SONIC WARFARE

Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear

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1998: A Conceptual Event **1**

Some of these sonic worlds will secede from the mainstream worlds and some will be antagonistic towards it.

—Black Audio Film Collective, *The Last Angel of History* (1997)

In an unconscious yet catalytic conceptual episode, the phrase *sonic warfare* first wormed its way into memory sometime in the late 1990s. The implantation had taken place during a video screening of the *The Last Angel of History,* produced by British artists, the Black Audio Film Collective. The video charted the coevolution of Afrofuturism:[1] the interface between the literature of black science fiction, from Samuel Delaney, Octavia Butler, and Ishmael Reed to Greg Tate and the history of Afro-diasporic electronic music, running from Sun Ra in jazz, Lee "Scratch" Perry in dub, and George Clinton in funk, right through to pioneers of Detroit techno (Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Carl Craig) and, from the U.K., jungle and drum'n'bass (A Guy Called Gerald, Goldie). Half way in, the voice of cultural critic and concept engineer Kodwo Eshun refers to the propaganda of Detroit techno's version of Public Enemy, self-proclaimed vinyl guerrillas Underground Resistance. Eshun briefly summarized their audio assault as a kind of cultural hacking against the "mediocre audiovisual" output of the "programmers." The meme of *sonic warfare* was repeated only once more in *Last Angel.*

In this cultural war, in which the colonized of the empire strike back through rhythm and sound, Afrofuturist sonic process is deployed into the networked, diasporic force field that Paul Gilroy termed the Black Atlantic.[2] On this cultural

network, the result of Euro-American colonialism, practices of slavery and forced migration from Africa, the triangle that connects Jamaica to the United States to the U.K., has proved a crucially powerful force for innovation in the history of Western popular music. The nexus of black musical expression, historical oppression, and urban dystopia has a complex history that has directly given rise to and influenced countless sonic inventions, from blues to jazz, from rhythm and blues to rock 'n' roll and from soul to funk and reggae. When this musical war becomes electronic, undergoing a cybernetic phase shift, Western populations become affectively mobilized through wave after wave of machinic dance musics, from dub to disco, from house to techno, from hip-hop to jungle, from dance hall to garage, to grime and forward. Armed with the contagious polyrhythmic matrix of the *futurhythmachine,* this sensual mathematics becomes a sonic weapon in a postcolonial war with Eurocentric culture over the vibrational body and its power to affect and be affected. So if the futurhythmachine constituted a counterculture, it was not just in the sense of a resistance to white power, but rather in the speculative engineering of "enhanced rhythm awareness," or music as nonconscious counting, to use Leibniz's phrase.[3] If Italian futurism first laid down the parameters of the modernism's *art of war in the art of noise,* Afrofuturism attempted to rewire these tactics by a transduction of the alienating experience of the Middle Passage through Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean and Black British urban machine musics. Aside from its sonic weaponry, Afrofuturism had its own propaganda machine that Eshun referred to as sonic fiction. In *More Brilliant Than the Sun,* he described sonic fiction as "frequencies fictionalized, synthesized and organized into escape routes" through "real-world environments that are already alien."[4] "Sonic fiction, phono-fictions generate a landscape extending out into possibility space . . . an engine . . . [to] people the world with audio hallucinations."[5] Sonic fiction is a subspecies of what the anomalous research collective, the Ccru, called Hyperstition, that is, the "element of effective culture that makes itself real, through fictional quantities functioning as time traveling potentials. Hyperstition operates as a coincidence intensifier."[6]

In the mid-1990s, music critic Simon Reynolds noted the preponderance of militaristic imagery within some strands of popular music, particularly those of the hallucinatory and cinematic "popular avant gardes" (he mentions specifically east coast hip-hop, hardstep jungle, and terrorcore gabba).[7] Reynolds describes these musics as producing a kinesthetic sound simulation, enacting the

dystopic megalopolis through sonic affect "in all its dread and tension." These musics, he adds, "act as mirrors to late capitalist reality, stripping away the façade of free enterprise to reveal the war of all against all: a neo-Medieval paranoia-scape of robber barons, pirate corporations, covert operations and conspiratorial cabals. In the terrordome of capitalist anarchy, the underclass can only survive by taking on the mobilisation techniques and the psychology of warfare-forming blood-brotherhoods and warrior-clans, and individually, by transforming the self into a fortress, a one-man army on perpetual alert."[8] The city becomes a war zone, "a treacherous terrain of snipers, man-traps and ambushes."

This present tense of urban dystopias, and their corollary ecologies of dread are central to *Sonic Warfare*. World systems theory, as developed by the likes of Immanuel Wallerstein, divides the world into two sectors, core and periphery, the developed and the developing world.[9] However, the pressure of reality scrambles this simplistic model into a topology of uneven development, in which the periphery is enfolded into the core, with urban ghettos constituting a kind of internal south of the global system, underdeveloped enclaves soldered into the new architectures of security and formats of megalopian sprawl so vividly depicted in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz, The Ecology of Fear* and, more recently, *The Planet of Slums.* This intersection of underdevelopment and high-tech control, amplified by racialized oppression, is the backdrop to Afrofuturism and an inspiration to its musical innovations, tangents, and lines of flight.[10] In the same way that cyberpunk fiction and cinema were foundational to discussions of the image wars of digital culture, the fictions and musical processes of black electronic musics resonate in revealing ways with the technopolitics of affective mobilization that are core to *Sonic Warfare.*

Reynolds seemed torn on the imagery of sonic warfare in ghetto musics, seduced on the one hand between the powerful affect of dread in their sonics, their antiauthoritarian stance, and their depiction of the predatory spaces of late-twentieth-century capital via their then unorthodox hallucinatory realist methodology. Yet he also seemed rightly skeptical of the paranoid, armored model of masculinity that seemed to him lay at their libidinal core. In a number of his texts, from *Blissed Out,* to *The Sex Revolts* to *Energy Flash,* Reynolds draws from Klaus Theweleit's exploration of the libidinal economy of fascist masculinity to challenge a certain legacy of "metal machine music" whose theorization he traces to a futurist lineage reaching back to Italian poet and speed-freak Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. As will be discussed later, Reynolds is also suspicious of

Afrofuturism, despite its significant divergences from both European modern-ism's white noise and the macho posturing of the "street." However, notwith-standing his semiotic, ideological, and psychoanalytic deconstructions of the pop manifestations of musical militarism, the concept of sonic warfare seems to compel an investigation of the material processes that accompany these sonic fictions and the seduction/compulsion and attraction/repulsion of bodies.