The logic of global capitalism prevails: buy, use and discard. The sensibility brought by the rotation of capital and relativist post-modern discourse (*pix & mix*), leads to the loss of value of cultural products.

The development of means of transport and ICT have helped to further all of these processes. They have been particularly influential in music during the 21st century (Del Amo, Letamendia and Diaux, 2016). In fact, the Internet has changed social ways of acquiring music, making them more individual, with no need for social relationships or personal networks. That is to say, in previous times obtaining music involved creating personal relationships: in record shops, pubs, swapping records or friends recording them... Often social groups based around music were set up in sub-cultures and neo-tribes. It is true that exchange does take place using today's new technology, but this does not involve the intensity and feelings of personal relationships.

Some other technological developments had a great influence on the process of rupture: Spotify and MP3 formats are now the most common ways of listening to music, above all amongst young people (Andrés, 2013; Fouce, 2009). In this way, the narratives and discourses which records have are split up. Some other things which records had have also been lost: covers, photographs, texts... All things which made it possible to go beyond music, providing information about the group and its context. Due to this, the song is now the basic musical cell. We come across isolated, heterogeneous musical passages, put in sequence on *Playlists*, or ground down by DJs.

Loose songs. And the most listened to. Although the Internet is a giant archive of music, it seems that we listen more and more to music that we already know (Álvarez Monzoncillo and Calvi, 2015). In other words, classic songs, or re-workings of them (Reynolds, 2013), or ones promoted by the media (Álvarez Monzoncillo and Calvi, 2015). Which people can sing together at parties and festivities (Del Amo, 2014).

In the age of ultra-connection, music seems to us to be disconnected: loose songs, snatched from their general contexts. The full logic of capitalism: take and mix, use and throw away. Has this acceleration and division reduced the value of music, converted it into total noise? Be that as it may, these new ways of use, and the importance of the songs most listened to, also provide a new way to share, telling us about a new sensibility.

Total sound tried to show the essence of its age, the heroic dream of a new, free society, liberating revolution, lineal development. After that, and also against it, noises denounced the

nightmare of total sound, and took the sounds of everyday life and industrial society, combining art and life. While noise-sounds were often heroic, showing a new sensibility, the sensibility of making culture the people's. In fact, they expressed structural contradictions with regard to working class sub-cultures. Or noise-sounds might have been the way to surpass structural class-determinations, turning high culture around and developing sub-cultural capital.

There is no heroism or petition in total noise. Music is something to be used and discarded, in the full logic of capitalism. The mechanisms of the new ways of perception which Benjamin pointed out — dispersion, multiple images and collage — are still, when taken to the extreme, the most accelerated and the most divided. But current sensibility maintains a factor which Baudelaire and Benjamin stressed: the pleasure of being among people. That is the main characteristic brought by today's *sensorium*: sound, turned into noise, is, above all, a path to socialize. The noise made up of single, disconnected songs, famous songs and familiar songs also offers the possibility of (re)connecting, singing together, being together.

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