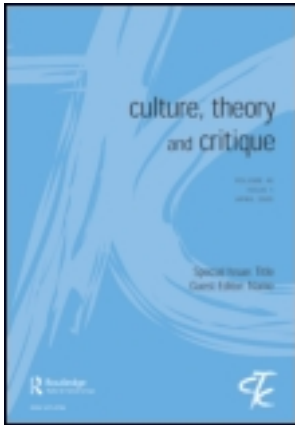


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Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault & the Biopolitics of Uncool¹

Robin James

Abstract *Is it even possible to resist or oppose neoliberalism? I consider two responses that translate musical practices into counter-hegemonic political strategies: Jacques Attali's theory of 'composition' and the biopolitics of 'uncool'. Reading Jacques Attali's Noise through Foucault's late work, I argue that Attali's concept of 'repetition' is best understood as a theory of neoliberal biopolitics, and his theory composition is actually a model of deregulated subjectivity. Composition is thus not an alternative to neoliberalism but its quintessence. An aesthetics and ethos of 'uncool' might be a more viable alternative. If and when they function as bad, unprofitable investments, uncool practices like smoothness (predictable regularity) can undercut neoliberal imperatives to self-capitalisation. I consider both the impact of neoliberalism on music, and how the study of music can advance theories of neoliberalism.*

According to theorists like Jacques Rancière and Mark Fisher, that it is impossible to even *imagine* alternatives to the status quo is one of neoliberalism's central, definitive claims (Rancière 1999; Fisher 2009). However, in his 1977 book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali claims to develop just such an alternative. He argues that 'composition' – music-making unconstrained by commodification, alienation, exchange, and what Herbert Marcuse calls the 'performance principle' – is a way to resist post-industrial capitalist exploitation, which he calls 'repetition' (Attali 1984; Marcuse 1974). Reading Attali through Michel Foucault, I argue that 'repetition' is less an Adornian theory of mass culture and more a Foucaultian concept of 'neoliberal biopolitics – that is, the statistical maximization of life and minimization of risk or randomness' (James 2012). From this perspective, Attalian *composition is not*

¹Some of the ideas in this article come from work presented at the 2012 meeting of philoSOPHIA: a feminist society, and from my article 'Loving the Alien' in *The New Inquiry*. I am grateful to my interlocutors at the conference, and especially to my editor, Rob Horning, for his brilliant editorial work. I would also like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their incredibly helpful comments, and my research assistant, Chad Glenn, for his help in preparing this essay for publication.

so much an alternative to repetition as its culmination. Attalian composition, both as a practice of the self and as a mode of mid-20th-century Western musical production and consumption, is a type of *deregulatory neoliberalism*.

Though composition is *not* an alternative to neoliberalism, we can still look to musical practices for possible alternatives to deregulatory normalisation. Deregulation makes the avant-garde the new normal. Everyone in the bourgeois mainstream (not just elites) is expected to cut a new leading edge, to 'go gaga' (Halberstam 2012). In that case, might blandly regularised averageness – what I'm calling, following J. Temperance (2012), 'uncool' – be a way to undermine neoliberal imperatives to cultivate and exploit excess? Or, is uncool's frictionless co-opt-ability evidence that it is incapable of genuinely 'resisting' neoliberal hegemony? But perhaps this inability to 'resist' is evidence that alternatives to deregulatory normalisation won't *oppose* co-optation so much as make it a *bad (unprofitable) investment*? To address these questions, I consider two types of musical 'uncool' found in Spandau Ballet's 'True' (1983): (1) the inability to louden the mix without introducing overly obvious errors, which I'm calling its sonic uncool, and (2) the white masculine uncool attributed to it by critics and journalists. I argue that the most effective counter-hegemonic responses to deregulatory biopolitics must address populations, like the first type of uncool, not (only) individuals, like the second type.

In what follows, I will focus on several key concepts in *Noise*, and read them through Foucault's late work on neoliberalism. First, I will argue that Attali's concept of repetition, his term for the episteme that unites both post-tonal compositional practice and neoliberal political economy, is compatible with and sometimes expands on Foucault's theory of biopolitics. Then, I explain how Attali derives three key features of neoliberalism – deregulation, intensification, and human capital – from an analysis of avant-garde composition and the recording industry. This both clarifies how specific musical practices and conventions are *neoliberal*, and sets up the last two sections of the essay, where I first critique his theory of composition, and then consider the two types of 'uncool' discussed above.

But first, I want to clarify my method. How can an analysis of music tell us anything about politics? How can I translate between musical practices and aesthetics, on the one hand, and political/ideological formations, on the other? Following scholars like David Harvey and Shannon Winnubst, who treat neoliberalism as a 'common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Harvey 2007: 148), or a 'social ontology and epistemology' (Winnubst 2012: 83), I take neoliberalism as a *background epistemic or ideological context* that sets the parameters within which specific practices are meaningful (they make sense) and functional (they work correctly) (Winnubst 2012). In the contemporary Western world, neoliberalism is one of the primary epistemological frameworks that shape structures of subjectivity, relations of production, gender and race politics, even artistic practices and aesthetics. Taking neoliberalism as a common epistemic framework (or, in more Foucaultian terms, power-knowledge regime), I can posit parallels between music and politics without having to go so far as to claim causal relationships among them. Unlike Attali, who claims that music 'heralds' paradigm shifts in political economy (and thus posits both causal and temporally correlated

relationships), I think music and political economy are both manifestations of broader epistemic shifts that cannot be pinned down to singular, coherently identifiable causes. This essay considers the extent to which Attali's account of music and political economy is compatible with Foucault's understanding of biopolitical neoliberalism, and then uses that compatibility as the basis for extending Foucaultian analysis of neoliberalism of and through music.

1. Repetition is not mass culture, but biopolitics

To what extent is Attali's *Noise* compatible with a Foucaultian conception of neoliberalism? In what way is repetition, Attali's term for late capitalist political economy, *biopolitical*, a power addressed to *life*?

Attali's term for neoliberal political economy is 'repetition'. Though the term might connote standardised 'mass production' (Attali 1983: 85), repetition is an *upgrade* on it. Capitalism has exhausted additive and multiplicative models of expansion; to grow the economy (i.e. extract further surplus value), it must shift to algorithmic models of intensification. 'Combinatorics', Attali argues, 'gives way to *statistics* . . . and *probability*' (Attali 1984: 65), or, as Foucault puts it, to 'analytics' (Foucault 1990: 148). Repetition, in other words, is the age of *statistical* reproduction; in this way, it strongly resembles Foucault's concept of *neoliberal biopolitics*.

There are four primary points of comparison between Attali and Foucault's account of neoliberal biopolitics: *statistics*, aleatory or *chance* processes (which are generated and administered statistically), *life*, and *noise*. First, statistics: Foucault and Attali offer nearly identical accounts of the role of statistics in neoliberalism. Just as 'the mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures' (Foucault 2003: 246), repetition is a 'macrostatistical and global, aleatory view, in terms of probabilities and statistical groups' (Attali 1983: 11). Statistics target society at large, and administer large-scale (overall, global) problems by 'effect[ing] distributions around the norm' (Foucault 1990: 144), or creating 'a music of the mean' (Attali 1984:124). Repetition/biopolitical administration normalises populations: probabilistic algorithms standardise deviations and funnel resources to the most highly probable – that is, normal – events, thus creating a feedback loop in which the norm reproduces itself as normal.

Reading Foucault through Attali suggests that biopolitical neoliberalism *uses the laws of acoustics as the mode of capitalist production in general*. On the one hand, in biopolitics/repetition, statistics are the mode of production of both society and capital. On the other hand, sounds are waves of air pressure that are modeled statistically as sine-wave shaped frequencies; in this way, the laws of acoustics, at least as understood by contemporary Western physics, *are* statistical.² Sound and statistics share an underlying logic – the sine wave. If, as Attali puts it, 'non-harmonic music' (1984: 115) makes 'the laws of acoustics . . . the mode of production of a new sound matter', and in so doing, 'displays all of the characteristics of the technocracy managing the great machines of

²My thanks to one of my anonymous reviewers for helping me articulate this point more clearly.

the repetitive economy' (1984: 113), then repetition's political economy also *makes the laws of acoustics – that is, the sine wave – the mode of capitalist production*. Attali's theory of repetition isn't just comparable with, but expands on Foucault's conception of biopolitics: these statistical, probabilistic arts of government are also, as it were, arts of noise.

Secondly, chance: statistics produce social/musical order by 'establish[ing] a sort of homeostasis, and compensate[ing] for variations within this general population and its aleatory field' (Foucault 2003: 246). Or, in Attali's terms, they 'monitor unexpected forms' (Attali 1984: 115). Statistical instruments generate a field in which superficially random or aleatory events appear, but do so in controlled and benign ways. As economic algorithms or acoustic phenomena, statistics create modes of production in which the individual actor, 'whatever he does, he is no more than an aleatory element in a statistical law. Even if in appearance everything is a possibility for him, on the average his behavior obeys specifiable, abstract, ineluctable functional laws' (Attali 1984: 115). That's how deregulation works: tightly controlled background conditions generate foreground 'randomness', which in turn supports and reaffirms (rather than destabilises) the background. I will discuss deregulation more extensively below.

Thirdly, life: repetition is biopolitical in the Foucaultian sense not just because it is statistical and probabilistic, but also because it centers biological life as a privileged field of knowledge and regulation. 'After music', Attali argues, 'the biological sciences were the first to tackle this problem' of repetition (1984: 89), namely, the problem of 'the conditions of the replication of life' (1984: 89; emphasis mine). From this perspective, life is a deregulated market, not a natural given. 'Biology replaces mechanics' (1984: 89) because it shifts focus from the regulated, mechanistic functioning of individual bodies (anatomy), to the deregulated health and flourishing of populations (epidemiology, genetics): it is 'a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes' (Foucault 2003: 249), or, in other words, by 'health'. Even though its aim is to maximise life, the discourse of health will require, as both Foucault and Attali claim, 'killing others to protect oneself' (Attali 1984: 126). Health requires not just the elimination of external contaminants, but, more importantly, the purification from what Foucault calls 'threats born of and in its own body' (Foucault 2003: 216). This manifests not only in Nazi racism, which is Foucault's example, but also avant-garde art music, in which, as Attali explains, 'the musical ideal then almost becomes an ideal of health: quality, purity, the elimination of noises' (Attali 1984: 122; emphasis mine). Noise is *internal* to every signal – the product of production, transmission, broadcast, and reception. Health requires the elimination of noise – or rather, the recycling of noise into signal.

Thus, the fourth point of comparison, noise: Attali claims 'repetition produces information free of noise' (Attali 1984: 106). However, as audio engineers know, every process of transmission introduces noise into the broadcast signal. Or, as Foucault puts it, 'the economic process *always leads to temporary frictions, to modifications* which risk giving rise to exceptional situations with difficulties of adaptation and more or less serious repercussions on some groups' (Foucault 2008: 138; emphasis mine). These 'frictions' and 'modifications' are statistical noise – deviations that can't be standardised and

controlled for. Noisy frictions or mutations, if left unadjusted, could lead the system to a 'crisis', which amounts to 'a decrease in the efficiency' (Attali 1984: 127) of repetition. Repetition eliminates noise by recycling it back into signal. 'Deviations from the original usage of the code constitute a profound danger to the existing powers, so much so that they sometimes transform their morphologies *in order to benefit* from the new network themselves' (1984: 35; emphasis mine). Instead of eliminating resistant (friction), unruly (noisy) material that could destabilise hegemonic power relations, neoliberalism processes noise into something ultimately beneficial and 'recuperable' (1984: 124). Noise isn't rejected as waste, but fed back into the repetitive apparatus and recycled into productive signal. Cage's 4'33" is the quintessential musical example of this recycling: the noises in the concert hall don't interrupt the musical performance, they *are* the musical performance. Thus, because noise is ultimately beneficial, there is incentive to generate more of it, and 'a burgeoning of each individual's capacity to create order from noise' (Attali 1984: 132). This is what deregulation does – generate more superficially noisy material that ultimately works with or as signal. This recycling of noise into signal can also be described in terms of resilience discourse, which, as Mark Neocleous (2013) argues, is another central component of contemporary neoliberal ideology and practice.

A practice of statistically and probabilistically deregulating the 'conditions' of music, politics, and economics so that they produce a 'healthy', resilient body capable of not just weathering, but profiting from noisy interruptions, Attali's repetition is not a Marxist concept of mass (re)production, but a quasi-Foucaultian notion of biopolitics. In the next section, I examine more fully the role of deregulation in both Foucault and Attali.

2. Deregulation: synthesisers and chance processes

Social contract theory, like tonality, claimed to build a model of social or musical organisation on the basis of natural order (e.g., the State of Nature, the overtone series).³ In this view, individuals have to be disciplined so they more perfectly conform to the natural order that they already ought to manifest in the first place (e.g., gender norms discipline us into the supposedly naturally sexed bodies we are born with). Neoliberalism, on the other hand, 'displaces the older metaphysics of a transcendental nature' (Winnubst 2012: 82) with a newer, non-foundational and non-transcendental theory of nature. As Attali puts it, neoliberalism 'rejects the hypothesis of a natural foundation for relations of sound, refuses a natural organization' (1984: 114). Nature is an *effect* of market forces, not a cause (Foucault 2008: 120).⁴ As an effect, it is an index of a well-functioning system. The system (i.e. the market) must be left alone (*laissez nous faire*) so that it *generates* the most

³See my *The Conjectural Body* (2010) for more on the relationship between social contract theory's concept of nature and tonality's use of the overtone series.

⁴Both Foucault and Attali call this new understanding of market relations 'competition' (Foucault 2008: 118; Attali 1984: 68).

accurate representation of its underlying conditions (Winnubst 2012: 82; Foucault 2008: 32–33). Nature, in other words, is synthetic.

This is why Attali uses the metaphor of an audio synthesiser to explain deregulatory ‘free’ markets: In the ‘free market, the only freedom left is that of the *synthesizer*: to combine preestablished programs’ (Attali 1984: 114), programs like the aforementioned ‘code’ or, to follow through with Attali’s metaphor, synthesiser patches. An audio synthesiser *generates* sound waves, just as neoliberal political theory generates ‘nature’ as an effect of the market. Though a synthesiser is able to generate a much larger range of sounds than a traditional instrument (like a piano), this range extends only as far as the limitations of the hardware and software one uses. An amplifier or an oscillator can only be tuned up to 10. Patches, cables, speakers, and so on – these background conditions regulate the process of sound production itself. So, for example, instead of disciplining individuals to make them conform to supposedly ‘natural’ forms (such as binarily sexed/gendered bodies, or the overtone series), neoliberalism regulates the material conditions of production, defining a range within which individual variability can and *should* be generated.

Deregulation is *designed to produce noisy irregularity*, not to suppress or eliminate it (Shaviro 2013). Nothing is explicitly prohibited or impossible; from a Foucaultian perspective, what appears to be repression is actually an *incitement* to deviance (Foucault 1990). Deregulatory processes *regulate and adjust themselves* so that any potential irregularities can be fed back into the system without unduly disturbing it. As Attali puts it, they ‘monitor noises, to maintain them, and to control their repetition within a determined code’ (1984: 87). The *code* does the work; like an autonomous drone, the process is designed to run on its own. Because the process needs little to no explicit external regulation, and because it appears to have no limits or prohibitions, it *seems* ‘free’.

Deregulation is like a random number generator – a program crafted to produce random outcomes. However, in order to get these outcomes, there has to be a code to generate them. Surface randomness is the effect of deeper, ‘earlier’ (Attali 1984: 128) systematicity. As Foucault puts it, ‘the main and constant concern of governmental intervention’ is ‘the *conditions* of the existence of the market . . . the “framework”’ (Foucault 2008: 140; emphasis mine). Though the code runs itself, it runs *on* something; computer code, for example, requires adequate hardware, power, and inputs. Deregulatory neoliberalism manages the code indirectly, via these background conditions or infrastructure. For example, rather than explicitly prohibiting specific classes of people from voting, state legislatures enact voter ID laws. Though any citizen can get a state-issued ID card, various background conditions – working hours, transportation networks and access, associated costs and application fees, availability of childcare, etc. – make it difficult for members of disadvantaged groups to easily obtain an ID. So, these laws rely on the racist and classist practices embedded in societal infrastructure to disenfranchise black and minority voters (Goulka 2012). We don’t need to control people; no matter what they do, the outcome will reinforce and/or augment the established social order. So, deregulation allows power to have it both ways – individual freedom is fully consistent with, and indeed necessary for, social control.

Noise shows us how deregulation influences mid-century avant-garde art music practices like the open work. 'Not so much a musical composition as a *field of possibilities*, an explicit invitation to exercise choice' (Pousseur, cited in Eco 2004: 168), open works are deregulatory structures that generate individual variability (Eco 2004). Instead of specifying the precise sounds to be performed, open works are recipes or programs for sound-generating practices. John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, for example, is a set of instructions for generating a musical work from radios. The surface-level sounds appear to be randomly generated – what we actually hear depends on the programming schedules of the specific stations available in a particular location, how the individual performers interpret the instructions, the idiosyncrasies of the radios with which they are performing, etc. None of those factors are *explicitly* controlled for in the composition itself. Because the composition regulates the *background conditions* for sound production 'the most formal order, the most precise and rigorous directing, are masked behind a system evocative of autonomy of chance' (Attali 1984: 114). Background conditions are predetermined and unvariable, so the aleatory process is limited by the parameters set out by these conditions. The point of this processing is to generate *all* the possible outcomes contained within these parameters, fully realising or optimising the system they constitute.

Though Attali does not directly address this in *Noise*, his method does give us a metaphor for understanding the interaction between macro- and micro-level deregulation, and how individual delinquency reinforces system-wide stability: the audio equaliser. Deregulation maximises individual variability, which in turn supports and feeds overall consistency. Equalisers produce overall consistency and stability from micro-level variability. Transmission and broadcast inevitably introduce noise into audio signals, so while contemporary audio recordings are very carefully mixed and balanced, the song you hear on your computer is going to be unbalanced, the mix distorted by all the 'noise' introduced by data streaming, compression, and similar processes. An equaliser re-balances the individual elements of the mix, not in accordance with the recording's original audio profile, but with whatever preprogrammed setting – i.e. rock arena, concert hall – you've selected. Both audio equalisers and neoliberal governmentality 'intervene at the level at which these general phenomena', like sonic profiles, 'are determined . . . to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and *compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field*' (Foucault 2003: 246). Like an audio equaliser, neoliberalism uses variability and delinquency at the individual level as the raw material from which to craft macro-level regularity. *Neoliberalism works like an audio equaliser*. It recycles noise, feeding it back into and thus *intensifying* signal. Attali's analysis of the mid-20th century record industry clearly illustrates how deregulated markets 'produce' value through practices of intensification.

3. Recorded music: intensification and human capital

According to Attali, the record industry is one of the earliest examples of neoliberal political economy: 'repetition appears at the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of recording' (Attali 1984: 32). In particular, it

illustrates how ‘the commodity could also disappear’, to be replaced by the ‘stockpile’ of money (1984: 130) – or, in more Marxist terms, the shift from an economy based on the *exchange* of commodities (M–C–M1, or money-commodity-money) into one based on the direct *intensification* of money (M–M1, or money-money).⁵ In Attali’s view, musical recordings are not commodified labor-time, but stockpiles of ‘use-time’. Use-time is, I will argue later in this section, a form of social or human capital.

(a) *Intensification*

Though musical recordings *can* be commodified, Attali thinks they exhibit a different relation to time and value than commodities do. Commodities *translate* the labor-time deposited in them into exchange value; commodity form is the medium in which time and value can be expressed in identical terms. Records, on the other hand, ‘transfor[m] use-time’, the time it takes to listen to a record, ‘into a stockpileable object’ (Attali 1984: 126). They transubstantiate time into material form, no translation or mediation required – time is already value, and vice versa; the records materialise this value qua time. As Attali argues, ‘repetition . . . constitutes a stockpile of use-time by registering . . . absolute values’ (1984: 125). Time needs to be materialised in an object so it can be stockpiled *as value*. With the commodity out of the value-generating equation, *value feeds back or compounds upon itself*, bypassing both transmission in exchange or expenditure in use – value is ‘absolute’, not in exchange or use (or fetishised sociality).

Record charts index the relative *intensity* of this use-time’s value. According to Attali, charts (like *Billboard’s* Hot 100) present records’ value as both (A) stockpiled use-time – the number of ‘listens’, and (B) stockpiled market activity. With respect to (A), because charts measure radio plays, internet streams, YouTube plays, and other ‘free’ audio transactions, record charts are particularly clear examples of the commodity’s irrelevance to neoliberalism, both as an object and as a medium for market transactions. With respect to (B), Attali thinks record charts aren’t that different from the DOW, CAC 40, or FTSE: ‘the hit parade system advertises the fact that . . . an object’s *value is a function of the intensity* of the financial pressures of the new titles waiting to enter circulation’, which makes charts ‘the public display of the *velocity of exchange*’ (Attali 1984: 107; emphasis mine). Intensity and velocity measure quantities *in time*; they are statistical approximations of how much of X in given time window Y (i.e. how many listens per week). Value doesn’t express the useful qualities or compare quantities, but measures the *intensity and velocity* of the M–M1 transaction. That is why ‘hit parades . . . play a central role in this new type of political economy’ (1984: 170) and exemplify a general shift in the production and conception of value. In Attali’s view,

⁵Finance and credit capital skips a step, and its formula might be written as M–M1. In other words, an increase in finance capital requires no direct or overt mediation by a commodity or service: no actual goods or services are required to represent or serve as a placeholder for the abstract value invested in money; and no labour power is required to account for the transformation or generation of surplus value as profit’ (Nealon 2002: 79).

record charts *already* explicitly worked like then-contemporary neoliberal economists *wanted* and *hoped* society would work: they measure the intensity of investment (M–M1) in stockpiled use-time.

(b) Human capital

'Use-time' (Attali 1984: 126) is Attali's term for the time one would invest in listening to a record. But the point of stockpiling is that you don't have to actually *listen* to the record to benefit from its value; stockpiling compounds surplus value on its own, no listening labor necessary. Moreover, the point of curating a record collection isn't managing the fetish-value of the records, their 'object-related differences' (1984: 121); rather, the point is to increase the amount of use-time at your disposal, augmenting the time you've invested in cultivating yourself, your social or human capital.

The neoliberal 'self is reconceived as a stock of capital' (Horning 2013), as, in other words, 'the accumulation of skills and qualities' understood and treated 'as forms of capital investment' (Dilts 2011: 139,137). This capital manifests qualitatively, as what Rob Horning calls 'cool' (2013) and quantitatively, as what Attali calls use-time. Though Horning doesn't explicitly use the term 'use-time' in his account of cool, he describes something quite like it: 'we must view it [cool] . . . as something countable in media-exposure minutes . . . [or] standardized units that our significance to society could be measured in' (Horning 2013). For Horning, social media (Klout scores, follower or friend counts, etc.) measures the intensity of 'the cool one has accumulated' (2013) – they track how much use-time other people have invested in one's media profile(s), the velocity of sharing, and so on. They chart our human capital, our "'value" as "cool"' (Horning 2012).

(c) The 'biopolitics of cool'

This is Winnubst's phrase for the 'neoliberal aestheticization of difference' (2012: 95). In modernist aesthetics and politics, power compels conformity and rule-following (e.g., disciplinary normalisation, mass production); difference is transgressive, and transgression is the critical, oppositional, counter-hegemonic practice par excellence. In neoliberalism, difference and transgression fuel deregulatory systems; hegemony is actively interested in inciting them, not suppressing them. 'Anticonformism', Attali argues, is 'no longer anything more than a detour on the road to ideological normalization' (Attali 1984: 119). Thus, subjectivity consists in, as Attali puts it, 'the permanent affirmation of the right to be *different* . . . the right to make *noise*, in other words, to create one's own code and work . . . to compose one's life' (1984: 132; emphasis mine). Otherwise 'normal' individuals are compelled to be as quirky, bizarre, unruly, and noisy as possible – to be, in Winnubst's and Horning's terms, 'cool' (Winnubst 2012:96). 'Difference must be intensified' (Winnubst 2012: 93), and deregulation is an efficient way to accomplish this. The biopolitics of cool, then, is the deregulated cultivation of difference *as surplus value* – which, as Horning notes, 'is another way of saying "cool"' (2012). The deregulatory method is one thing that makes this approach to cool-hunting *biopolitical* in Foucault's sense: deregulation *incites* privileged subjects to transgress their personal limits and social boundaries, because

this individual risk-taking generates the human capital necessary to produce and maintain the overall status quo. Or, as Attali puts it, 'depersonalization in statistical scientism results in the elimination of style and at the same time the demand for its impossible recovery, the search for an inimitable specificity' (Attali 1984: 115). Is Attali's concept of composition just another version of this neoliberal incitement to be different?

4. Composition as deregulated practice

The problem, Attali argues, with 'the standardized products of today's variety shows, hit parades, and show businesses' is their '*repressive* channeling of desire' and their 'alienation' (1984: 6; emphasis mine) of enjoyment (especially enjoyment-time) from creative production. 'Egotistical pleasure is repressed', he argues, 'and music has value only when it is synonymous with sociality, performance for an audience, or finally the stockpiling of "beauty" for solvent consumers' (1984: 32). Composition is his solution to these problems of repression and alienation.

Repression and alienation, however, are features of disciplinary, M-C-M capital. They are not features of neoliberal-style deregulation, which *intensifies* desire, affect, and interest by re-investing them in laboring subjects – quite the opposite of repression and alienation.⁶ Attali's theory of composition seems to overlook his overarching analysis and critique of repetition. Not only is it a solution to the wrong problems, it reinforces problematic features of neoliberalism – namely, deregulation.

Deregulation *is* an escape from repression and alienation. 'The disappearance of codes' (Attali 1984: 142) means the disappearance of prohibitions or taboos, and thus the need to repress anything. Release from repressive codes also 'open[s] the way for the worker's reappropriation of his work' (1984: 142), i.e. for the overcoming of alienation. Neoliberalism, however, doesn't work through repression and alienation; it governs via deregulation and intensificatory re-investment. Attalian composition is a deregulatory, intensificatory practice. 'Composition', he argues, 'necessitates the destruction of all codes' (1984: 45) because only in a deregulated marketplace of ideas and affects can subjects optimise their creative capacities and re-invest their creativity in themselves.

Composition uses the same deregulatory processes he attributes to neoliberal free-marketism and mid-century avant-garde composition. For example, it involves 'inventing new codes, *inventing the message at the same time as the language*' (Attali 1984: 143), 'creat[ing] its own code at the same time as the work' (1984: 135). Attali's account echoes Steve Reich's idea that 'musical processes . . . determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the over all form simultaneously' (Reich 1968). In both accounts, the macro-level code emerges from generative, micro-level processes. These generative processes *appear* to be random because the composer is not *directly* choosing each individual musical event – the process is 'impersonal' (Reich 1968). However, in

⁶For more on the difference between disciplinary capitalism and deregulatory neoliberal capitalism see McWhorter's 'Queer Economies' (2012).

this style of deregulated composition, ‘musical processes can give one a direct contact with the impersonal and also a kind of complete control . . . by running this material through the process I completely control all that results’ (1968). Reich’s musical processes – like swinging a microphone over a speaker to generate feedback, or setting two identical tape players to play the same looped recording in and out of phase – articulate the *background conditions* within which individual sonic events arise. As ‘program producers’ (Attali 1984: 40), Reichian and Attalian composers are de/regulators; what they compose or arrange is the ‘code within which’ sounds are generated. ‘Composition, nourished on the death of codes’ (Attali 1984: 36), does not subvert neoliberal deregulation – it is a model for optimally deregulated subjectivity and musical-political economy.

This deregulation helps subjects further optimise their capacity for erotic investment because it allows them to *re-invest the profits of their human capital back in themselves*, rather than in a recording or a media enterprise. ‘A narcissistic pleasure tied to the self-directed gaze’ (Attali 1984: 144), Attali explains ‘to compose is to locate liberation . . . *in one’s own enjoyment*’ (1984: 143). Instead of recuperating eros as something to consume or use (i.e. the use value of pleasure), composing subjects feed their enjoyment back in to the compositional process, re-investing in and intensifying their eroticism. In this way, composition ‘is the individual’s conquest of his own body and potentials’ (135). Composing subjects are not just ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ (Foucault 2008: 226), but enterprises without loss, externalities, or dividends; everything gets re-invested in the business, so to speak. This is what Attali means when he argues that ‘composition belongs to a political economy’ in which ‘production melds with consumption, and violence is not channeled into an object, but *invested* in the act of doing, a substitute for the stockpiling of labor’ (Attali 1984: 144; emphasis mine). Composition *redirects the processes of (self) intensification*, allowing subjects to appropriate the ‘production-consumption’ (1984: 144) or ‘prosumer’ means of production for themselves.

A practice of deregulated self-intensification, Attalian composition is not an alternative to neoliberal governmentality, but its quintessence. I want to try to follow through with Attali’s project in a way that corrects for his original misapplication of his theory. If we take Attali’s analysis of musical and political neoliberalism as our baseline account of what neoliberalism is and how it works, what sort of theory of counter-hegemonic practice could we develop from it?

5. This is the sound of uncool

What sorts of practices would or could subvert the biopolitics of cool? Though they are designed to generate ‘cool’ capital, can composition and repetition be engaged in *unprofitable* ways? Might they be pushed to the point of diminishing returns? What if, instead of ‘going gaga’, we are reliable, predictable, and square? Is resolute averageness a viable alternative to ‘the neoliberal aestheticizing of difference’ (Winnubst 2012: 95) and its imperative to push boundaries and test limits? In this section, I consider if and how the biopolitics of cool might be reworked into a politics of *uncool*.

Before I begin, I want to make an analytical distinction between ‘uncool’ as a judgment of aesthetic taste and ‘uncool’ as an economic cost/benefit analysis. I will often equivocate between the two, but this is because neoliberal capitalism has subsumed aesthetic taste into the means of production. The biopolitics of cool describes the production chain in which cool taste becomes ‘cool’ (i.e. profitable) capital. In general, I use ‘cool’ to indicate *profitable* human capital, human capital whose surplus value supports hegemonic institutions. ‘Uncool,’ then, describes the production chain in which any sort of aesthetic taste becomes ‘uncool’ (i.e. unprofitable) capital. I use ‘uncool’ to indicate unprofitable human capital, human capital whose surplus value doesn’t adequately support hegemonic institutions. Often the aesthetically and economically uncool coincide (because they feed back on one another), but sometimes they don’t.

Uncool

J. Temperance builds a theory of ‘uncoolness’ from a generalised account of Yacht Rock – a late-1970s, early-1980s easy listening genre characterised by ‘intentionally trite lyrical themes and an almost nonchalant instrumental virtuosity or “smoothness”’ (Temperance 2012). This aesthetic avoids all musical transgression – no indecent lyrics, no noisy, dissonant, or otherwise offensive sounds – and smooths rock’s edginess into noise-free, risk-free ‘soft’ or ‘lite’ versions. ‘Yacht rock was counterrevolutionary’ to the extent that it ‘open[s] up a space in which the popular was not subservient to the status games of cool-hunting and the disciplinary function of novelty’ (Temperance 2012). Uncool music is popular without being edgy; its mainstream success and ubiquity is the opposite of avant-garde coolness. Counter-intuitively, *one level of normalisation* (e.g., business-minded decisions to craft calculated, sure-fire hits) in effect *undermines another level of normalisation: minding limits* is a way to deflect the imperative to *push* limits. Normal, middle-of-the-road, mainstream taste may be an antidote to cool’s prescribed transgression. *Mainstream success deflates ‘cool’ cultural capital*. Abandoning the avant-garde for the mainstream, the politics of uncool seems to have found alternatives to the biopolitics of cool, its demand to invest in oneself by seeking noise and profitably recycling it back into signal.

I want to build on and complicate Temperance’s account of uncool, taking a different route through late 1970s, early 1980s pop music. In the early 1980s, several avant-garde British post-punk bands released very mainstream-sounding pop records. The Human League went from the noisily confrontational ‘Being Boiled’ to the now-classic pop confection ‘Don’t You Want Me?’; Gang of Four similarly replaced the angular, crunchy feedback of ‘Anthrax’ with the smooth groove and girl-group harmonies of ‘Is It Love?’; Joy Division transformed into New Order and became massively popular as a dance music group.⁷ Spandau Ballet, another post-punk band with Nazi

⁷In all these cases – Human League, Gang of Four, New Order – the move to a poppier sound coincided with the inclusion of one or more women in the group. Though this begs a feminist analysis, such work is beyond the scope of my project here.

references in its name, released chart-topping and now soft-rock classic 'True'. Instead of *sharpening* punk and post-punk's cutting edge, these bands *blunted* it; rather than provoke, oppose, and negate mainstream pop tastes, they seem to have reworked their sounds to accommodate these norms. And they accommodated them quite well – these were all charting, and often chart-topping, singles.⁸ If anything, their sound had become *excessively normal*.

These formerly avant-garde bands appear to have sold out, both literally (to chart success) and figuratively (to mainstream bourgeois taste). For example, in his review of *Hard*, the Gang of Four album on which 'Is It Love?' appears, Robert Christagu, writer for the *Village Voice* and 'dean of rock critics', expresses distaste for the record's 'sick-soul-of-success lyrics' and 'sloganeering hookiness' (Christagu 1983). He continues, claiming that 'the detachment of [lead singer] John King's delivery' makes him indistinguishable from the Human League's Phil Oakely, who here serves as an obvious symbol of uncool yuppie alienation (1983). Christagu's concern seems to be that *Hard*, in its affective detachment and its accommodation of rather than resistance to yuppiedom, isn't invested in edginess.

Spandau Ballet has been interpreted in similar terms. Their work is commonly considered conformist music for yuppies.⁹ For example, their 'nostalgic evocation of aristocratic elegance coupled with their *smooth, almost un-expressive music*' (Stratton 1986: 16; emphasis mine) and their '*rejection of the truculent politics of negation and social realism* evidenced by the Sex Pistols and the Clash' (Rowe 1985: 131) leads people to accuse them of 'kitsch foppery' (1985: 131) and 'soft romanticism' (Gill 2003: 13). The gendered and sexualised character of this disapprobation is telling. These critiques interpret the lack of intense emotive or affective expression as a failure in masculinity. 'Detachment' is the failure to invest and intensify, and smoothness is the failure to accelerate and push limits; detached and/or smooth records appear 'foppish' and 'soft' (in this light, *Hard*'s title resonates as an ironic rejoinder to such critiques). Though traditional notions of masculinity privilege detached, disinterested contemplation and emotional self-control, neoliberal capitalism upgrades traditional masculine stereotypes so they are more compatible with discourses that privilege entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial subject is, above all, *interested* and *invested*. Likewise, hegemonic masculinity idealises 'male values of individual achievement, competitiveness, and self-discipline' (Tretheway 2000). The refusal of macho self-investment reads as a surrender to queerness and/or the 'feminized popular' (Cook 2001). The above-cited critics interpret these songs' safe, expressively guarded aesthetic as a failure in masculinity because they're a failed enterprise; the songs are aesthetically uncool because they don't generate enough gendered affective capital (that is, they're economically uncool).

But is this an attempt to out-cool 'cool' by pushing its demand for edginess over the cliff into its opposite – a negation of cool's negation of the square and normal? Is this just another instance of masculine appropriations

⁸'Is It Love?', the worst performer of the bunch, managed to reach #9 on the US Dance Chart in 1983.

⁹The sentiment is so common that the UK tabloid *The Sun* can pun on yuppie in a 2009 headline story about Spandau Ballet's reunion: 'Spandau are yuppie to be back'.

and resignifications of abject femininity (Battersby 1989; Gooding-Williams 2006)? Or, does ‘uncool’ undercut the politics of cool, *succumbing* to the spurious movement back and forth between negation and assimilation (i.e. noise and signal) instead of sublating it?¹⁰ Can uncool be a feminist intervention in neoliberal gender-race politics? In the next section, I will use a more careful analysis of the uncoolness of ‘True’ to (a) explain how uncool normalisation can undercut the cycle of cool capitalisation, and (b) consider the efficacy of uncool as a response to *biopolitical* neoliberalism.

Regimes of ‘True’

‘True’ is uncool in two different ways: one is sonic, and one is political. Its sonic uncool is primarily economic, whereas its political uncool is primarily aesthetic. Comparing the two types of uncool, I argue that uncool can be an effective alternative to the *biopolitical* dimensions of neoliberal hegemony only insofar as it targets *populations*, as the first (sonic) example does. The second (political) example shows that, as an individualised ethos, uncool actually *reinforces* the biopolitics of cool.

First, ‘True’ is *sonically* uncool – it’s so sonically moderate that it can’t be profitably loudened. The economics just don’t work out. As recent research in audio engineering suggests, the original mix is so precisely and carefully normalised (in the general sense, not the technical audio sense) that it cannot be profitably deregulated (‘dynamically processed’ in audio engineering jargon). In their study of the limits of ‘loudness’, specifically music listener’s tolerance of ‘distortion’ and ‘potentially fatiguing sound’ (that is, just the sort of ‘noise’ or ‘difference’ prized by cool), Tomas and Furdek (2007: 1) chose to use a 30-second sample from ‘True’ as the audio track for the control and, in remixed form, the variables. They were studying ‘the perceptibility of aggressive digital audio broadcast processing’ and its effect on audio quality (2007: 1). In contemporary audio engineering, it is common practice to push sounds to their limit – to maximise the ratio between a carrier signal’s frequency deviation (how much the signal speeds up and/or slows down as it is broadcast) and its amplitude (how much power it has, its voltage) (Devine 2013; Hinkes-Jones 2013). ‘Today’s music is louder than ever’, the authors note, because the technique called dynamic processing makes it easy for audio engineers to ‘push the loudness envelope as far as it goes’ (Tomas and Furdek 2007: 1). Dynamic processing is an automated system for constantly monitoring and re-balancing audio signals (like an FM radio signal). All broadcast signal needs processing, just as all recorded music needs mixing – the act of broadcast or recording introduce noise into signal, and processing deals with that noise so that the resulting mix sounds better. In this case, ‘better’ means loud. ‘In many markets, broadcasters believe that

¹⁰The Hegelian dialectic intensifies negation, transforming it into a profitable sublation; Hegel’s term for this is *aufheben*. I’m describing something more like *verheben*, which implies overly intense, self-injurious activity that diminishes one’s capacities. *Sichverheben* can often mean to overstretch oneself financially; this sense of unprofitable investment is exactly what I’m after here. It’s a spurious investment or an investment *in* spuriousness.

being louder than the competing stations will make listeners stop on their station when tuning across the dial' (Tomas and Furdek 2007: 2). So, loudness is an aesthetic preference. 'True' is *economically* uncool because the cost of achieving this aesthetic ideal outweighs the benefits.

Tomas and Furdek chose 'True' for their study because 'it is *difficult* to process dynamically' (2007: 2; emphasis mine). In other words, it's hard to make 'True' loud, to push its mix to this limit. In a sense, the original is so narrowly mixed, so 'spectrally sparse' (2) that generating a sufficiently 'loud' imbalance between frequency and amplitude introduces obvious glitches and distortions into the mix. *Pushing 'True' to its loudest limit actually creates diminishing returns*: it won't sound attractively loud, just odd or damaged (i.e. distastefully over-compressed). It produces unfavorable frequencies that can't be brought in line with more favorable ones.¹¹

Insofar as this taste for sonic loudness is a version of cool-hunting (pushing audio signals to their limit), 'True' is uncool because it can't be *profitably* loudened. Strategically or practically, this uncoolness is the result of excessive regulation and regularity (Clayton 2004). The original mix and mastering had to be careful and precise – sparse spectra means less room for error: inexactness would be more obvious. Its refined normalisation (a very precise mix) undermines attempts to intensify irregularity. Working in the early 1980s, neither the band nor the record's producers could have anticipated post-millennial audio engineering technologies and conventions. They wouldn't have known this specific type of loudness would be 'cool' (i.e. a profitable transgression), so the sonic uncoolness of 'True' isn't an intentional result of an explicit, subjective choice. However, the immunity of 'True' to distortion anticipates later, more explicitly critical uses of uncool. Writing in 2004, Jace Clayton notes shifts away from distortion in various musical subcultures including crunk and grime: 'think about Lil Jon's clean synth lines, squeaky clean, narcotically clean, as clean as synthetic drugs in a plastic pill case – crunk is HEAVY, but without distortion . . . the new hardcore embraces cleanliness like never before'. Here Clayton argues that underground music aesthetics use 'cleanliness' as a way to distinguish themselves from a mainstream aesthetic that emphasises distortion.

In 'True', what is normalised is the *mix*: an overall balance is maintained by regulating *relationships among* individual tracks, not individual tracks in isolation. Dynamic processing deregulates these *relationships*. Just as 'the phenomena addressed by biopolitics are, essentially, aleatory events that occur within a *population* that exists over a period of time' (Foucault 2003: 246), the sonic phenomena addressed by loudness and dynamic processing are, essentially, aleatory events that occur within a *mix* that exists over a period of time (i.e. dynamic processes). The sonic regularity of 'True' is *biopolitically uncool* because it intervenes on the same level that biopolitics does – the mix, the 'milieu' (Foucault 2003: 245), or the population.

¹¹As LaDelle McWhorter argues, in biopolitical administration, 'populations as statistically characterisable entities were the target of these efforts, and the goal was "to bring the most unfavorable [frequency] in line with the more favorable" in a particular population' (2012: 66).

Given contemporary tastes for 'loudness', 'True' sounds sonically uncool. It is aesthetically uncool because the economics can't be made to work. But why might the song's original audiences, like those aforementioned critics, have heard it not just as bad or distasteful, but as *uncool*? To answer this, we have to return to the gendered and racialised dimensions of those critiques. This will also help me distinguish between an individualised politics of uncool, uncool as taste-entrepreneurship, and a *biopolitics* of uncool, uncool as means of counter-productivity.

The biopolitics of cool is a system in which elites, by investing in 'cool' ventures (i.e. their own human capital), rise to the top of the population. A rejection of the mainstream by those who would otherwise be identified with it, cool targets mainly white (cis/hetero) men.¹² Because white supremacist patriarchy normalises and centers white masculinity, 'cool' subjects establish their exceptional status *as men* by feminising mainstream averageness.¹³ For example, a website dedicated to (implicitly white) fraternity culture describes Carly Rae Jepsen's 2012 megahit 'Call Me Maybe' as 'so *excruciatingly mediocre*' that 'I would rather . . . ge[t] an electric charge run through my dick than hear "Call Me Maybe" one more time' (stuffratpeoplelike 2011). Responding to the prospect of hearing 'Call Me Maybe' yet *another* time, the author is reacting not so much to the song itself as to its pervasiveness; it is excruciatingly mediocre *because* it was an excessively successful hit record. Arguing that this mediocrity is more intensely damaging than the torture of male genitalia, this post equates mediocrity – the failure to be cool and cutting-edge – with emasculation. This is why the above-cited critiques of 'True' and *Hard* can use the language of failed gender performance to describe these records' aesthetic and political faults: their uncoolness reads as a deficiency in masculinity. This begs the question: is uncool available only to already-privileged subjects? For example, though a white man's deficiency in masculine cool reads as uncool, would a (white or non-white) woman's or non-white man's deficient masculinity be read this way? In white supremacist patriarchy, could women and non-white men ever appear *too* normal?

But before I fully engage that question, I want to clarify the racial stakes of cool and uncool. The biopolitics of cool, like all practices of hipness, feeds on the 'difference' of racially non-white and culturally non-Western people (see Monson 1995). As I discuss in my *New Inquiry* article, this difference can give white appropriators the 'edge' they seek. White cool is racist, but uncool is not necessarily less racist. One way to be uncool is to practice inefficient or unfashionable forms of cultural and racial appropriation. For example, 'True' invokes racist logics of cultural appropriation in the line about 'listening

¹²For more on the racialised and gendered dimensions of cool and the related practice of hipness, see Monson (1995) and James (2009).

¹³In neoliberalism, the structural position of 'whiteness' is opened to 'multicultural' others, just as the structural position of 'masculinity' is open to women who 'Lean In', so to speak. So, women and men of color who are already privileged enough (e.g., by class, nationality, etc.) to be included in the mainstream can practice biopolitical cool as a way to establish their elite status above the mere mainstream (see Sexton 2008; James 2011).

to Marvin [Gaye]' – this is a sort of Northern Soul-style reference to classic Motown. But this specific type of racial/cultural appropriation wasn't transgressive by the early 1980s, when hip hop was the hot new black/Latin/Caribbean thing for whites (like the Clash's late turn to hip hop, or Blondie's rapping on 'Rapture') to appropriate. This new type of hipster racism was edgier and more avant-garde than the older style of hipster racism, whose edginess had been blunted by widespread appropriation. So part of being cool is being racist in the 'right' ways, and 'True' is uncool because it isn't fashionably racist . . . it's just predictably racist. So, perhaps then-contemporary audiences and critics rejected records like 'True' because they sounded *too normal*, too average, too . . . uncool. The song was judged *aesthetically* uncool because it couldn't be made to boost the listener's 'cool' human capital.

This helps clarify the difference between uncool and hipster irony. Hipster irony is a version of cool: it appropriates cultural objects and practices, using their perceived otherness, difference, or aesthetic badness to *intensify* the hipster's eccentricity. This eccentricity is the source of the hipster's human capital – who stand above and beyond the merely average. Uncool may also appropriate and revalue, but that revaluation doesn't translate into a profit – it doesn't generate enough *surplus* value. Hipster irony intensifies one's human capital, but uncool is a bad investment. For example, just as 'True' can't be loudened without introducing perceptible errors, Spandau Ballet's appropriation of (Marvin Gaye's) black masculinity isn't transgressive enough to overcome the feminising effects of mainstream pop success – they still get derided as 'foppish'. So, hipster irony and uncool may bear a superficial resemblance, but they are fundamentally different: with respect to human capital, hipster irony profitably intensifies edginess, whereas uncool brings diminishing returns. Or, hipster irony is aesthetically uncool and economically cool, whereas the uncool I'm theorising in this article is aesthetically uncool because it is economically uncool.

But back to the question: is uncool a form of privilege? Is it a good investment for individual subjects and hegemonic institutions? As a venture of the individual subject (i.e. an investment in his/her human capital), uncool is an option only to those already privileged enough to be potentially 'cool' subjects. Uncool is the effect of refusing or failing to do the work of cool-making, the refusal or failure to rise above the mainstream norm. The queer white masculinity attributed to New Romantic bands like Spandau Ballet differs significantly from the (generally non-white) queerness then frequently attributed to disco, which was also hugely popular and commercially profitable in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Disco's queerness was such a threat they infamously burned disco records in Comiskey Park; uncool may be distastefully queer, but it's not threatening enough to start a white riot of sorts. This suggests that uncool registers as an individual's failure to embody the identity white patriarchy demands of him, not as generalised threat to hegemonic white patriarchy itself. In other words, uncool is the refusal or failure to be sufficiently entrepreneurial as an individual subject.

As the uncool racism of 'True' suggests, though uncool may be an alternative to entrepreneurial cool-hunting, it could intensify broader structures of white supremacist patriarchy. Individual-level changes may have little effect on macro-level processes. Like deregulatory practice, which is 'free' at the

individual level and organised at the institutional one, 'uncool' allows individuals to opt out of norms and institutions while simultaneously reaffirming those norms and institutions as such. A genuine alternative to the biopolitics of cool, one that addresses these norms and institutions, will work on and through populations, not just individuals.

6. Adjusting the level of our analysis

Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as political problem. (Foucault 2003: 245)

Neoliberalism is a method that allows power to have it both ways. For example, deregulation is *both* 'free' (on the surface) *and* highly administered (in the background). Counter-hegemonic techniques will also need to work on two levels at once; they will also appear to have it both ways, to be both complicit and critical. This is why uncool is an ambivalent strategy. At the level of the individual subject, uncool strategies adopt averageness and apparent conformity as alternatives to norms of entrepreneurship, self-improvement, and risk-taking. At the population level, uncool strategies adopt strict regulations as alternatives to deregulatory imperatives. Uncool is counter-hegemonic when it targets the underlying entrepreneurial, biopolitical logic – that is, when it targets the economics, not just the aesthetics, of the biopolitics of cool. When it merely targets the *content* of cool – what we aesthetically judge to be 'cool' – uncool feeds back into hipster entrepreneurship, which repackages non-cool phenomena and sells them at a profit. An *economics* of uncool short-circuits the underlying biopolitical logic. The two readings of 'True' illustrate this difference: the second interpretation, about race/gender politics, reinterprets the aesthetic content of cool; the first interpretation, about the song's sonic uncool, reworks the economics of cool. In this first interpretation, 'cool' meant sonic 'loudness', and attempts to louden 'True' didn't produce the expected (i.e. cool) type of noise. The individual elements of its mix were so precisely and rigorously regulated that the overall balance of relationships among them couldn't be profitably deregulated. This type of uncool dealt with the 'population' (here the mix), *the population or mix as aesthetic problem*. This type of uncool practice addresses itself to *biopolitics*, not just to cool (i.e. to entrepreneurial subjectivity). A biopolitics of uncool normalises populations so that both systematic deregulation and individual entrepreneurship (i.e. individual behavior in a deregulated marketplace) are bad deals. It is an *economy* not just an aesthetic – or better, it is an aesthetic economy.

A *biopolitics* of uncool must be an alternative to population-wide deregulation, not just to individual entrepreneurship. This is the main point of departure between my account and Winnubst's. Though she and I agree that 'turning alleged social transgression into yet another site of entrepreneurial enterprise' is 'one of neoliberalism's best songs', my reading of Attali challenges her claim that there is still a 'reservoir of intervention' hidden within 'the experience and concept of jouissance' (Winnubst 2012: 96). Conventionally, jouissance is the pleasurable/painful transgression of an individual subject's limits and sense of self. Winnubst turns jouissance

on its head: instead of treating it as transgression, she posits it as a *limit*, specifically a ‘non-fungible limi[t] to the *enterprising* rationality of neoliberalism’ (Winnubst 2012: 97; emphasis mine). Winnubst is concerned with ethical limits – thresholds that should not be crossed, or thresholds that, when crossed, do ethical work (like call attention to racism).¹⁴ For Winnubst, *jouissance* is a historically and materially specific experience – I feel it in *this* body, under *these* specific conditions. Material-historical specificity is a *limit* on neoliberalism’s imperative to absolute fungibility. In this way, *jouissance* transgresses – by arresting or shattering – the logic of fungibility. Here, then, *the limit itself is transgressive* because it disrupts norms of fungibility and flexibility. Her move to limits is on the right track, but *jouissance* is not the best model for theorising the function of limit, either as an ideal of de-deregulation or challenge to biopolitical logic – it is still too focused on *individual* experience.

The biopolitics of cool is a balance of relationships that encourages the privileged to ‘push it to the limit’, as both Foucault and R&B singer Usher put it.¹⁵ Biopolitical uncool, on the other hand, undercuts the *individual* imperative to transgress and push limits by regulating the *overall, population-wide balance*. The focus is not on limits as individually-indexed ethical thresholds, but on an overall system of normalisation, an ecosystem of limits that work together to maintain a ‘balanced’ population. From this perspective, material-historical specificity is a set of background conditions that makes deregulatory entrepreneurship a bad investment for particular groups. The biopolitics of uncool is an economy that makes *both systematic deregulation and individual entrepreneurship* unprofitable. In this way, uncool short circuits the biopolitical means of producing surplus value.

Like Winnubst’s notion of *jouissance*, Attali’s theory of composition intervenes at the level of the individual subject, not at the level of the population. Because composition targets the wrong level of intervention, its challenge to deregulatory repetition misfires. Even though Attali’s notion of composition is not the progressive alternative to neoliberalism that he thinks it is, *Noise* still helps us theorise neoliberal biopolitics, both as an art of government and as a sonic/musical art. Read through Foucault and Winnubst’s Foucaultian concept of ‘cool’, *Noise* theorises repetition in a way that both expands our understanding of neoliberalism as an art of government and an art of noise. Moreover, this reading of *Noise* suggests that neoliberalism’s episteme is *sonic*, so further study of music and sound will contribute to our philosophical and theoretical understanding of neoliberalism.

¹⁴Winnubst argues that when properly ‘historicized’ and ‘racialized’, *jouissance-as-limit* can be ‘a way to intervene in the rationality of fungibility’ (2012: 96). ‘Historicizing work resists the neoliberal fungibility machine’ by positing thresholds that should not be crossed, i.e. thresholds of memory and forgetting. ‘Racializing work excavates resources to think through the ethical aporia of neoliberalism’s structurally damaging effects’ by crossing thresholds of racial common sense, raising consciousness and giving us reason to act and think differently (2012: 97).

¹⁵The telos of neoliberal systems is to ‘somehow push them to their limit and full reality’ (Foucault 2008: 138). Similarly, Usher’s ‘More’ uses the refrain ‘push it to the limit’ (Usher 2010).

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