

# Capture and Release: Capitalism and the Flows of Sound

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## I.

In 1985, the Canadian composer John Oswald complained that “although more people are making more noise than ever before, fewer people are making more of the total noise.”<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of turntables, tape recorders, samplers, and other consumer electronics was enabling clever amateurs to create astonishingly experimental music; yet, to Oswald’s dismay, the soundscape of the mid-1980s was dominated by a handful of pop stars supported by a few corporate record labels. Oswald responded to this situation with what he called “plunderphonics,” a creative *détournement* of pop songs that subjected them to parody while appropriating some of their cultural power and unleashing their experimental potential. At the same time, Oswald fostered alternative modes of distribution for creative audio. A key figure in the “cassette culture” of the 1970s and 1980s, he joined a global network of musicians and artists who traded one-off or small-batch recordings and mixes on cassettes via zines such as *Op*, *Option*, *Sound Choice*, and *Unsound*.<sup>2</sup>

An eminently portable read/write format, the cassette lent itself to piracy and samizdat purposes. Recording industry associations in the United States and United Kingdom were sufficiently worried that they mounted media campaigns against “home taping,” initiated lawsuits

to halt the practice, and sought a tax on blank tapes. For the most part, these efforts proved unsuccessful. Nonetheless, over the course of the 1980s, the cassette became the most lucrative format for the music industry, which, by the end of that decade, was dominated by five multinational corporations whose revenues from recorded music (in the United States, at least) were steadily rising by nearly a billion dollars annually.<sup>3</sup>

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the industry had all but collapsed, thanks largely to the emergence of MP3 and digital file-sharing networks, and later to YouTube, SoundCloud, and other platforms that delivered an enormous amount and range of free music on demand to anyone with an internet connection. Again, the major labels fought back, successfully shutting down the file-sharing network Napster, suing individual users, and flooding peer-to-peer networks with “spoofed” files. But the unregulated flow of digital music continued unabated. CD sales plummeted, as did overall revenues for recorded music. By the 2000s and 2010s, major label artists such as Prince, Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, and U2 were giving away their music for free; and in 2017, Chance the Rapper won three Grammy awards for a hip-hop mixtape he distributed online free of charge and without the support of any record label.

All this prompted cultural theorists to speak of “post-economic music,” a phrase registering both that recorded music had become essentially free and that, as a result, musicians and composers could no longer make a living through their music.<sup>4</sup> Some economists agreed, arguing that the advent of MP3 inaugurated a post-scarcity culture in which recorded music lost all economic value while retaining its cultural, social, and affective power.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, however, capitalism found a way to contain the flow. By 2016, recording industry revenues were once again on the rise,

thanks largely to Spotify, a music-streaming service founded and funded by former pirates.<sup>6</sup> Spotify's solution was to stop *selling things* to consumers and instead to *rent streams* to subscribers or to pay for those streams through advertising, on the older model of commercial radio or TV. Despite Spotify's promise "to inspire human creativity by enabling a million artists to live off of their art," just over a quarter of artists made any money from streaming in 2018; and the median amount was \$100.<sup>7</sup> Oswald's complaint seems as true today as it was in 1985: "although more people are making more noise than ever before, fewer people are making more of the total noise."

And yet much has changed. Recorded music travels faster and lighter, with less contextual baggage and less monetary value than ever before. All this facilitates the proliferation, mutation, and circulation of hybrid and synthetic micro-musics that combine global influences with local or indigenous forms. Digital platforms and networks provide easy access to these micro- and experimental musics, which are often homemade and produced with cheap, readily available equipment. More people are making more noise than ever before; and, for those who seek it out, most of this noise is easily found.

## II.

How can we make sense of these technological shifts and their effects on the circulation of sound and music? How do we map these expansions and contractions, the escapes and captures of sound in the context of global capitalism? We could adopt a classic Marxist analysis, focusing on the contradictions between existing power relations and the political and economic effects of the technologies they unleash. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx summarizes this process:

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with

the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, every economic system sews the seeds of its own destruction. It develops tools and technologies (“material productive forces”) that challenge its own structures of power and property (“relations of production”), generating forces and capacities that undermine those structures and the economic system they support. In the musical context, for example, the technological shift from bulky LPs to more compact, portable, and mobile cassettes and CDs enabled exponential increases in revenue for the music industry; but it also soon led to the industry’s near collapse, as perfectly copyable digital files were ripped from their tangible supports and began to circulate and proliferate on the internet for free through a kind of post-scarcity gift economy.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop Marx’s account and help us to understand the circulation of music, particularly under capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari conceive all of nature and culture as a set of *flows* (of matter, energy, and information) that, when captured, controlled, bound, or slowed down, become the physical and social forms we experience (mountains, organisms, species, languages, cultures, institutions, etc.).<sup>10</sup> These forms are only temporary coagulations or transitory hardenings of these flows, which constitute the basic reality of the world. The fundamental function of society, Deleuze and Guattari write, is to *code* flows (of food, goods, bodies, money, energy, refuse, etc.), that is, to intercept them, organize them, regulate them, channel them in particular directions, impose meanings and limits on them, and the like.

Deleuze and Guattari prompt us to think of sound as forming a macrocosmic flow akin to the other flows that constitute the natural world. As Deleuze puts it, "One can ... conceive of a continuous acoustic flow ... that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence. A musician is someone who samples [*prélève*] something from this flow."<sup>11</sup> Such "sampling" is a form of coding, an inscription or recording of a material flow (sound) that is by its very nature evanescent. For most of natural and human history, audio recording was biological and social, registered in individual bodies and in the social body of the animal or human community. Sound was seized by the ear and sorted by the brain according to evolutionary and cultural schemata that determined their significance for survival or social membership. Virtual systems (grammatical rules, song structures, etc.) formed sonic flows into memes that facilitated their replication and transmission to future generations. All these coding processes "territorialized" sound. That is, they captured and organized its flow, enabling it to accumulate as a cultural "stock."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, they facilitated a certain "deterritorialization" of sound, transporting it beyond the here and now of its transient sounding. The temporal and spatial extension of these sonic forms introduced variant repetition, copying errors or mutations that caused them to change or drift.

The traditional or folk song was a collective product, the anonymous creation of a whole community over several generations, a sort of cultural commons. The bodies and generations through which it passed served as relays, points of connection and transmission of its sonic flow. The emergence of capitalism in early modern Europe demanded new and different forms of sonic capture. It sought to fix music as a commodity, a *thing* that could be bought and sold for profit. To achieve this, it repurposed a tool that had existed for several centuries as a mnemonic device for musicians and performers: musical notation. The musical score arrested the flow of sound in the form of graphic symbols on a page, a reification of sound that

could then serve as an exchangeable commodity. No longer an anonymous, collective creation, music became a form of private property protected by a new tool of the bourgeoisie, *copyright*, which legally restrained the flow or reproducibility of the score and the performances it determined. In addition to its use-value, music was now endowed with an exchange-value, a properly economic value.

Musical notation initiated new forms of musical territorialization, submitting sound to a symbolic code that required musical literacy and thus enabled a specialized class to regulate its flow. It fixed music in the form of an authorized document and thus restricted the musical drift that characterized folk musics. Yet the score was also an agent of deterritorialization, allowing music to travel widely in space and time, to be transported far beyond the cultural context of its creation.

The advent of audio recording intensified these codings of sonic flows and initiated new forms of deterritorialization as well. Electronic inscription captured sound in exchangeable containers and thus perfected the reification and commodification initiated by the musical score. At the same time, it dispensed with the requirement of musical literacy, allowing music to be actualized by anyone with an appropriate playback device. Where the score routed music through the detour of a visual code, audio recording delivered actual sounds and performances—and not merely *musical* sound but *any and all sound*. Not only did this vastly expand the domain of sonic art, it upset linear temporality and historicity as well. Sound recording extracts a sonic surface from a segment of the past and gives it a virtual existence that is not exhausted by any playback in the present. It generates a vast, discontinuous sonic archive in which wildly heterogeneous sounds collide, overlap, and coalesce.

### III.

It's 2010 in Kidal, a trans-Saharan trading hub in northern Mali traversed by Berber nomads, commercial truck drivers, smugglers, refugees, and migrants headed to North Africa, Europe, or the West African coast.<sup>13</sup> Many of these travelers and urban locals are equipped with knockoff cellphones that serve a myriad of functions, prominent among which is to store and trade MP3s. These collections are extraordinarily wide-ranging and diverse: American classic rock and European techno-pop share space with Bollywood and Nollywood film music, Angolan kuduro, Bamako hip-hop, Tuareg desert blues, Balani Show music, Algerian rai, Ivoirian coupé-découlé, and other regional musics recorded with cheap or pirated technology in home studios, sometimes directly to cellphones. Audio files are traded phone to phone via Bluetooth networks that don't require internet or phone service, which, in the Sahel, are spotty and expensive if they exist at all. Or they're purchased from cellphone dealers who copy songs from cellphones brought in for repair. Two years later, Islamist rebels have taken over the region and imposed sharia law, banning music and destroying cellphone towers to halt this musical exchange. Prominent Malian musicians seek exile in Algeria or move southwest to the capital, Bamako, where the Islamist presence is weaker.

With all its flows and cuts, relays and blockages, this Saharan cellphone culture exemplifies how sound moves in the early twenty-first century. The digitization of music unleashed powerful forces of deterritorialization, allowing sound to flow with unprecedented ease and speed, spreading mainstream culture across the globe while also facilitating the development of highly local, hybrid scenes and subcultures. This flow can be restrained or blocked by conservative forces such as radical Islam, state firewalls, or the occasional "content moderation" of social media platforms such as YouTube; but the tendency of global capitalism is toward massive deterritorialization and decoding.<sup>14</sup> As Marx and Engels put it in the middle of the

nineteenth century, capitalism sweeps away “all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions,” “all new ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”<sup>15</sup> Capitalism annihilates all *codes* and replaces them with an *axiomatic* that translates all concrete, particular qualities into abstract quantities and ultimately into the universal equivalent: money. Anything goes, so long as it sells.

Yet this proviso reveals something crucial: capitalism recoils before its own inherent tendency. It tolerates deterritorialization only so long as it can profit from it, generating a “surplus value of flow.” MP3s pushed the music industry to this brink and threatened it with dissolution.

Marx’s prophecy seemed to have been fulfilled: it appeared that capitalism had invented a technology that undermined its own property relations, a technology that fostered unlimited mobility and eliminated the scarcity necessary for the generation of economic value. Yet music streaming services revealed capitalism’s power of reterritorialization. Platforms such as Spotify reasserted capitalism’s ability to stockpile sound and to fabricate value hierarchies through the gatekeeping of “editorial playlists.” They offered the consumer what piracy promised—easy access to a vast quantity of the world’s recorded music—while enabling the music industry to extract a surplus from every stream. Moreover, music streaming exemplifies the new form of power that has been called “control society” or “surveillance capitalism.”<sup>16</sup> Like Facebook and Google, streaming services not only derive monetary value from sonic flows; they also mine affective and behavioral data, enabling affective modulation and the sale of behavioral futures.

In response to these conditions, some artists attempt to return to the economy of the object, revalorizing the vinyl record, the homemade cassette, the limited-edition release. At the same time, artists find themselves compelled to reinvest in the aura and presence of live



performance and touring.<sup>17</sup> Critics of surveillance capitalism call for new legal restrictions and regulations to counteract its extraction of free labor and invasions of privacy. But there is another solution: not to return to older modes of aesthetic value but accelerate capitalism's tendency toward deterritorialization, to go further than it's willing to go. This was Oswald's solution in the early 1980s: to extract music from its commercial flow, alter it, and release it back into the sonic flux free of its commodity status. And this is how music circulates across the globe today, via digital networks, Bluetooth and cellphone connections, pirate radio stations, sound systems. The solution is not to return to earlier moments in the history of the sonic flux but to strengthen, extend, and multiply these networks and develop new technologies that liberate sound from its capture by power and capital and increase the speed and spread of its flow.

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<sup>1</sup> John Oswald, "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Imperative" (1985), <http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html>. This text is reprinted in this volume on pp. 259–274, here 155–170.

<sup>2</sup> On "cassette culture," see *Cassette Mythos*, ed. Robin James (New York: Autonomedia, 1992); David Novak, "The Future of Cassette Culture," in *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 198–226; and Don Campau, "A Brief History of Cassette Culture" (2009), <http://livingarchive.doncampau.com/about/a-brief-history-of-cassette-culture>.

<sup>3</sup> See the Recording Industry Association of America's U.S. Sales Database, <https://www.riaa.com/u-s-sales-database/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Audio Poverty," *e-flux journal* 16 (May 2010), [http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article\\_143.pdf](http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_143.pdf); and Ekkehard Ehlers and Björn Gottstein, "A Brief Aesthetics of Posteconomic Music," in *Audio Poverty: Konferenz über Musik und Armut*, conference catalogue, February 6–8, 2009. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, [https://ia800705.us.archive.org/4/items/AudioPovertyCatalogue/AudioPoverty\\_Katalog.pdf](https://ia800705.us.archive.org/4/items/AudioPovertyCatalogue/AudioPoverty_Katalog.pdf). See also Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 211–12.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Attali, "Ether Talk," *The Wire* 209 (July 2001): 70–73.

<sup>6</sup> See Stephen J. Dubner, "How Spotify Saved the Music Industry (But Not Necessarily Musicians)," *Freakonomics* (podcast), ep. 374 (April 10, 2019), <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/spotify/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 425.

<sup>9</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,

trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and Deleuze's seminars from November 16, 1971 (<https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/116>) and December 14, 1971 (<https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/119>).

<sup>10</sup> Manuel DeLanda elaborates this idea in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, seminar of April 15, 1980, trans. Charles J. Stivale, <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/50> (translation modified). See also R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT:

Destiny Books, 1994), 5 and passim. I develop this notion at length in *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> See Deleuze, seminar of December 14, 1971; and Daniel W. Smith, "Flow, Code, Stock: A Note on Deleuze's Political Philosophy," in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 160–72.

<sup>13</sup> I draw my account from the liner notes to *Music from Saharan Cellphones* (Sahel Sounds, 2011) and *Music from Saharan Cellphones, Volume 2* (Sahel Sounds, 2013), both compiled by Christopher Kirkley, and from various online interviews with Kirkley.

<sup>14</sup> By decoding, I mean the undoing or dissolution (rather than the deciphering) of codes.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. McLellan, ed. McLellan, 248.

<sup>16</sup> See Deleuze, "Control and Becoming" and "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 169–82; John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, "Surveillance Capitalism," *Monthly Review* (July 1, 2014), <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/07/01/surveillance-capitalism/>; and Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> See Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 46–50.