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SPOOKY NOISES:  
GHOSTS IN THE MUSIC MACHINE OF PAUL D. MILLER  
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Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning. Today, music heralds—regardless of what the property mode of capital will be—the establishment of a society of repetition in which nothing will happen anymore. But at the same time, it heralds the emergence of a formidable subversion, one leading to a radically new organization never yet theorized, of which self-management is but a distant echo.<sup>1</sup>

In the years since the dot-com crash, analyses of cyberspace and digital media have begun to reveal—beyond the initially hyperbolic utopianism and apocalyptic portents—both a more profound set of social potentials and a deeper set of political economic, and even spiritual ambiguities. Digital music in particular has become a flashpoint for both despair and hope: despair over the stranglehold that monopolistic capital continues to maintain over content, copyright, and royalties; hope that in music a “radically new organization” of exchange and creativity (through file sharing and collective composition) may yet be breaking through. The above quotation, which describes our current

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 5.

situation so well, was penned in 1977. It is from Jacques Attali's *Bruit: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (translated in 1985 as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*), a text as provocative today as it was when it first appeared.

Attali's thesis was that music has an essential and dynamic relationship to noise, such that what can only be heard as noise in one historical moment is the harbinger of what will be heard as music in the moment forthcoming. But what Attali means by noise is at once musical and political. For Attali, music as a means of sign-production has an eminently social function: not the ideological function that traditional Marxism would relegate to the mere "superstructure" of cultural activity (as opposed to the hard facts of political economy, the "substructure"), but rather a *prophetic* function of revealing the future shape of political economic organization. As the noise in music is, the sound of society will be. In fact, Attali argues, since political economy is itself a form of coding, an act of establishing or assigning value, insofar as music also assigns value and orders noise, music is essentially a form of *power*. Sound is not accidentally but essentially important to state formations. Attali writes,

More than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies. With noise is born disorder and its opposite: subversion. . . . All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form . . . Equivalent to the articulation of a space, it indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard within it, how to survive by drawing one's sustenance from it . . . to listen, to memorize—this is the ability to interpret and control history, to manipulate the culture of a people, to channel its violence and hopes. Who among us is free of the feeling that this process, taken to an extreme, is turning the modern state into a gigantic, monopolizing noise emitter, and at the same time, a generalized eavesdropping device. Eavesdropping on what? In order to silence whom?

The answer, clear and implacable, is given by the theorists of totalitarianism. They have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal—these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.6-7.

As *Noise* unfolds, Attali traces how reproductive technologies—from written music to sound recordings—tended towards an impossible yet dialectically necessary objective: the silencing of noise. Dialectically, the suppression and control of noise finally gives rise, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to a subversive and noisy music, a violent music intended to counteract the violence done to music (and to society) by the censors of noise.

Attali posits that in the early twentieth century, the rise of a record industry that could normalize and administer society by organizing and standardizing sound prophesies a coming era in which all sound would be reduced to manageable data. The book also uncannily anticipates the way in which, by the late 1980's, "alternative" subgenres and subversive counter-cultures, from punk to death metal, and from hip hop to jungle and trance, would be over-coded and confined to their appropriate places within the market. But even more uncanny is how Attali's text seems also to anticipate the "listening" that it is now possible for state power to do through the internet, from the potential surveillance machine that sites like MySpace and FaceBook can become, to the possibility, already realized, for search engines such as Google to become sources of information about citizen activity. In *Noise*, Attali foresaw that as record sales would come to dominate the possibility of making a living as a musician, the space of performance would become less and less important, and that the interior or virtual spaces of music—the multiple indexes of music's now-digitized existence—would take on more and more significance, both aesthetically and economically (ultimate evidence for this is the fact that probably the most important indicator of a piece of music's popularity is its function as a ring-tone). Attali's argument thus anticipated how recording technologies would enable the apparatus of state and capital power to penetrate our physical bodies to the point at which anonymous technologies can map and mirror and predict our "preferences."

As Attali foresaw, it is increasingly the case that people compose music in relative isolation, at electronic consoles and in front of their computers, and that in the listening stages music is heard, for the most part, in the private club of one's own headphones. And it is arguable that despite its potentially democratizing and subversive potentials, the internet tends to perpetuate social alienation—not so much because it further isolates us from others (although it does), but because it encourages the formation of monadic cliques centered around shared tastes or shared fetish systems. The visibility of these cliques and micro-connections of desire makes our surveillance and control yet more feasible.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The danger of course with internet-based groups is that rather than being open-ended groups or what Deleuze and Guattari called "multiplicities," their borders are often all too clearly and rigidly marked. On the notion of a multiplicity, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 32-33.

In her "Afterword" to *Noise*, Susan McClary expressed hope that the emergent forms of music-making in the early 1980's New Wave movement—a movement that deliberately subverted not only by being noisy but also by bucking dominant

One of the most interesting aspects of Attali's analysis is his reading of the power of music to make and subvert borders. Whereas in earlier moments, especially the high medieval era, music permeated work and festivals and street life, and music would have had to be noisy enough to compete with the other noises around it, over time there is an increase of silence *around* music. Attali traces how music first went from the noise of sacrificial rituals, street fairs, and religious festivals into the quieter spaces of the court, the homes of the bourgeoisie, the controlled environment of concert halls, and finally onto records (and now into data processors). Even today, when society makes room for loud concerts, the walls of the thumping clubs are soundproofed to protect the neighbors from noise pollution, or have been ghettoized in warehouse districts, in out of sight and out of mind areas of urban industrial wastelands. In all this, for Attali, what is silenced is not so much music itself as music's message to society. This is a message that can only be passed as *noise*, as the viral contagion by music and in music of that which is not yet intelligible or recognizable to society. If this message is translated not by music but by noise, then even although there is more music "out there" than ever before, there is also ever more silence, because the methods of distribution and even the right to hear music (even on your own iPod©) are ever more rigidly controlled. If noise is violence, the displacement of noise outside music (and outside society) is a repression that manifests in as much undirected violence as it does in "noise pollution," from airplanes and industry to the sounds of war.

But Attali was not a doomsday prophet. He did not prophesy the end of music or of society, but music as a revelation of the potentials and ambiguities of an apocalyptic social situation. And Attali imagined an authentic and subversive mode of music making that would emerge from within what he called our "repetitive" society. This music-making would be a "composing" that, as opposed to mere reproduction and blank repetition, would be a new way of linking music and pleasure. Composing would be spontaneous, local, and subversive of the demands of professional standardization and marketplace requirements. Writing in the mid-1970's, Attali did not offer many specific examples of successful acts of composing. But he saw the Rolling Stones and John Cage as "the liquidation of the old," and as "announcing the void, voicing insufficiency, refusing recuperation."<sup>4</sup> Susan McClary, writing an "Afterword" in 1985, pointed to late 1970's and early 1980's New Wave as a genuine

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paradigms of race, class, gender, and professionalization in music—would prophesy "a society in which individuals and small groups dare to reclaim the right to develop their own procedures, their own networks" (158). The fact that so many punk and new wave artists became popular or were "co-opted" into the normalizing music industry should not discourage the act of subversion, but only remind us that it has to be incessantly re-created. I explore below the ambiguities involved in how DJ Spooky attempts to engage in what Attali calls Composition, or putting-together, in a way that seeks to subvert the classification and organization system that digital media might otherwise be.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 137.

movement of composing. (McClary also highlighted the ambiguities of the fame those in the movement garnered).<sup>5</sup> Yet the New Wave movement, even insofar as it eventually was co-opted into the mainstream, had profound and lasting effects on the possibilities for making and performing music, from the collaborations between Philip Glass and various dance and theatre groups to the performance art possibilities captured by artists like Lori Anderson. There was much emergent at the time of *Noise* that Attali did not perceive but somehow sensed evolving around him. (Attali makes no mention of Jamaican dub, for instance—emerging yet still very much underground in 1977).<sup>6</sup>

In a way, it might seem that the digital era would be the realization of Attali's dream for composing, since software and the internet place not only the music but the means of making, recording, and distributing music directly into the hands of composers. And yet Attali seems acutely and prophetically aware of the ambiguities that the apparent "democratization" of the means of music might represent, even in a fully digital age that would not come until years after the publication of *Noise*. Attali writes, of the coming era of "composing," in which everyone can be a creator (or perhaps where "you" are *Time* magazine's person of the year)<sup>7</sup>:

Music is no longer made to be represented or stockpiled, but for participation in collective play, in an ongoing quest for new, immediate communication, without ritual and always unstable. It becomes nonreproducible, irreversible. "If we compose music, we are also composed by history, by situations that constantly challenge us" (L. Berio). Music is ushering in a new age. Should we read this emergence as the herald of a liberation from exchange-value, or only of the emplacement of a new trap for music and its consumers, that of automanipulation? The answer to these questions, I think, depends upon the radicality of the experiment. Inducing people to compose using predefined instruments cannot lead to a mode of production different from that authorized by those instruments.

That is the trap. The trap of false liberation through the distribution to each individual of the instruments of his own alienation, tools for self-sacrifice, both monitoring and monitored.<sup>8</sup>

### **That Subliminal Kid**

<sup>5</sup> The Sex Pistols, founded in 1975, famously disbanded as soon as they realized they had become famous, in 1978.

<sup>6</sup> It may be a part of Attali's general focus on dominant economies rather than marginal or emergent social milieus that he says nothing or perhaps knew nothing of Jamaican dub.

<sup>7</sup>"You" were the person of the year, according to Time Magazine's December 13, 2006 issue. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 141.

Are there digital experiments radical enough to break with the traps of automanipulation? Or is the digital age simply exposing, as Slavoj Zizek and others have worried, the elements of our innermost fantasies to total control by state power? Into these ambiguities enters Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Drawing on a vast array of influences, from William S. Burroughs to the Jamaican dub masters, Spooky is a black conceptual artist who works in the medium of sound.<sup>9</sup> Since 2004's *Rhythm Science*, Miller has championed sampling as simultaneously time travel, gnosis, and a spiritual path through the digital age he is willing to dub "digital dharma."<sup>10</sup> I originally studied Miller's *Rhythm Science* in the context of teaching a course at Villanova University in 2006, Philosophy of Contemporary Music, in which I also taught Attali's *Noise*. I was struck by *Rhythm Science*'s manifesto for the compositional powers of sampling, and for how it both continued and diversified the possibilities of the "black electronic" that emerged in Jamaican dub and extended into Afrikaa Bambataa, Grandmaster Flash, Chuck D., and into the underground electronic scenes that began to flourish with the rise of new technologies in the early 1990's.<sup>11</sup>

Miller's own music is cut-up art that uses sounds as images to create travelogues of the virtual. Spooky is not trying to make us dance, at least not physically. But he is trying to let us travel through the as-yet-unexplored regions of virtual space opened up by the resources of forgotten or over-coded sounds. Early in 2008, I proposed to interview Miller by having him respond both to my questions and to some key texts of Attali's *Noise*. The following is a transcription of that interview, conducted via email in the fall of 2008. Following the transcript of the interview I try to articulate some of what I see as the promise of Spooky's noise as a technique of composing, in Attali's sense.

**Joshua Delpech-Ramey:** In *Noise*, Jacques Attali lays down some lines that seem eerily prophetic about the way in which music might become complicit in totalitarian info-regimes. He writes, of the age of "repetition" in which we now live,

Taking the analogy further, we might say that the listener in front of his record player is now only the solitary spectator of a sacrificial vestige. Doubtless, a hereditary memory of the process preserves music's power of community, even when it is heard in solitude. But the disappearance of the ceremony, and even the sacrificial spectacle, destroys the entire logic of the process: there is no longer a closed arena of sacrifice, the ritual or the concert hall. The threat

<sup>9</sup> For complete information on DJ Spooky, including his biography, bibliography, and discography consult <http://www.djspooky.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> In response to a question put by the author at the New York launch party for *Sound Unbound*, in April 2008.

<sup>11</sup>See Erik Davis' excellent article on this topic, "Roots and Wires: Polyrhythmic Cyberspace and the Black Electronic," <http://www.techgnosis.com/chunks.php?sec=articles>

of murder is everywhere present. Like power, it slips into homes, threatening each individual wherever he may be. Music, violence, power are no longer localized in institutions.

When this happens, music can no longer affirm that society is possible. It repeats the memory of another society—even while culminating in its liquidation—a society in which it had meaning. In the disappearance of the channeling sacrifice and the emergence of repetition, it heralds the threat of the return of the essential violence. Thus, from whatever dimension we approach it, music in our societies is tied to the threat of death.<sup>12</sup>

Do you think that rhythm science as you and others practice it can help affirm that "society is possible"? Are you at all concerned about the diffusive character of virtual space, which, since inhabited by anonymous users, may also be inviting the kind of random violence that Attali fears is the logical outcome of the era of repetition?

**Paul D. Miller:** *We live in an era that writers as diverse as Edward Said and Salman Rushdie have posited as moving into a multipolar, fractured world of overlapping forms of governance and finance. Let's think of it as a kind of polyphony, where political issues refract off of the surface of our deeply interconnected, multi-segmented market driven culture. What's the soundtrack to that? How does music map this kind of complex terrain? It's hard to think of anything that cannot be a reflection of the deep structural changes that are going on now, and to see how music relates that to whether or not we can think of what one of my favorite writers, J.G. Ballard liked to call "myths of the near future." "Virtual space" is something akin to what Antonin Artaud liked to call the "symbolic theater" – if you look to the root of "drama" it simply comes from the Greek "dran" – "to do, act, or perform." We now live in an information economy: there is no question about that. But when we think of society's norms for cultural production, we still have a lot of overlapping frames of reference, and I think that sampling is a good mirror to hold up to that kind of situation. My works are inter-related to looking at how that kind of multiplicity of perspective is the hidden architecture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. How do we "do, act, or perform" information? One of my current film projects is a remix of D.W. Griffith's film "Birth of a Nation" from 1915. But the idea for the new film's appropriation of the original is: "director as dj." I think that the main thing artists and theoreticians need to be aware of is this – for the 21<sup>st</sup> century it's all about convergence of form: you have to think that multimedia is absorbing ALL previous modes of production – including identity. The trailer for the film [can be found at the following]: <http://www.djspooky.com/art/rebirth.php>. I think of the film as a metaphor for this kind of confusion, and it resonates with some of the issues that you mention with Attali and repetition. For me, it's time to hit the reset button on digital culture. Who should be able to tell you where and when you can play music back (in clubs or in public spaces, in Europe this is problematic!): the answer - you should! Who owns your credit card code: not you! Are we all digital sharecroppers? One could argue that our current financial crisis says: yes! Open source systems are all about integrating unexpected developments,*

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 120.

*and I think that music is a preset scenario for getting people to think about the absence of many of the things that the 20<sup>th</sup> century took for granted. Musicians who I think really have explored this kind of copyright/open system music - Nine Inch Nails, Saul Williams, Radiohead, Matthew Herbert, Jeff Chang, Mad Professor, El-p, Girltalk ... I really think that there are a lot more people who are into this kind of thing, but who don't have the tools to be able to explore what's going on. Like people say in the U.S. military - freedom isn't free! Let's reverse engineer that phrase and see what pops out of the remix. So when you think about Griffith's work you can see some of the issues that drive conceptualists like Attali - Griffith's innovations: he pioneered multiple screen narrative, the "close-up," huge battle scenes... and above all, violence in cinema based on the characters response to racial and class divisions being "breached" - you can now see a re-inscription of that kind of trace in our culture through the politics of perception. "Virtual spaces" like [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) didn't exist in 2004 - and that was where the real battle for the 2008 election was fought. My film "Rebirth of a Nation" explores these kinds of paradoxes from the viewpoint of play with the archive - in this case, I look at Griffith's work as the DNA of American cinema, and try to unravel it. Whether it was scenes from "Apocalypse Now" that "quote" the infamous "ride of the Klansmen" to the previous Bush administration's use of the infamous Willie Horton ads about blacks and crime, to the last election cycle's attacks of Obama's preacher, to the ads the Clinton campaign used... one can still see some of these issues as lingering traces. To remix Artaud's concept of the "theater and its shadow" we now are in a "shadow administration" - which can be a very interesting thing. One has to ask: are Europeans the new Other? That's just something I thought I'd throw out at you.<sup>13</sup>*

**JDR:** Maybe to focus the question, what do you think of the kind of random anti-social violence *Wired* magazine recently reported on, about groups of hackers that work to destroy Second Life, and so on, or groups like Team Satan that are busy making hoax crop circles. Might these tricksters be good for us? And are we kidding ourselves that a utopia is really being constructed through

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<sup>13</sup> What Miller references here is an idea contemporary philosophers like Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou (and theologians like John Milbank) have latched onto, an idea of the European as "other." The idea is that in her bid for "universality" or "concrete universality" the classic "European intellectual" is now more or less working with a relic of rationality. In other words, this imagined European resists the kind of rationality that Miller celebrates, namely the one that affirms our relativistic global village, with its idea that rationality manifests as an ability to see and create connections. The older European model holds to truth as a confluence of the universal and the singular such that truth places a demand upon us, a demand which excludes some options in favor of others. This notion of truth as singular or hegemonic is obviously opposed to the idea that truth is the continuous unfolding of the network, for it is an idea that the search for truth is marked by lack, by an urgency or even an anxiety (a la Kierkegaard) at its core, and that the discovery of truth demands fidelity, allegiance, partisans in a cause. This idea of truth runs totally contrary to what Zizek in particular sees as a kind of faux Buddhist pan-perspectivist relativism that dominates the consumerist ethos of our age. Zizek's argument, much like that of Adorno and Horkheimer, is that, at least for people who are the products and producers of the culture that originated in European ideals of truth, this move to a Buddhist perspective is either insincere or self-deceptive. Miller obviously thinks there is more substance to contemporary relativism. For Zizek, see especially Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001).

virtual spaces, while most of the planet's population lives off-line and goes unrecognized and unnamed?

**PDM:** When you think about "Utopus" – the ruler of the fictional realm of Utopia, Thomas More's pro-novel of 1516 AD, you have to ask yourself – is it about Eutopia, or Utopia? Which is the name derived from? There's a lot to argue about the word-play. Is it a place of perfection, or a place of (as the actual Greek word says "no-place" eu-topos) "non-existence." One could argue that Utopus is a being on "no-place" – a subject of his own realm. Let's look at the books that have been inspired by it: George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," Yvgeny Zamyatin's "We," Samuel Butler's "Erewhon," the Wachowski Brother's "Matrix," Terry Gilliam's "Brazil" or even Katsuhiro Omoto's "Akira" – we tend to see that heavily regimented societies (like our own) need tricksters. I think that "anti-social" behavior is always something outside of the norms that we use to define regularity, and in a lot of cases, that kind of irreverent play is healthy and good to see. I dread a world where everyone has the same playlist mentality for life, and I celebrate play in all its aspects. On and off-line play mean that we have a kind of eternal childhood to engage. It doesn't matter whether half the world's population is on or offline – the impulse is the same. Ask Utopus... I would be the noise in the system.

**JDR:** I'm also curious to see if you think that your artistic practice potentially addresses Attali's concern about the power of community becoming a mere memory. Your music seems to work through and as memory, as a kind of voodoo séance of pop ancestors, a Warholian shamanism of the mysteries of pop iconography. Is this the creation of new meaning, or the voyeuristic repetition of the meanings of others, or is that opposition itself superseded by this activity of rhythm science/rhythm séance? Is yours the music of the living dead? There is something Spooky about it, in the insistent presence of the ancestral lives: your music has a disturbing, arresting quality, as if the voices of the past were not really dead, as if they were lying in wait, waiting to take some kind of revenge on the present for its passivity, for modernity's hysterical insistence on creating distance from the past. Is Spooky's the music of an undead archive or a spirit body, a body that is more alive than our docile, anemic self-consciousness?

**PDM:** Let's look at this in terms of [what] people like Slavoj Zizek like to think of as a false multiculturalism. Yes! Yeah, the world is getting wilder and wilder while other kinds of things keep in decline - there are species and languages (literally - LANGUAGES! you know, people who speak dead languages...), that are dying every day. My material links this kind of stuff to the fact that we're also pro-creating new forms and artificial scenarios that can never replace that lost nature. My film projects explore this kind of thing - Earlier this year I went to Antarctica to shoot a film about the sound of ice. The trailer is at: [http://www.djspooky.com/art/terra\\_nova.php](http://www.djspooky.com/art/terra_nova.php)

All I can say is this: who owns the ice? Who owns the environment? What happens if all aspects of intellectual property are assigned "value" - I think we need to find a reasonable middle-ground. Copyright limits are meant to encourage creativity. Instead, what is happening in the U.S. is simply that corporations are extending copyright far and beyond anything reasonable. The backlash is that people will have a totally irreverent attitude towards copyright law. Your average kid is into the whole "rip-mix-burn" type scenario.

*Because they've been conditioned by the networks that undergird our information-based society. All I can say is that this is just the beginning. What happens in the near future when information itself is like the environment? Will we treat it like a scarce resource like oil, or like something that is meant to be a community resource - like water? Water or oil - the choice is ours. William S. Burroughs was and still is an inspiration for me, but when you look at what the Beat Poets responded to - hyper-conformity, mass man, and the Cold War, we have a lot of things to think about in the 21st century. Has the "war on terror" replaced the Cold War? What is the artist's response to this kind of thing? I can't really answer these questions, but I think art is a good place to start. There are only around 2000 people on the entire continent of Antarctica - the only way to maintain human presence on the continent is through science. The whole idea of a scientific community based on shared principles of human inquiry into the nature of... nature. That's what I look at when I think of the inspiration for my compositional strategy. Pan-humanism, I guess, is the driving theme for all of my work. Pop iconography's relationship to graphic design is a part of the way I communicate with my audience. It's a dialect of our consumer culture that speaks to every class and ethnicity at this point. The concept of community is evolving. I definitely think that we need to celebrate instability, transience, and above all, impermanence. As we move further and further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we really have to accept that everything is connected.*

*I like to think that the process of sampling is about collision between the expected and unexpected results of collage: it's a process that has made an entire generation of musicians, software engineers, code writers, and yes, normal artists, free from the constraints of how older genres limited the way people could perceive their work. As a composer, I make material that is unapologetically complex, and as an artist much of my work is an essay on the kind of lyrical form of poetry and music combined with the fine arts. Multi-media, the digital arts, and a sense of interconnectedness are what drive my inquiry into how creativity can evolve in an information based world like ours. I want people to think about music and art with an eye towards literature's invisible hold on how we tell stories. Is a song an art piece? Can art be a text? Can a film foster a sense of transcendence? Entropy of form, instability, transience, and above all - a possibility that art can say, simply - another world is possible. These are things that linger in my mind when I engage the creative act. I never, ever, ever want people to think that life is simple. It is not. Ellison the trumpet player and composer-in-training who became a writer. Claude McKay, the poet who wrote "If we Must Die," Paul Robeson, actor, singer, inspiration - these are my heroes. It's kind of like mental software - it's a kind of Ellisonian equipment for those deciding not only to shun the noise but to live with the momentum implied in jazz music and electronic music's inheritance from all forms of complex human expression. Like they used to say -"it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing..."*

*Lawrence Lessig is a big hero of mine because he gives people a different perspective on what copyright means in the era of relentless connectivity. In hip hop, it's just called keeping true to the "street" - but for me, the new streets are the web, and the connected commons of things like mix tapes, graffiti that moves along systems of messages (networks can be train systems or fiber optic cables... you just have to adjust perspective). Again: it's all connected. That is the new community. And no, I don't have a blog!<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup>This is true, but it is also true that Miller is a regular contributor to [www.realitysandwich.com](http://www.realitysandwich.com), a forum for new ideas about spirituality, culture, arts, and

**JDR:** Listening to your music, I always have a strong sense of a dialectic at work there between sacrificial priest and victim playing out in your compositions. As DJ, you sacrifice the ancestral spirits to the mix. As victim, you subordinate your creativity to these voices. Can you conceive of the political angle here? Is this a model for a return to a more aboriginal or chthonic inhabitation of time?

**DJ Spooky:** *New media!!!! It's obviously a loaded term that gets thrown around without much thought as to its real meaning, but with the convergence of media increasing at an alarming pace, it seems only expected that this word pops up in every newspaper/magazine/blog. Is new media beneficial on the whole? Are we losing something as this process races past us without much analysis? My work, given its multidisciplinary nature and collaborations with writers, filmmakers, falls under the umbrella of "new media" but exists in a continuum with some of the people I look to for inspiration – it traces things like "appropriation," remixing, plagiarism, and out-and-out theft as basic cultural production processes, and it says they're OK. I know that sounds controversial, but it's the way we live these days.*

*For me, composition is all about "concept." To me, everything is connected. Sound is writing, writing is music, music is art. It's all about composition. So the basic idea is to get people out of the 20th century mentality where everything was broken into separate components like a factory. Today, we are all factories- I rip-mix-burn CD's and DVD's every day, all the time. A couple of years ago I would have had to go to some kind of factory, etc. The way we've consolidated production tools allows the dj metaphor to really move to the forefront - it all becomes linked to selection instead of the production of physical goods. You gotta remember the 20th century was all about mass production, and economies of scale. The 21 century is about mass customization. What have computers done to us? My book is about sound art, digitalmedia, and new compositional strategy. My book Sound Unbound explored this kind of scenario by asking people to write directly about oblique strategies.<sup>15</sup> It has essays from Brian Eno, Steve Reich, Chuck D, Moby, Pierre Boulez, Saul Williams, Bruce Sterling, Jonathan Lethem, etc. The audio companion has rare material by Allen Ginsberg, James Joyce, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Jean Cocteau, Gertrude Stein, Liam Gillick, Trilok Gurtu, Sun Ra, George E. Lewis, Aphex Twin, Sonic Youth, Philip Glass, Iggy Pop etc. I was really interested in how much I could squeeze out information from radically different sources, like a mix-tape. It's just another kind of shareware. "Popular" software is just operating systems that let people look at the "interface" of a process that they can share with their community. So you move from web 1.0 type issues of "privacy" and anonymity to web 2.0 issues of intensive social space. The music industry isn't even at web 1.0 -they still think everyone will pay for music. That's a wrong-headed approach, and it's costing them a fortune! New media is leveling the playing field - artists like Damien Hirst are utterly bound to perception of the market value of their works. But if you look at what's happened with Google and social network sites like FaceBook I guess it all depends on what avatar you're into. The playlist killed the album. Your FaceBook recommendations define a public sense of presence. Your MySpace page is an advertisement for yourself. It's OK.*

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society.

<sup>15</sup>*Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture.* Ed. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

**JDR:** Attali writes, about the alternative to repetition he called “composing”:

Composition . . . makes a collective creation, rather than an exchange of coded messages . . . it gives voice to the fact that rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies once the screens of the symbolic, usage, and exchange are shattered. In composition, therefore, music emerges as a relation to the body and as transcendence . . . Music, directly transected by desires and drives, has always had but one subject—the body, which it offers a complete journey through pleasure, with a beginning and an end . . .<sup>16</sup>

Obviously re-mixing and sampling is something done in solitude, in quiet spaces, without much physical movement. How does being a rhythm scientist affect your body, and do you think Attali's notion of a kind of transcendence is an appropriate way to describe what's going on in the mix?

**DJ Spooky:** *When you think of “metaphysics” of sound, you are taking on a pretty daunting task in trying to explore the history of digital music and sound recording and the ways in with different methods have combined to offer new creative outlets for musicians and composers. Sound, like one of my favorite composers, John Cage, always pointed out, was about how we perceive the flow of patterns around us. When I'm making tracks, I'm guided by key-clicks on a keyboard, movement of a mouse, and my eyes interacting with icons on a screen. There's a haptic quality to the flow of movement, but it's mainly perceptual. My first book, Rhythm Science<sup>17</sup> was all about how we can think of mix culture as a kind of pan-humanist kind of scenario – it related graphic design to music in a way that almost anyone who has seen a CD or record cover sleeve anywhere in the world can attest to. Look back at how Edison's recording cylinder's led to the popularization of recorded media, and how that in turn changed the way we perceive the flow of information (yes, music is information) around us. It was a proto-process – Edison didn't have the metrics of sites like iTunes or YouTube to show how many tracks have been downloaded or videos have been seen. Software is culture now. The new software has really democratized the creative process – you have to think that almost anything you do will be involved in some kind of network - whether it's on-line collaborative filters like last.fm and amazon.com's “collaborative filtering” recommendation services and mechanisms, or that you will have people remixing and doing the whole "rip-mix-burn" scenario. A lot of musicians from the old mentality are really into the idea of something staying "the same" - the new mentality is to say that anything, and everything, will always change. And that's OK. The creative act mirrors the tools that are used to create the music. That's OK. The composer is faced with learning a different kind of literacy. Again: that's OK.*

*That's what my second book Sound Unbound looked at. It's 36 essays by people like the senior Legal Counsel for Google (who wrote the essay about copyright law) and Moby*

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984.

*talking about what it was like to sample black voices, Erik Davis on dub and technology. Chuck D about the media environment, or Pierre Boulez and Saul Williams... Steve Reich and Cory Doctorow who does "Boing Boing" wrote the introduction.*<sup>18</sup>

**JDR:** Attali writes,

...this constitutes the most fundamental subversion we have outlined: to stockpile wealth no longer, to transcend it, to play for the other and by the other, to exchange the noises of bodies, to hear the noises of others in exchange for one's own, to create, in common, the code within which communication will take place. The aleatory then rejoins order.

... There is an innovation that is only now beginning to play out its role, a herald of this mutation: the recording of images ... the essential use of the image recorder seems to me to be elsewhere, in its private use for the manufacture of one's own gaze upon the world, and first and foremost upon oneself. Pleasure tied to the self-directed gaze: Narcissus and Echo. Eroticism as an appropriation of the body.<sup>19</sup>

I think there is a really interesting ambiguity in Attali at this point. He is talking about the potentially revolutionary effects of composing, but he is also talking about this in terms of a radically individual form of pleasure, an auto-eroticism, even a kind of narcissism. And he thinks the culmination of this kind of pleasure would be in being able to manipulate images. I know you are starting to work on film in the way you worked on music. Can you say something about what drives you to that practice? What is pushing that shift, for you?

**PDM:** *I started dj'ing as an art project that focused on collage narrative. Simple and direct. I did not think my dj'ing would be "popular" but it became popular. I guess a lot of the response to my work has been accidental – I never thought I'd be "dj'ing" but basically putting material that was made from the collage process into the "normal" art discourse. For some reason the normal artworld. I really don't see them as separate. My work looks at text: text made from fragments of found sound, found visual material, and found written materials. I read Attali when I was an undergraduate at Bowdoin College, and it had an influence on me because he mapped out a relationship of noise to the social economy of music. If you look at some of the most influential albums of the last 50 years – Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" or Sun Ra's "A Joyful Noise" etc and even Tricia Rose's seminal "Black Noise" book, there's something that resonates with the issue of whether noise is a seduction because of the absence of recognizable motifs and patterns, or if it's something that creates disturbance through its destruction of the familiar patterns of everyday life. On this, I'd take the John Cage approach and say that you really have to think of noise and its role in our culture as a way of defining pattern recognition.*

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<sup>18</sup> *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*. Ed. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 143-144.

*Nietzsche's "eternal return" could be a metaphor for this kind of pattern recognition, we just have to expand our definitions. That's probably why Wagner and him had a big falling out! Hah!*<sup>20</sup>

**JDR:** In one of your pieces in *Sound Unbound*, "In Through the Out Door," you write that "the loop of perception is a relentless hall of mirrors in the mind. You can think of sampling as a story you are telling yourself—one made of the world as you hear it, and the theatre of sounds that you invoke with those fragments is all one story made of many."<sup>21</sup> Isn't there a danger that we will lapse into a kind of autism here? A kind of self-imprisonment? Or are we on the verge of a new form of connectedness that only appears temporarily to isolate us? Perhaps this is what Attali was thinking of when he affirmed that "tolerance and autonomy" would be the politics of the future?

**PDM:** My first book "Rhythm Science" made a link between graphic design and music composition because it was centered on exploring how to apply the idea of "remix" to seemingly disparate production processes, but basically, it says that we blur the line between self and other with joy, with play, with sharing the information that gives meaning to the work we create. I look at that kind of sharing as a kind of chaos, a pandemonium where any sound can be you. Sampling is truly an open source creative process because it's omnivorous.

*I don't think that chaos is really something that human beings know how to dig into. It's the order of the universe - quantum, deep structure, fractal... for me, music is our way of just trying to make sense of how weird it is to be alive in this strange universe that exists in our imagination - are we dreaming the world, or is the world dreaming us? My work has a Borges kind of impulse to look at layers and layers, reflections within reflections – it's an appraisal, an attempt to think of music's digital update of how people relate to the*

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting in this connecting to note that Slavoj Zizek is a major Wagner fan. From Spooky's perspective, Zizek also holds onto an older, "European" model of freedom that locates freedom in a certain *attachment* to key paradoxes or to a central parallax, a certain specific location of the human between freedom and determinism that Hegel called "absolute knowledge," since it is the place or perspective from which, within every historical constellation or social antagonism or psychic tension, one can see the manifestation of the gap between the ideal and the real, or the spiritual and the material, or consciousness and unconsciousness, etc. Indeed, for Zizek, there is only one "pattern" to recognize, namely, the pattern of the Real as modeled by Hegel and Lacan. This is the pattern of parallax, the logic of a "gappy" or ontologically incomplete world. But the patterns Spooky is talking about are continuums, Riemannian spaces where a singularity organizes an overcoded field. The fact that this is an operation imposed upon or emergent within a given field is what is odious to Zizek, who insists a la Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Christianity on the co-incipience of organization and field, with nothing "pre-given." Zizek thus sides with Wagner contra Nietzsche's vision of the will to power and eternal recurrence. See Slavoj Zizek, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2001) and Joshua Delpech-Ramey, "For Example, Opera, For Example . . . A Preface to Slavoj Zizek's "Why is Wagner Worth Saving?" [http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue2-1/Josh\\_Ramey/josh\\_ramey.html](http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue2-1/Josh_Ramey/josh_ramey.html).

<sup>21</sup> *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture* (Ed. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 12.

"discursive/recursive" nature of human inquiry. The remix has been around a lot longer than people want to admit - for me, the remix is a critique of language itself. William S. Burroughs' is the last sound on the audio companion to "Sound Unbound" for a reason: he simply said "language is a virus" - I'd add: language functions as a code embedded in the deep structure of how human beings create meaning and value - and remixes are a kind of transformative unit. They exist in reflection of the "original." But the original is nothing but another reflection, and the whole scenario keeps going to a point where there's nothing really "original" - everything is a cover version. That's the metaphysics of the soundsystem. Jamaica just made the link explicit.<sup>22</sup> Rip, mix, burn - it's an aesthetic that is inherited from the Jamaican dub tradition, which itself comes from the African tradition of call and response. Everything is connected. Digital Africa is the global digital network echo chamber. The essay that focused on this was a remix of a piece Erik Davis wrote a while ago. Sound Unbound was an update on this kind of thing - with essays from Ron Eglash (a mathematician who studies African polyrhythm) and Daphne Keller, the Senior Legal Counsel to Google. Her essay looks at how sampling reflects a lot of the way digital material moves through networked systems. For me, music isn't music - it's information.

**JDR:** You sometimes compare the possibilities for exchange in the information age to the way in which people once shared mantras or prayers or alliances to certain deities.<sup>23</sup> Can you say more about how rhythm science can be a spirituality or a spiritualization of existence? I'm also really interested in your take on nature, on the fact that we no longer believe that trees or wolves or sunsets have anything to say to us.<sup>24</sup> Can we re-learn to listen to trees by learning to listen better to samples? Can digital recreation teach us how to recreate a lasting relationship with earthly life? Or are we left to bring what was once our communion with nature into our communion with data? Or is this is a false dichotomy?

**PDM:** Life should be fun! If it's not fun, leave it alone!!! I wanted to do books and art that keep things interesting for me! Music is art, art is literature, literature is music. Keep the loops flowin'!!! It's the way we live in the 21st century. I have seen so much that seems to affirm humanity's relationship to dynamic systems in the last 10 years. As the internet has reached out and changed people's relationship to the social process of how culture is produced, technology has changed far more quickly than our society's ability to absorb the change. Government (literally in all its forms) and the norms of several centuries of colonialism have conditioned the way the bulk of the human species relates to the idea of "the future" - it's like the idea of the "future" in philosophers like Hegel or Marx led towards the ultimate redemption of humanity. I don't think so... The web will change almost everything you can describe as "fixed and focused" - multiple perspectives, versions, and contexts at every angle, all the time. It's OK - that's the way kids are growing up!!! The idea that music is a kind of shock absorber that has been absorbed:

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<sup>22</sup> For more on Jamaican dub in relation both to its West African precursors and to the emergence of mix culture, see Eric Davis, "Roots and Wires: Polyrhythmic Cyberspace and the Black Electronic" at <<http://www.techgnosis.com/chunks.php?sec=articles>>.

<sup>23</sup> *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture* (Ed. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture* (Ed. Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 7.

*we've internalized the process of thinking about the future so much that we basically look at everything as "scripts" (again, that William S. Burroughs moment!). I'm influenced by a lot of the issues that drove the Beat Poets - William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka - but updated from the viewpoint that digital media has taken over where their sense of non-linear process in their writing, and the kind of irreverence that made them so charming left off. Amiri Baraka is the last one alive. That is a beautiful thing. Artists that have grown up in the contemporary model of youtube, facebook, myspace, or stuff like mixi in Japan ([www.mixi.jp](http://www.mixi.jp)), have transformed the whole way people think about the "production of social space." That's cool, but it's also a very open situation, where anything can jump out. I encourage people to expect the unexpected in my mixes, music, art, and writings. It keeps things fun. Feedback is kkkooooooll!!!! We are part of nature, and nature is part of us. Technology in that light is just part of nature. We need to accept that we have agency, but that we are also part of a much much much larger pattern. Maybe dj culture is teaching us about the real eternal return, linking us to systems we never really thought of because they were too deep in our cognition to be foregrounded. That's just a thought, but I hope that in one way, it opens a door to get us to re-think many of the things that have plagued us since the advent of the modern mindset. This is just the beginning.*

When Jacques Attali sang the praises of “composing” in 1977, he wrote primarily of the potential that a more experimental, itinerant, non-professionalized music making might have for a renewed relation between individuals and their own affects—in archaic terms, Attali seemed talking about a rehabilitation of the relation between body and soul. But one of the most provocative aspects of Miller’s project is that insofar as it can—and should—be understood as an act of “composing” in Attali’s sense, it explores noise (of samples, of a polyphony of voices) not only for physical or affective liberation, but also on a quest for a specific type of spiritual or even esoteric knowledge. Through projects like *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica* and *Rebirth of a Nation*, Miller seeks to reveal archaic codes. He explores the soundscape of ancient ice as revelatory text, and reads the images of D.W. Griffith’s film as a DNA of American cultural politics as much as of its cinema. These codes, once exposed, unmask modernity and “the contemporary” as itself an overcoding or a sampling of ancient sources. As Miller’s last remark in the interview indicates, there is an undoing or undermining of modernity going on in the extrapolation and exploration of the tools and techniques and possibilities modernity made possible. Miller’s work points to a new shamanism of culture, a techno-shamanism built on an eco-webnology where nature and culture blur. In this way Miller’s work resonates with Bruno Latour’s insistence that all of the objects of modern technology are themselves complex mediations between human and non-human, natural and cultural worlds.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Miller’s work also seems to touch upon a kind of mysterious “outside” of the modern dialectic of myth and enlightenment, and to find a way through sampling back to that enchanted world Horkheimer and Adorno identified as a lost world of magical flows, the world of local powers and regional divinities operative along itineraries of human desire prior to that priestly governance and mythical histrionic overcoding that would eventually

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<sup>25</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

become the progressive rationalization of society.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Miller works directly with what Attali seemed most to fear in the age of repetition: the reduction of music to information. Miller clearly revels in the fact that music is information, music is code. Yet, through sampling, Miller makes information noisy. This is why we should see Miller's art as a kind of renegade necromancy: if the means of making music noisy are physical, the means of making information noisy are spiritual. In any case, the goal seems to be the same: the enjoyment of difference, of possibility or potential, and the exploration of elevated states of consciousness where there might be a renewed possibility for interconnectedness and shared affect across ordinary divisions of class, race, gender, even across time and space.

Attali was prophetically lucid about the tremendous risks involved in something as simple as sampling and re-mixing.

To compose is simultaneously to commit a murder and perform a sacrifice. It is to become both the sacrificer and the victim, to make an ever-possible suicide the only possible form of death and the production of life. To compose is to stay repetition and the death inherent in it, in other words, to locate liberation not in a faraway future, either sacred or material, but in the present, in production and in one's own enjoyment.<sup>27</sup>

The question that remains for Miller and for all artists working within the hyper-saturated world of repetition really is a pragmatic one: which sounds unbound will reveal a geography, even a geology, that we can continue to inhabit? There is something both beautiful and terrifying about the search for knowledge in uninhabitable wastes of ice, just as there is something intimidating and threatening about the prospects of mining the codes of our ancestors' prejudices, sampling the way they imagined history, truth, and humanity. But Miller's sampling lives on this dying edge: the future sounds of melting ice and of the image of ancient vendettas that will not fade into the past. A spooky new model of freedom seems to want to emerge here, a kind of re-sampling of the inevitable, an *amor fati* staked on the transformation of ecological and economic end-game into a quest for subliminal new territories. Whether Spooky's "multiplex consciousness," – reveling in the multiplicity of the emerging networks – can model a viable post-human future remains to be seen.

PAUL D. MILLER, aka DJ SPOOKY, is a composer, multimedia artist and writer. His written work has appeared in such publications as *The Village Voice*, *The Source*, *Artforum* and *Rapgun*. Miller's work as a media artist has appeared in a wide variety of contexts such as the Whitney Biennial; the Venice Biennial for Architecture (2000); the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Germany; Kunsthalle, Vienna; the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and many other museums and galleries. His work

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<sup>26</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 141

"New York Is Now" has been exhibited in the Africa Pavilion of the 52 Venice Biennial 2007, and the Miami/Art Basel fair of 2007. Miller's first collection of essays, entitled *Rhythm Science*, came out on MIT Press 2004. His book *Sound Unbound*, an anthology of writings on electronic music and digital media, was recently released by MIT Press.

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