

Unravelling “Arrhythmia”

August 24, 2023



It's the Summer of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has violently torn through the global community. George Floyd has been murdered by racist Minnesotan cops, and millions have turned out to protest. Marching down the streets of post-industrial Detroit with stereo in tow and techno music blasting as accompaniment, a multiracial crowd chants, “No justice, no peace, fuck these racist ass police” to the tune of Bruno Furlan’s “Line Five.” A handmade placard declares, “Techno is Black! Police are Wack! Ravers 4 Racial Justice!”

This moment of human beings making the streets theirs and asserting their right to live and be free resonates throughout Alexander Billet’s wonderful new book, *Shake the City: Experiments in Space and Time, Music and Crisis*. Commencing at the birth of capitalism, Billet lucidly conveys the interactions between the “movement” of a song (extracting it from its self-contained status as a piece of music) and social “movement” in the streets: those hard-fought struggles for political, social, and economic justice that constitute the motor force of human history. For Billet though, the relationship between these two “movements” is perpetually being transformed, redefined, and severed by the dominance of capital and the commodity-form. Capitalism’s prerogative of making a buck out of anything that moves cannibalizes music, turning the threat it *may* pose to the structures of power into a cultural form that amounts to mere venting against the everyday oppression of the system-at-large, thereby reenforcing the system’s predominance.

Unlike Michael Denning’s exploration of world music and anti-colonial insurgency in *Noise Uprising*, or Mark Abel’s analysis of music and time in *Groove Music*, the battleground for this book is space and the city—the site of our alienation from work, from domestic life, and (saddest of all) from each other. Billet never flinches from just how daunting and all-consuming the corporate control of music has become. Drawing upon Frankfurt School icon Theodor W. Adorno, *Shake the City* takes seriously his assertion that popular music is a “deceitful fetter on the imagination,” reproducing the rhythms of industrial production and socializing us into the conditions of our own exploitation. This state of affairs did not dissolve at the onset of neoliberalism. If anything, it intensified.

Drawing on French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Billet claims that we live in a state of “arrhythmia.” The places we call home are sick because we are sick, “coercively saddled with an anxiety that never abates.” We are indebted, paid a pittance for long, arduous, labor-intensive jobs, and routinely forking out a large sum of our pay packets in order to keep a roof over our heads. The possibilities

latent within the city, “this massive concatenation of potential and human imagination,” are dampened at every turn. Instead of human flourishing, we are “ushered through” this cacophony of domination. The algorithms of Spotify, Apple, and even TikTok marshal us away from the freedom to choose and into particular, more profitable soundscapes. “Lofi Study Beats” serve to smooth out the edges of a hostile environment that was never made for us, and the racialized history of powerful, white record executives disenfranchising black musicians and lining their own pockets is generalized across the music industry in the age of big-tech streaming platforms.

Yet the story isn’t one-sided. Whilst the city is structured in a way to enable the uninterrupted flow of capital and the production of value at the expense of the majority, new “movements” arise to challenge this, or eke out a place amidst the hostile noise. Even in rustbelt Detroit, plagued as it is by unemployment, poor housing, and decline, the former landmarks of the Motor City, such as the abandoned Packard plant, would become venues of Techno’s birth, producing “the experience of a shared rhythm,” externalizing the imaginations of its participants through this “collective touchstone.” In seventies New York, the emergence of Hip-Hop as a musical form reckoning with racialized inequalities, citadel disintegration, and an incipient process of gentrification would eventually undergo its own process of corporate absorption and massification. But the sediments of its history as a culture of block parties, cyphers, and speaking truth to power still live on within its orbit. In English cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, music has become an arena of battle, as the proponents of a real estate revolution decry the music and collective joy of urban nightlife in favor of gentrification and privatizing the city.

Late night noise in non-residential locales, it turns out, isn’t so desirable for the neoliberal city’s new class of wealthy proprietarians. And more powerfully, as SmokedPoets, street poet and presenter of the *Guerilla* radio show, conveyed to me, we see numerous examples of oppressed peoples appropriating the violent rhythms of their oppressor, such as Palestinian Drill artists using the sounds of drones and shells as a challenge to the colonial occupation of their land. Adorno may still be sneering from beyond the grave, but there remain “resources of hope” that could one day wipe that expression off his face.

Billet’s *Shake the City* is a tribute to the cultural resonances of the class struggle. Any social movement worth its salt cultivates its own soundtrack. Sometimes, as with the chants of “Oh Jeremy Corbyn” to the White Stripes’ “Seven Nation Army,” the rhythm provides a convenient rallying cry, setting a movement’s ambitions to a popular tune. Often, the music sounds a clarion call, an insistence on the value of life against the barbarities of racial violence, as with the ringing out of Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” throughout the first round of Black Lives Matter protests in 2015. The scores of nineteenth-century Jewish workers who would carol “Hey hey, daloy politsey” (“Hey hey, down with the police”) in the face of state persecution and murderous pogroms exemplify the creativity of the street fighter. And on other occasions, such as Lethal Bizzle’s “Pow” and the student protests that rocked Britain in 2010, the music opens a pathway into grasping what Raymond Williams called the movements’ “structure of feeling.”

Shake the City captures all of these dynamics and then some. Billet’s debut book is a work of cultural criticism par excellence. The late Marshall Berman once wrote in the pages of the *New Left Review* that those of us who want to radically change the world for the better should pay greater attention to the “signs on the street.” Billet calls for us to listen seriously for the sounds of the street. Eager to construct a “Marxism with a soul,” *Shake the City* traverses the entrance of a disalienating subject desperately trying to impose the imprints of its brittle but determined emancipatory potential onto the space of capitalism. Let’s hope a new chapter in this story is written soon.