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► **To cite this version:**

| Makis Solomos. Four sounds against capitalocene. 2021. hal-03153995

HAL Id: hal-03153995

<https://hal.science/hal-03153995>

Preprint submitted on 26 Feb 2021

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Four sounds Against Capitalocene
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0. INTRODUCTION

Having had the privilege of being invited as a keynote speaker, I did not had to send the title and summary of my paper long in advance. I was thus able to read the titles of the papers of the participants of this conference before defining my paper. I noticed from reading these titles – all very interesting – that something was missing from this conference: a global political and offensive paper on the relationship between the health, ecological, economic, social and political crisis that we are going through and the art world. I will try to present such a paper, which also corresponds to my intellectual development where, from a specialist in contemporary music that I was and still am, I am increasingly interested in the relationships between music and its multiple environments.

1. LOCKDOWN AS A POLITICAL REPRESSIVE MEASURE

→ audio (1'30'')

You have heard a montage of sound ambiances, slogans and songs heard during the demonstrations that took place in Paris from December 2019 to March 2020. The first lockdown did not only stop the economy (a certain economy, as we shall see) as well as people's lives. It also gave a brutal stop to the massive mobilizations that were taking place in the streets of French cities, but also in the streets of Santiago and other cities in Chile or in Hong Kong, Lebanon, Israel and many other countries. Indeed, the first lockdown stopped very strong protest movements against neo-liberal and / or authoritarian policies, movements as important as the mobilizations of the Arab Spring or the so-called “place” movements of the early 2010s.

In France, from December 5, 2019 to March 8, 2020, nine national demonstrations against the pension reform took place (reform which the government of Macron has for the moment put aside, under the pretext of course of the pandemic and not of the mobilization...), but also against a reform of research at the university (which unfortunately has passed); the last demonstration, undoubtedly the most beautiful, being a feminist demonstration converging with the social movement. In these mobilizations, sound, music and the arts involved played an important role. And this on a double level. On the one hand, the movement was accompanied by soundscapes, songs, brass bands, choreographies ... which would also deserve to be looked at for their artistic content, for example as works of “mobile” art. On the other hand, musicians and artists, also going on strike – opera dancers, musicians from conservatories... – made their own demands.

Then, suddenly, on March 17, 2020, at noon, this incredible outpouring of political and artistic energy was followed by a strange silence. The streets were deserted, the public gardens were closed... This was the start of lockdown in France, the only measure available –

due to the lack of preparation of governments despite numerous warnings from scientists and environmentalists – to halt the progression of the pandemic.

Should lockdown also be taken as a repressive measure against the protest movements? Would we be called supporters of conspiracy theories if we said so? If we observe that the mobilizations resumed as soon as the lockdown ceased and if we also observe that, despite the second lockdown that we are currently experiencing, the protests against the new reforms of the Macron government (and in particular the law of “global security”) are very strong, as are mobilizations in other regions of the world, I will answer the initial question positively.

Yes, lockdown is a form of repression, there is no doubt. Unilaterally decreed by a government, it is possible due to the state of emergency. A form of political repression is also the curfew that so-called democratic regimes have hardly experienced outside of times of war. Let’s quote a text by Giorgio Agamben, in Italian and in English, a text which has been widely read and criticized:

Italiano : “Lo stato di paura che in questi anni si è evidentemente diffuso nelle coscienze degli individui e che si traduce in un vero e proprio bisogno di stati di panico collettivo” trovato nell’epidemia “il pretesto ideale”. “La limitazione della libertà imposta dai governi viene accettata in nome di un desiderio di sicurezza che è stato indotto dagli stessi governi che ora intervengono per soddisfarlo”, e che così continuano a stabilire lo stato di emergenza.

English : “The state of fear that in recent years has evidently spread to the consciences of individuals and which translates into a real need for states of collective panic” found in the epidemic “the ideal pretext”. “The limitation of freedom imposed by governments is accepted in the name of a desire for security that has been induced by the same governments that now intervene to satisfy it”, and which thus continue to establish a state of emergency.

This is what Agamben wrote on April 26, 2020. This text has been widely criticized, and rightly so, because the philosopher had not, at that date, taken the measure of the pandemic. But today, in light of the measures taken again during the second wave of the pandemic, which should have been foreseen, this text deserves a reread.

2. ANTHROPOCENE AND CAPITALOCENE

→ audio (1’20’)

During the first lockdown, an atmosphere of astonishment, fear and often despair settled in. For some, the hope was that this would serve as a lesson for the “world to come”. Sometimes, however, we took pleasure in observing the silence, the return of birds to the city ... From the start of the lockdown, several projects were launched to observe the change in sound environments in the cities. To mention the French project *Silent Cities. Paysages sonores d’un monde confine*: “Since the implementation, throughout the world, of more or less strict measures of lockdown of populations and social distancing, many press articles have encouraged city dwellers to contemplate what some already present as a renaturation, or even a rewilding of urbanized spaces”, write the authors of the project, who ended up bringing together many people from several countries around the world, using a precise protocol making it possible to record sound atmospheres. They therefore suggest that we compare a recording from the **Allée de Brienne in Toulouse on March 16, 2020 at 7 p.m.** with a recording from the **same Allée at the same time on March 20, 2020:**

<https://laboratoireparallele.com/2020/04/17/silent%C2%B7cities-paysages-sonores-dun-monde-confine/>

The pandemic clearly marks a new ecological crisis, since it is a zoonosis. In this sense, it could be interpreted as the best warning signal of our entry into the anthropocene, made up of ecological disruptions of all kinds that you don't need to be a collapsologist to take seriously. As such, the disappearance of anthropogenic noise in cities during the first lockdown (this is not the case in the second!) could be taken as a revenge of “nature” on “man”, if the we absolutely want to distinguish the two rather than speak of the “living”. We could dream of “echoes of the past”: “It is sixteen thousand years ago, and the plains teem with life. [...] It is jam-packed with nonhuman life, whose individual voices coalesce into an intense and collective symphony. [...] In this one verdant spot thousands of creatures sing in choruses at all times of the day and night. The visual spectacle is impressive, but the sound is absolutely glorious”, writes Bernie Krause in *The Great Animal Orchestra*. But why would animals do what we did in the era of tonal music: symphonies, choirs, well-behaved concerts; why wouldn't they make some noise, like that magnificent “lion's roar” found in Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation*? Forgive me, but I cannot subscribe to this *wilderness* ecology, which is nostalgic and that takes us back to the days of harmony when we grew to love certain forms of noise. Above all, it is an ecology *that is insensitive to social issues, to issues of racialization or to gender issues*.

Certainly, we all liked the silence and the birds during the first lockdown, but is it necessary to recall that this lockdown was a terrible moment – which is far from over – for the most economically precarious populations, for the violence conjugal, for students, for the poorest countries...? It is important not to think only in terms of environmental ecology. Félix Guattari, in his 1989 manifesto, already said that there is *not only one* ecology (the environmental one): there is also a social ecology and a mental ecology; the simultaneous concern for these three ecologies forms what he called “ecosophy”. An important part of political ecology, that of the left parties, is just coming back on the social ground. This is why, with the economist Benjamin Coriat, we will say that the analysis of the anthropocene (with precious and indispensable indicators such as the state of the ozone layer, the melting of glaciers, the warming of the planet, the state of biodiversity, etc.) is useful, but that it has its limits: “many of those who refer to it have an apolitical vision of the disruption we are witnessing: for them, it is the ‘human activity’ as such which is the cause of disturbances. This is where the notion of capitalocene allows us to go further in the analysis. Based on the observations made in climate change, it highlights that the state of degradation in which we have arrived is not linked to a ‘humanity’ – hypostasized and undefined - but to a very particular humanity, organized by a predatory economic system”.

3. MUSIC IS NOT JUST THE WORLD OF CONSOLATION

→ video: <https://www.shutterstock.com/video/clip-10855673-crowded-music-concert-stage-zoom-camera-+10>

By typing “zoom concert background” on my browser, this is what I found. Of course, you can try to put the sound on, it doesn't change anything, since it's up to you to create the sound!

Artists and all culture workers have suffered tremendously from the situation, from the first lockdown until today, and it is not about to end. After the concert, theater, cinema and dance halls which have closed, there has been a succession of cancellations of major summer and autumn festivals. The economic situation of those in France who enjoy the status of “intermittent du spectacle” is dire, even though the government has extended their rights for a year. In addition to economic suffering, there are several forms of psychological depression, due to cancellations of shows, the inability to publicly present one's work, and the general uncertainty. In France, while places of worship were opened (in limited capacity) from the end of November, the places of spectacle which were to be opened in mid-December, will only open – and this is not certain – in January, like universities. The government informs us that culture (and education) are not “essential” areas, unlike religion...

During the first lockdown, the artists however tried not to be defeated. Many artists have tried to overcome this lockdown from the first days, doing what they loved to do: music, dance, theater, as they could and where they were, “looking for forms suited to the moment in order to hold on, to resist, to continue to exist as well, not to lose a part of their identity which crowns the phase of creation by a presentation, an exchange, a sharing”. And the audience seemed to be “there”, that is to say in front of their computer mainly.

Thus, we had ersatz concerts produced by concert halls, by professional orchestras or by high-level artists, who could have professional means to produce good videos. In France, we quickly had a Ravel's *Boléro* offered on YouTube by the Orchestre national de France (#Confinement and #EnsembleÀLaMaison), a video that went viral (whether spectators saw it to the end is another question). Another video worked well: the dancers of the Paris Opera and their *Ballet en visioconférence* in tribute to caregivers (#RestezChez VOUS), with a production by the filmmaker Cédric Klapisch: the dancers “appeared both natural and professional in gestures whose very nature and quality of execution stood out against the domestic setting of the background. They made a hob, a stairwell, a corridor, the frame of a window, a carpet or a bathtub a new bar [to dance], a new workspace”.

In parallel to these “zoom concerts”, we had the famous concerts of windows and balconies at 8 pm, which came from Italy. In France, they took a very interesting turn when they became a means of protest as a reminder that we applaud the caregivers whom the government had beaten up when they demonstrated against the break-up of the public hospital. Alessandro Greppi and Diane Schuh told us about these forms of protest linked to artistic events. There have also been many other “grassroots” initiatives, for example podcasts combining music or sound creation.

Finally, there were all those initiatives by grassroots musicians and artists (and countless amateurs as well), which were discussed previously, who tried to resist the desperation of lockdown by playing alone or with others in amateur videos.

What about “zoom-concerts”, whether they are those of large orchestras or concert halls or those of grassroots musicians? Certainly, they brought consolation, but no one was fooled (it is significant that they were far fewer in the second lockdown). And it is also difficult, with

hindsight, to subscribe to the enthusiasm of certain journalists, during the beginnings of the first lockdown, for the videos of artists in beautiful houses or in splendid gardens playing the hits of classical music. “Lockdown inspires”, we could read in a video posted online by the newspaper *Le Monde*. This is undoubtedly the case of the French violinist Renaud Capuçon, who made videos that border on the ridiculous:

→ vidéo : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnCNkClwxYA>

4. THE ARTIST AS PRODUCER

→ audio (1'30)

Artists are rightly concerned that “zoom-concerts” have contributed to the idea that art has to be free, that the artist's work does not have to be remunerated. (If there is one thing that should be free during this health, political, economic, ecological, social crisis that we are going through, it is internet connections!) On the other hand, as rock musician Dave Grohl writes: “The coronavirus pandemic has reduced today's living music to unflattering little windows that look like video surveillance screens, and sound like Neil Armstrong's distorted radio transmissions from the moon, all chopped and compressed”. “Zoom-concerts” indeed introduce us into a world where everything is recorded, stored, sold, including our personal data – the world of generalized surveillance. Most of us don't care or live with it, until one day we learn that Zoom banned this or that conference (political censorship) as it happened recently with the well-known Palestinian activist Leila Khaled. There is no need to invoke Agamben again (or Michel Foucault) to say that capitalism has reached the stage of biopolitics. If you prefer a more moderate, but equally disturbing version, I will cite pianist and researcher Pavlos Antoniadis who, referring to the live animal markets where covid was born – and where soils are always wet from runoff blood from slaughtered wild animals, from seafood, etc. –, evokes the “wet markets” of music: “It is the market for streaming digital data between brains connected in networks, the ‘wetware’ and ‘netware’ of new computer and communication technologies, complementing the distinction between ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ in the context of *cognitive capitalism*”.

The progress of GAFAM (Google-Apple-Facebook-Amazon-Microsoft), of Zoom.us and other empires of digital capitalism during the crisis is ruthless. They are taking over sectors that are still not very industrialized, such as education. Art has been delivered to them for a long time in its commercial version and it is a war prize that will cost the art world dearly: an article in the international edition of the newspaper *The Guardian* recently announced in its headline that “Streaming platforms aren't helping musicians – and things are only getting worse”. And this is just a small example. In fact, to follow the economist Cédric Durand, it is not “digital capitalism” that we should speak of but “techno-feudalism”, based on rent, predation and the political domination of multinational companies. The reference to feudalism is not a metaphor. The analysis of the social relations generated by this mutation of capitalism indicates that “the link between the digital multinational companies and the population is that of the seigneurial class with the serfs and [that] their productive behavior is more a matter of feudal predation than of the capitalist competition”. We do not have time to

develop the question here, but Cédric Durand delivers a serious and convincing analysis, showing that the current future of capitalism is not the society of “free men” that libertarians dream of but a feudal form of the society.

If artists want to avoid being eliminated or instrumentalized – to serve as a Trojan horse for techno-feudalism – by this development, it is important to think about the means of production they use and the social relationships they induce. Art and especially music are sometimes steeped in a form of idealism, where, under the pretext of focusing on the music “itself”, musicologists leave this reflection to sociologists or politically engaged people. The mutation that we are witnessing, to which the crisis serves in many ways as a gigantic territory for experimentation, will surely modify the music “itself”, if that expression means anything. Let us become a little materialistic, in order to think of the artist as a *producer*, and let’s quote the end of Walter Benjamin's article from the 1930s, “The author as a producer”: “Perhaps you have noticed that this development, of the end of which we are approaching, formulates a single requirement with regard to the writer, the requirement to *reflect*, to ask oneself what is his position in the process of production ”.

The evolution is not inevitable. One can imagine a development of the commons, as many claim: “The GAFAM will perish on their own when we will understand that the Internet must become a public service. Commons as well as air and water. A global commons. We have to work on that as much as on a solidarity economy”, says the writer Alain Damasio. We can also imagine “short circuits” of culture, which would make it possible, “as in agriculture, to do without intermediaries, while taking into account the reduction of the ecological footprint and the constraints of social distancing”. We can still think of degrowth, even if the word is scary, not only to live with less technology, but to develop other technologies, which would allow us to move towards autonomy, that is to say towards “emancipation from dependence on alienating and heteronomous systems”. Thinking of the artist as a producer would perhaps open the doors to many other concrete, “real” utopias (to quote sociologist Erik Olin Wright), and would certainly not distance us from the art world, quite the contrary.