

Sound embodiments¹

Music, body and noise

[...] La poesía sale de mi boca,
de mis puños, de cada poro
resuelto de mi piel /
de éste mi lugar volátil, aleatorio / [...]
—Mario Santiago Papasquiaro

Until recently, music had always required the physical presence of creators and spectators in the same geographical and temporal space to occur as an aesthetic phenomenon. Unlike other arts, such as painting or literature, in which it is possible that the aesthetic product occurs in a temporal and spatial desynchrony between the body of the creator and the body of the viewer, in dance and music it is necessary that the sound production of the musician and the auditive appreciation of the spectator overlap in the same temporal and geographical space. The bodies of the musician and the listener are activated as such (as producer and receiver respectively) in the same space and at the same time, thus creating the musical aesthetic effect.

For sound to occur as music it is necessary to organize, in the same time and in the same space, the bodies involved in its creation, in a phenomenon that we would call “concert”. This corporal organization is an essentially political act, this politicization is an inherent characteristic of music. This is why music has always formed such an important part in all social activities. This is what makes music arise and mix with festivities, with the creation of community, with work, with the carnival, with life itself. There is a music inherent in every human organization, in every political act. As it arises from the earth itself, from the spontaneity of our existence, perhaps prior to all political structuring, everything human is profoundly musical.

¹ *Acuerpamientos sonoros* in Spanish. The original word used in this essay is *acuerpamientos*, this word is not common in day to day Spanish language. As I explain later in this essay, it was practically invented within some feminist movements in Latin America. The word *embody*, widely used in English language, is the closest translation I could come up with, but with the exception of cases in which original language is English, this word is never used with the traditional meaning given in English. It is always used with the connotation given in Latin American Spanish: to rise up from the community body, to create a body together with other people, to support each other in some struggle. A better definition is given later in this essay.

While talking about life in other geographies, Deleuze and Guattari said: "Neither is music the same, the music of the earth is different, as is sexuality"², because certainly, music seems to emerge from the earth, from all land stepped by humans. Our act of living has its own musicality, there is an inherent music in our existence in the world. That is why music, in its first contact with the human, in its first entry into political organizations, comes in the form of ritual, of sacred, violent, sacrificial experience. Still far from any representative function, music emerges in humans as part of the sacred experience of the world. Because, arising from the very earth, music, before getting a fix position in political structures, is part of the cosmos, of the violence and confusion inherent to the pre-social experience of the human being. "Music is not alone in being art as cosmos and in drawing the virtual lines of an infinite variation"³. Being the same with all sensitive experience of the world, music is a disappearing on the earth.

In this context, the development of musical technologies⁴, both Western and from other geographies, emerge as a process of de-ritualization of musical, as a consolidation in the political functions of representation. All musical technology has the purpose of controlling a certain pre-political quality inherent in music in order to convert it into an object of social and political order. While these systems get fixed in the ways we create and listen to music, it loses its violent, ritual, sacred and confrontational quality to gradually become a fixed and functional element in a society. In the case of the Western culture, music has become a consumer product. In the words of Jacques Attali:

Then, after [music] entering into commodity exchange, it participated in the growth and creation of capital and the spectacle. Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: de-ritualize 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.⁵

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 18.

³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 96.

⁴ When I say "musical technology" I mean any epistemic creation that intends to organize, systematize or quantify the elements involved in the musical phenomenon. This implies the creation of harmonic systems, the development and construction of physical spaces for musical representation, the construction of instruments or the economic systems of music distribution.

⁵ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 4-5.

Lost of meaning, of the world, of reality. While music gets fixed in the political structures of financial semicapitalism, it moves away from the ritual and sacred experience, from human sensibilities, from the inhabiting of the earth. Music gets inserted into capitalist production and appreciation systems, leaving aside the poetic experience. Music becomes an object of capitalist value. The evolution of the musical institutional apparatus has led music to a disconnection with the real, with our bodies, with our inhabiting the earth. Music has lost the world. In this sense the following quote becomes deeply revealing of the current musical condition, and in any case, of the human condition:

It's not the world that is lost, it's we who have lost the world and go on losing it. It's not the world that is going to end *soon*, it's we who *are finished*, amputated, cut-off, we who refuse vital contact with the real in a hallucinatory way. *The crisis is not economic, ecological, or political, the crisis is above all that of presence.*⁶

But the ritual, poetic and corporal quality of music is inherent to it. There is a political and philosophical power in the musical act. We can also study the history of musical technologies as a history of political subversion, as a permanent struggle against the institutionalization and the fixation of the sound act as a political element of order, organization and control. Music is also a permanent return to the body, to the earth, to the world, to ritual.

Prior to all commercial exchange, [music] *creates political order because it is a minor form of sacrifice. In the space of noise, it symbolically signifies the channeling of violence and the imaginary, the ritualization of a murder substituted for the general violence, the affirmation that a society is possible if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated.*⁷

But, contrary to what certain idealizations of music propose, the subversive, political and profoundly transforming power of music was never in music itself, in sound as a physical phenomenon, in waves traveling in an elastic material. The political, aesthetic and philosophical power of music was always inside our bodies, in our inhabiting the earth, in its sacred power, in its demand for a world, in the ritual that demands bodies present in the same temporal and

⁶ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (California: Semiotext(e), 2014), 31.

⁷ Attali, *Noise*, 25-26.

geographical space shared between musicians and spectators. Here is the political potential of music. Because politics is no other than the configuration of spaces, the allocation and distribution of our bodies, sensibilities and subjectivities. The same thing happens in music, because, in the words of Jacques Rancière: "aesthetics - and therefore music - is rather a way of sensitive configuration, a distribution of places and bodies whose rupture or emergency determines the very essence of politics"⁸.

What to do in the face of this loss? How to return the political quality to the sound experience? How to recover the body in music? To try to offer a possible answer to this questions and sketch a possible theory of the musical act as a political and philosophical phenomenon I would like to borrow a word that was forged in the middle of the political effervescence of some feminist movements in Latin America: To embody [*acuerpar*]. Marie Bodet explains this concept like this:

Embody, most of the times conjugate in the first person plural, to *embody* ourselves [*acuerparnos*]. *Body* ceases to be a noun to become a verb, act, gesture. To *embody* as a hug that is also to take body, to insert the body, to occupy the square intrinsically in relation. It is not about forging a new body with other better trained limbs⁹ or with better organized and invincible organs, but to situate ourselves from and between bodies that affect and are affected, between gestures of a doing that are also a listening, that produce and are produced . [...] To *embody* ourselves [*acuerparnos*] is heard as a word, a shout, a gesture, a howl in tension between the occupied space when we are in a place, a square, a street, and the multiple ways of hugging that know how to weave the collective consolation with the transmission of a fury.¹⁰

In this sense a sound embodiment [*acuerpamiento sonoro*] would be a sound that gains body and space, or rather, a body that becomes sound. To think of music as a verb, as a living act and not as an inert and functional representative object. To abandon the formalities, the instruments and the techniques to recover the musicality that lives in us, in our inhabiting the earth, in our collectivities, in the spaces in which we live and we occupy.

⁸ ⁸ Jacques Rancière, *El tiempo de la igualdad: dialogos sobre política y estética* (Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2011), 20. [my translation]

⁹ The word used here is *miembros*, which in Spanish can signify both, members (human members) and organs (as in body organs).

¹⁰ Marie Bardet, "Saberes gesteaes. Epistemologías, estéticas y políticas de un «cuerpo danzante»" *Enraonar: an international journal of theoretical and practical reason* 60 (2018): 13-28 [my translation]

This conceptualization of the sound act is something that I have proposed to materialize in my work as a composer, my pieces aspires to be a sound embodiment, to be a music that arises absolutely from the body. Even beyond music, I think what I try to do is to create a form-of-life whose existential axis is the embodiment. In a future essay I will try to outline this approach from a creative point of view, from the composer's eye -if such an occupation exists in an embodiment-, for now, it seems worthwhile to dedicate this essay to a brief analysis of sound embodiments in other existing music.

There have always been music that put the body (personal or communitary) at the center of the sound praxis or that, in some way or another, offer certain elements that allow us to analyze the music from the bodies of those who produce it and listen to it. Such is the case of many traditional musics, the work *Canti del Capricorno* by Giacinto Scelsi, some works by John Cage and many other composers and musicians who contribute in some extent with the approach proposed in this essay. At some point I would like to propose a general theory of sound embodiment that would allow us to analyze all music from the perspective of the body, but in this brief essay I would like to point out some reflections on just one musical genre: Japanoise (or Japanese noise). Hijokaidan, Hanatarash and Incapacitants are three bands that belong to that genre that, when I discovered them during my puberty, I got very impressed by them, but after having forgotten them during all my professional musical training, I now find an enormous similarity and affinity with my philosophical, political and aesthetic interests.

I would like to begin these brief comments by acknowledging my inability to conduct a formal anthropological or ethnomusicological study. What I know of the Japanese music and of all the culture of that country, has been learned by second-hand, by readings, videos and music that I have heard, seen and read without experience in my own flesh. That is why these comments are not intended to find or discover a "truth" or a unique reality about these music or about the people who inhabit them. This text emerges, rather, as a first attempt to formalize and test some of my thoughts and conceptualizations about sound.

From the end of the 19th century, Japan underwent an intense process of modernization and industrialization that put an unusual stress on the population that until then was accustomed to

a traditional way of life. After the defeat in World War II, Japan drastically increased its industrialization by adopting Western economic values. As proposed by Bifo Berardi, the central part of this process of change experienced by Japan until the end of the Second World War consists mainly of a de-feminization of its culture, thus causing a neurotic crisis in its population:

A peculiar aspect of the psychological violence intrinsic to the forced modernization lies in my opinion in the forced masculinization of the Japanese psychology [...] the Japanese were obliged to strengthen their character and to deny their feminine kindness and timidity, when forced to become a colonial power and to fight modern wars, in order to compete in the world system. [...] traditional Japanese culture is marked by self-restraint and apprehensiveness. Stress and psychological self-violence resulting from the repression of their spontaneous emotionality during the Modernization process led to the collective nervous breakdown. [...] After the defeat and the conversion to Western economic values, the competition shifted from the field of military aggression to the field of productivity and economic growth. [...] This is why it is possible to assert that contemporary Japan is a sort of laboratory of stress-related psychopathology, and particularly a sort of laboratory of the pathologies related to the connective mutation of technology and of social behaviour.¹¹

It is in this political context emerged from the postwar period of forced modernization, of the dispossession of a traditional culture, of masculinization and adoption of Western values, where a swarm of artistic expressions that questions and revolts against aesthetic practices -and therefore also political and philosophical- adopted from the West are born in Japan. Gutai, butoh dance and Japanese noise are part of these expressions emerged as a response to this political context.

Having briefly described the context in which the japanoise is born, before continuing it is worthwhile to invite the reader to watch some videos and listen to some pieces of this genre. To this end, I leave below a small list of 4 audiovisual documents that I consider important, although not sufficient, for a very small introduction to this musical genre. It is important that these videos are watched and not only listened to. Some of the thesis developed in this essay depends on the corporalities shown in the videos:

¹¹ Franco Berardi, *And. Phenomenology of the end: Cognition and sensibility in the transition from conjunctive to connective mode of social communication* (Helsinki: Aalto University publication series, 2014), 81-83.

- Hanatarash live performance in Bears, Osaka, Japan.¹²
- Incapacitants live performance in Tajima, Fukushima.¹³
- Hijokaidan live performance.¹⁴
- Audio of *Beyond* by Hijokaidan.¹⁵

Even from a superficial view of these musics, there are at least three important characteristics that are worth pointing out:

- *In japanoise there are no western traditional instrumental techniques.* Although in some cases instruments or objects from the western musical tradition are used in noise (such as speakers, electric guitars, microphones, etc.) their use never responds to the functional logic used in the Western tradition, rather, the use of these instruments in Japanese noise destroy their functionality. Its relation with the instrumental technology is opposed to all the western values. In this sense, it is worth retaking what James Novak expressed about the relationship between noise and feedback (a technique widely used in this genre):

The technical conditions of feedback performance powerfully embody Noise's nonlinear representations of musical history. These systems reflect deep investments in cultural self-invention, through which individual Noisicians develop feedback into an individual performance of creative subjectivity. Their self-assembled electronic networks are iconic of Noise's antihistorical discourses of newness. They also reflect Noisicians' challenge to musical ideologies of authorship and stylistic influence and their emphasis on self-reinforcing relationships with technology. [...] Noisicians [...] use their electronics to embody the self-destructive imbalances of positive feedback. Personal expression is transformed in conflict with the system, through a process that Japanese performers describe as "out-of- control" (*bôso suru*). This is not a relationship that creates a balanced sound environment. On the contrary,

¹² "HANATARASH" YouTube video, 0:50, "RoiloGolez", January 22, 2007. https://youtu.be/L7p_C9OIN40

¹³ "Incapacitants - Live In Tajima, Fukushima, 25. AUG, 1991" YouTube video, 4:34, "icepick method", July 29, 2007. <https://youtu.be/LSG3m5ujegA>

¹⁴ "Hijokaidan King of Noise 非常階段 - The Best Documentary Ever", YouTube video, 16:16, "Kelsi Stark", December 3, 2017. <https://youtu.be/Q78wX7NbjXI>

¹⁵ "Hijokaidan - Beyond (1986 Noise / Harsh Noise)", YouTube video, 11:52, "Kelsi Stark", January 2, 2014. <https://youtu.be/-a3SIjNKHGg>

Noisicians appear to be in the midst of battle with their machines. Pushing against their own performance, they reveal the internal conflicts of technological subjectivity.¹⁶

- ▶ *There is no formal concern.* The form of the piece, its duration, the internal musical material and other elements properly "musical" (according to the western tradition) are of secondary interest, all these elements are produced almost by accident. What in Western music is profoundly important –so much that it led to the development of a technology as sophisticated as the score is– in Japanese it is hardly a by-product, a casual result of the spontaneity of the moment. Even thinking of noise as an improvisational music and comparing it with other similar music, the concern for intrinsically musical internal material is minimal (to say the least), and this material arises only as a product of the catharsis of bodies producing sound, It is not something that worries the musicians or the public involved in the sound act.
- ▶ *The concert experience is the most important part of noise.* The high volumes, the corporal movements, the destruction of the stage and other similar elements, are evidence that noise, more than a musical act as we would conceive it in the western tradition, is a kind of ritual where the poetic-sound experience is forged from the presence of the bodies producing noise, from the presence of the bodies in the same space. This is so important that it is practically the only concern in these musics. Japanese does not develop instruments or instrumental techniques nor it develops any writing systems. The only thing it creates is a form of "concert", different ways of living and experiencing music, of organizing the bodies involved in the sound act. Japanese is concerned only with creating a ritual experience of bodies and uses music as a means to achieve this. Here it is worthwhile to go back to what David Novak wrote when describing a performance by Incapacitants:

In their live performances, Incapacitants embody the private sense of being overwhelmed by sound. They show the effect of Noise on their own senses, even at the very moment of its creation. This liveness short-circuits the distance between the listener and the sound, folding them back together in its affective feedback loop. Noise emerges simultaneously "out there" and "in here," inside your body. The audience member does not simply hear this sound in space but reacts to its sensations within a private sensory world. Noise's liveness is a circuit of energy that

¹⁶ David Novak, *Japanese: Music At The Edge Of Circulation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 142

is purely internal and admits no outside space; in this, it is less like listening to music and more like the sensation of an electric shock. Liveness becomes an involuntary encounter with the feeling of Noise within one's body. Incapacitants transform these profoundly individuated sensations of personal overload into an observable performance. [...] Noise performance highlights an individually embodied knowledge. Noise etches hard lines between those who inhabit its unapproachable space of sound; between those who feel it—even if that feeling is involuntary—and those who do not. In some ways, the sense of participating in a powerful musical experience is made “live” as much by those who choose not to “get into it,” but to “get out of it.”¹⁷

Here, western musical technologies are useless to analyze what happens in noise as an aesthetic phenomenon. Although born from the violent insertion of Western culture in Japan, this music seems to emerge from a world apart, ignoring or opposing the epistemic and practical development of Western music.

It is no coincidence that two of the most profoundly radical and subversive artistic expressions have a similar geographical and social backgrounds: Japanese noise and butoh dance. Both arise from the conflict, from the clash between the remains of a traditional Japanese culture with the violent and accelerated adoption of Western economic values to turn the Japanese culture into an industrial product of economic value. Perhaps no other culture in the twentieth century lived so violently the invasion of financial capitalism in everyday lives. Faced with the overwhelming violence of Western industrialization in Japan, with the transformation of individuals into factories of mercantile products, the body throws itself into ritual. Far from all musical technological formalities, Japanese noise is born from the individual and community body to create new political forms, new distributions and configurations of subjectivities and sensibilities. Japanoise does what Jerzy Grotowski theorized in his writings about the theater he produced in his laboratory:

Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses. Ours then is a **via negativa** - not a collection of skills but an eradication

¹⁷ Novak, *Japanoise*, 39.

of blocks. [...] The violation of the living organism, the exposure carried to outrageous excess, returns us to a concrete mythical situation, an experience of common human truth.¹⁸

The body of the musicians in noise burns and vanishes, their actions and impulses become sound, their use of technologies is a *via negativa*. Japanoise is a return to the body from music, a sound embodiment [*acuerpamiento sonoro*].

It is worth mentioning that this cathartic born of japanoise, this sound embodiment born from this music, unlike what happened with other artistic expressions such as *butoh*, japanoise fails to materialize as a long-term political practice, as a community experience transcendent of the temporal limits of the initial effervescence, it does not become a form-of-life. As often happens in popular music, which, although arising from a profound subversive questioning of the political reality of the bodies that conforms the practice of music, these (including noise) often fail to transform the initial effervescence into a permanent state of “being” and a way of inhabit the world, in an embodiment not only of sound, but a embodiment of the world, in a form-of-life.

But there is an inherent power in music to form new political realities. Music have always accompanied all human organizations, all political structuring. Noise is an example that new ways of organizing our bodies are possible, that our bodies have sound and political becomings. There is a radical power in sound, in our experience of it. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many “transformational multiplicities,” even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome.¹⁹

I think that it is possible to grasp this rhizome inherent to music, to inhabit the sound, to make the sound listening a corporal and ritual experience. Starting from the formation of a sound aesthetic of the embodiment, it will be possible to make the poetic experience a form-of-life, to expand the powers and becomings of the body and sound to create a state of being and inhabit

¹⁸ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1968), 16-23.

¹⁹ Deleuze y Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11-12.

the world, and thus forge a radical politics of embodiment that involves the whole life. Here, the following quote by Giorgio Agamben takes on a profound meaning:

And yet, only if thought is able to find the political element that has been hidden in the secrecy of singular existence, only if, beyond the split between public and private, political and biographical, *zoè* and *bios*, it is possible to delineate the contours of a form-of-life and of a common use of bodies, will politics be able to escape from its muteness and individual biography from its idiocy.²⁰

Because the political power of music and life lies in each one of us, in our bodies, in our sounds. Perhaps the most radical and fruitful political, aesthetic and philosophical position consists in finding and recognizing the powers of our singular existences, in finding the social becomings intrinsic to our corporalities, and from there forging a new state of being and living, a form-of-life, a new world.

Did you listen?
It is the sound of your world crumbling.
It is the sound of our world resurging.
The day that was day, was night.
And night shall be the day that will be day.
-General Command of the EZLN.
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2 (California: Stanford University Press, 2016), xxi.