

**FOREWORD:  
SCORING CONTRADICTION**

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[O]ur most intense approach to what is 'new' about the old involves a sudden intuition of taboos and constraints, negatives, restrictions, prohibitions, reluctances and aversions. But these are not inherited dogma or aesthetic moralism, and have nothing to do with the respectable tastes and unexamined aesthetic good conduct of the conventional public sphere. They are new taboos; indeed, what is new about the *Novum* is less the work itself (whose most spankingly new innovations, in all their self-conscious Sunday pride, may well come to seem the most pitifully antiquated thing about it) than these new prohibitions, about which it would therefore be better to say, not that they tell you what not to do, but rather that they spell out what is no longer to be done; what you cannot do any more; what it would be corny to do again; or about which something (Socrates' *Daimon*) warns you that it is somehow not quite right and ought to be avoided, for reasons you yourself do not quite understand and may never fully grasp.

Fredric Jameson<sup>1</sup>

If, as Mattin proposes, the movement from Schoenberg to Cage was the step from equality of tone to equality of sounds, what is the next threshold of equalisation? Or in terms borrowed from Jameson: What is no longer to be done in the realms of noise and free improvisation? Mattin's response is uncompromising. Since structures of tone and sound cannot be abstracted from social structures, the gestures, codes, and

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1. F. Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 192.

conventions that have turned noise and free improvisation into recognisable genres are no longer to be done because they prevent us from seeing that the aesthetic liberation of tone and sound ultimately entails the social liberation of humanity. Mattin's Marxism compels him to connect improvisation's staging of freedom to freedom's social realisation. Yet while Marxism may rightly be seen as the most radical of egalitarian visions, it also suggests that legal 'equality' and social 'equivalence' mask the inequality of the capitalist class relation and the abstract domination of exchange value. Against this, communist freedom would realise equality as the society of nonequivalents, or the sociality of inexchangeables. Dissonance and noise are its negative prefiguration within a society where inequality remains the necessary condition of equivalence. The atonal and the aleatory index negative freedoms whose positive obverse can only be realised by abolishing the fundamental inequality of class together with the false equivalence of value. Thus, it is not just tone and score that are no longer to be done, but 'performer' and 'performance' as well. The concert form (staged or impromptu) and the performance venue (theatre, club, hall, gallery, cinema, warehouse) belong to an apparatus of commodification that cannot but reify whatever parcel of freedom or subversion might be experienced by participating individuals. The point however is not to seek a purer elsewhere, some space uncontaminated by commodification, but to turn commodified experience into an experience of commodification, or the experience of unfreedom. What is required, in Mattin's words, is 'a suspension of clear-cut roles where people experience and explore their own conditioning, their unfreedom'. This suspension permits the construction of the space of social dissonance, conceived as the contradiction between the commodified experience of the individual spectator or performer

and the system of social relations enforcing this commodification. The articulation of this contradiction requires collaboration, but a collaboration whose principles must be collectively forged. Thus social dissonance must be *scored*, precisely because it does not sound like anything. This very unlikeness indexes hearing's inextricable sociality: Mattin wants us to hear what the commodity form renders inaudible; what is inaudible in commodified experience. His wager is that the scoring of social dissonance rehearses an experience of unfreedom from whence the prospect of collective freedom might begin to be orchestrated, however dimly.

What does 'experience' mean here? How does it relate to subjectivity? Mattin distinguishes three distinct but superposed strata of experience and subjectivity. First, subjective experience as neurobiological phenomenon, the embedding of a self-model within a representational system's world-model (following the work of Thomas Metzinger). Second, subjective experience as sapience or cognition: the subject as locus of apperceptive spontaneity in which representations are combined according to a rule or concept (following Kant and Sellars). Third, subjective experience as social self-consciousness, comprising an entire system of practices, beliefs, and norms in a contradictory totality (following Hegel and Marx). The first is the domain of the self as individual 'I' or owner of experiences; the second, the realm of intersubjectivity, the space of dialogical exchange mutually implicating first- and third-person standpoints (as indexed by Kant's 'I or he or she or it, the thing that thinks'); the third, the dimension of collective social agency, wherein individual and collective are no longer opposed or even reciprocally implicating, but interpenetrating: Hegel's 'I that is We and We that is I'. (The subject of the unconscious traverses these three strata, but its workings defy any quick

summary here.) However, where Hegel sought the reconciliation of personal and impersonal, individual and collective, in the institutions of bourgeois society (property, marriage, work, state, etc.), Marx exposes these as false conciliations masking the fundamental contradiction between the social production of wealth (cognitive as well as material) and its private accumulation. Capitalism tethers subjectivity to the property relation: to be a social subject is to be a proprietor, either of capital or of labour-power. The realisation of freedom, individual and collective, is stymied by this basic antagonism, locked between its poles. The construction of social dissonance ties this antagonism to the dynamic of alienation traversing the superposed strata of subjectivity: alienation from below, attributable to the dysfunction of the subpersonal mechanisms conforming awareness into the shape of the self; and alienation from above, imposed by the suprapersonal structures constantly personifying us. Personification interpellates the self as a proprietor of experience. By exposing this complicity between naturally mandated selfhood and socially mandated personhood, social dissonance aims to alienate us from the proprietary relation to the experience we call our own. Sandwiched between the sub- and supra-personal levels, cognitive subjectivity is constrained from below (by neurobiology) and conditioned from above (by ideology). But Mattin's gambit is that it is also the medium in which both vectors of alienation can come to be recognised—not because they are transparent to consciousness, but precisely because conception itself registers the symptoms of the process through which the machineries of selfhood and personhood (neurology and ideology) screen themselves from self-consciousness. Between self and person, the subject of social dissonance emerges as the symptom of estrangement

from socially mandated individuality. From this estrangement, something like class-consciousness becomes possible.

Thus, although the neurocomputational processes mapped by Metzinger (presentationality, globality, transparency) are no more conceptual in nature than the social forms anatomized by Marx (commodity, value, money, labour) they remain conceptually tractable. Conception gives us cognitive traction upon the forces shaping subjectivity, despite their nonconceptual character. Of course, this does not automatically endow us with the ability to act upon them. But it is a start, whereas ignoring them is surely a guarantee of practical impotence ('Ignorance never yet helped anyone!', as Marx thundered to Weitling). By exposing the screening mechanism through which these forms and processes hide themselves, social dissonance does not just aim to make us conscious of them, as though this were sufficient for us to change them. In this sense, the estrangement or *Ostranenie* (Shklovsky) sought for in social dissonance differs from standard interpretations of what Brecht called the 'estrangement effect [*Verfremdungseffekt*]'. The point is not just to present the machinery of representation or to integrate the conditions of presentation into what is presented. These once unsettling techniques of defamiliarisation have become overly familiar; they have become, in Jameson's terms, antiquated or even corny. Defamiliarisation presumes that becoming conscious of something motivates us to change it. But what is required is an estrangement of estrangement: a defamiliarisation that suspends the fixed positions from whence estrangement can be experienced as a spectacle because it exposes and indicts the social forms that underpin spectacle's social contract. It is in this regard that the idea of noise retains its pertinence for Mattin:

[N]oise is, in some regards, the most abstract yet the most concrete of cultural expressions [...] It is abstract because [...] it constantly forces [...] complexity to reach another level which has not yet been explored. Yet it is concrete because its specificity has to do with the unacknowledged residue [...] that surfaces in a precise sender-receiver situation.

Because it is at once the most abstract and the most concrete cultural expression, noise conjoins the intelligible and the sensible without fusing them in some mythical immediacy. Thus, it conjoins conception and sensation in an unintuitable register. This is its paradoxical aspect. Noise is successfully conceived when it fails to sound like anything; it is successfully sensed as the failure to sense meaningfully. It correlates thinking and sensing, but without either corresponding to the other. Thus it reveals their historical rift to be not eternal, but socially symptomatic—and symptomatic not of our estrangement from some originary integration of thinking and sensing, but of a social contradiction whose overcoming is indissociable from a revolutionary transformation that would rearticulate them, such that each might spring the other from its limitations.

Social dissonance aims to turn noise against itself; not by reinstating an aesthetics of tone and sound, but by turning noise into a device capable of scrambling established codes for interpreting it:

[W]hat would it mean to claim the possibility to use noise as a device? It would mean incorporating and appropriating the very deciphering of noise into this device. I propose that highlighting the process of the deciphering of noise could be a way to socialise its estrangement effect. Inevitably, this would mean the disappearance of the immediate experience of estrangement for the

time being, but it would also allow us to explore how our social, cognitive, and sensory capacities work at resolving such experience.

Deciphering noise socialises the workings of its estrangement effect. This is a form of demystification, which works by exposing the social relations underlying what presents itself as alien—what is alien is made so by human social relations. To turn noise into a device that incorporates its own deciphering is to show that estrangement is man-made, not God-given, and that its abolition is not the reinstatement of some originary unalienated state of nature, but the estrangement of estrangement. Thus the problem is to convert the experience of estrangement into an estrangement of experience. While the individual's experience of unease or disturbance is required to render estrangement perceptible and cognitively tractable, it must also be grasped as the symptom of a more profound social estrangement, which the individual cannot directly perceive or experience. Noise becomes the mediating instance here in so far as it indexes a confusion that confounds us because we can't control or access what produces it. What could be gleaned from such confusion? Perhaps the recognition that alienation is a contradictory process in which freedom and unfreedom are bound together. Social dissonance is an attempt to articulate this process, and thereby an attempt to get individuals to collectively articulate the contradiction between individual and collective. It affirms the need to overcome this contradiction as the only non-mystificatory idea of freedom available, while acknowledging that this overcoming is congenitally blocked by capitalism. But capitalism is manmade, not God-given, so the question is whether this blockage is a symptom of what Martin (following Samo Tomšič) calls 'constituted alienation' (the



transposition of relations between producers into relations between their products, or commodity fetishism), or whether it follows from a 'constitutive alienation' (Tomšič) intrinsic to being human. The danger of affirming the latter is the accusation of essentialising a historically contingent condition (the charge often levelled by Marxists at Lacan). One way to respond would be to say that it is externalisation (*Entäußerung*) that is constitutive of freedom, because it is at once what separates and unites subject and substance; their reified unity in the interdependence of capital and labour being the estrangement (*Entfremdung*) that reinstates unfreedom. What perpetuates this interdependence? In one sense, the commodification of consciousness is coterminous with capitalism: it is just reification in Lukács' original sense (the commodity as universal social form). In another sense, it would be the ultimate stage of real subsumption as the direct production (not just determination) of experience (the manufacturing of conscious states, as envisaged by Metzinger). But the complete integration of labour into capital (the reduction of worker to tool) threatens to compromise capital's self-reproduction. Tools are not compelled by vital needs to sell their labour-power to reproduce; capital requires labour to maintain a modicum of independence (as living labour) so that it can continue to depend on selling itself to capital for its reproduction (mortifying itself as dead labour precisely in order to maintain itself as living labour). As primary source of surplus-value, the wage relation is fundamental to this entire dynamic. It is the point of intersection for the two cycles of reproduction, capital and labour. Capital needs labour-power, but doesn't care whether or not it is attached to a self when buying and consuming it. Indeed, it promotes the notion of self in order to sell commodities back to labourers. If so, then communism as coincidence of singular 'I' and plural 'We' might

be envisaged as decoupling the interests of the subject from the socially enforced needs of the self and the person. What would arise then is a subject striving to realise social conditions under which humanity becomes free to develop and satisfy needs unconstrained by those of capital.