Title
Future Sounds: The Temporality of Noise by Stephen Kennedy (review)

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Judging by the introduction, which is little more than a summary of the four chapters to follow, at its core Kennedy’s volume speculates about an “atemporal realm” collapsing critical distance, which is expected to produce the “ability to reliably predict what is yet to come”. But what would be the academic value of such trendspoting or futurism if it came at the price of oblivion or ignorance about what preceded it? Who will decide (and how) whether such predictions are reliable if there is no critical distance, no historical precedent in this atemporal realm? To elucidate these issues, Kennedy quickly piles up philosophers – in the space of less than ten pages, we encounter Foucault and Lefebvre, Attali and Whitehead, plus glancing references to Shaviro, Nancy, Virilio, Fukuyama, Thrift, Harman, Heidegger, Derrida, and then via Bergson and Bachelard back to Attali. Now, the first issue is that with the exception of Attali, none of the works invoked here directly address sound or music or noise. What is worse, there is no awareness of the fact that many of the names dropped are sharply incompatible with one another. This is noise of a different sort: the dissonance of suppressed, unexplored disagreements between systems of thought, intoning radically different political, aesthetic, conceptual, and methodical positions. It might have been interesting to the intended reader of this volume (which appears in a Sound Studies series) to engage with Foucault’s sense of the acoustic or sonic conceptual register, and how it differs from or influences what others heard or wrote. But that kind of mapping of the theoretical terrain never happens in this volume.

And the book takes a rather long time, considering its titular promise of sounds and noise, to come around to discussing anything sonic or noisy. After Rihanna is mentioned briefly, twice, in the introduction (albeit misspelled), the reader needs to cross a desert of 50-odd pages of grinding and drifting theory sands to come across the next reference to music or sound (p 53). Instead, we get to contend with Adorno – but not the Adorno who thought and argued about music (not to mention wrote and played music): instead, we get a cardboard Adorno who is propped up as a foil to Quine, Wittgenstein, Deleuze, and Sellars. But how do their philosophical works illuminate future sounds? Never mind: on to quotations from Delanda, Kroker, and Merleau-Ponty. Did they engage with the core concerns of sound studies, or with “future sounds”? We may never know if we rely on Kennedy, because the next chapter, in its entirety, instead offers an annotated reading of Attali. Indeed it is odd to see Attali merit an entire chapter here, since in Sound Studies that work on noise has been discredited ever since Douglas Kahn mocked Attali as a Luddite who made the phonograph the wicked steam engine of the undesirable epoch of repetition, banishing it from the desirable epoch of composition.

Finally on page 96ff (out of a slim 153) we get to sounds: namely to music after 1977 – from Sex Pistols to Patti Smith, from Ornette Coleman to Iggy Pop, and from Krautrock to Donna Summer. Yet when Kennedy mentions these acts, there is no framework for listening to them or contextualizing their performances in a way that somehow arises from the preceding 100 pages. Instead, we get some odd tidbits about Cabaret Voltaire or Human League. The result of all the supposedly groundbreaking theoretical musings is that when it comes to understanding something about Sonic Youth, New Order, Throbbing Gristle, or Einstürzende Neubauten is that they all seem to be the same to Kennedy.
The four chapters here do not have much of a conceptual link to one another; there is no conceptual, let alone historical exploration of what noise is, or how noise means, in certain contexts, and what those contexts are, or mean, to the valorization of noise. Kennedy offers nothing on information theory, no media history of recording or amplification, no aesthetic distinctions between signal and noise, no description of the role of filtering versus the creative recuperation of unpredictable, or unwanted, or unscripted sonic events. There is also no reference to futurity, futurism, or any movement in music or sound art or the like that foregrounds what Kennedy’s book title held out as a promise: future sounds.

Instead, the fourth and last chapter of the book is an extended riff on the Swiss-German painter Paul Klee (1879-1940), who rejected both 19th century and contemporary music and favored Mozart instead. How this goes with noise, future sounds, or any of the other themes of the previous chapters is hard to assess, because instead of a discussion of music or sound this chapter retreats into some minor skirmishes of the culture wars without directly addressing sound studies or music history. Finally, on page 147 Kennedy claims to have been writing about a “sonic economy”, although there is little evidence for a sustained discussion of that phrase or its potential import throughout the book.

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