



REVIEW | Seismographic Sounds: Visions of a New World

Theresa Beyer, Thomas Burkhalter and Hannes Liechti Eds.

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Founded in 2002 by ethnomusicologist and cultural producer Thomas Burkhalter, Norient: Network for Local and Global Sounds and Media Culture, is a multi-modal assemblage devoted to the research, debate, mediation, and promotion of new music, media, and digital culture from around the globe. In addition to their essential web presence at norient.com, the network also produces the Norient Musikfilm Festival, numerous performances, radio programs, an academic journal, documentary films, and *Seismographic Sounds – Visions of a New World*, a travelling multi-authored exhibit and now book, the latter of which is the subject of this review. Setting themselves the goal, as the book's blurb notes, to "orient and disorient readers, listeners and spectators", Norient's approach to their objects of study is impressively expansive, offering a dizzying array of examples from multiple locales and representative of countless sociocultural moves and positionings.

The book is divided into six thematic areas (money, loneliness, war, exotica, desire, and belonging), which surfaced after an initial call, as Burkhalter writes in the introduction, to “musicians, DJs, journalists, bloggers and scholars from our Norient network to send us their five favorite current music clips from their respective countries” (11). After scanning through over two thousand submissions, the editors selected twenty-four video clips to address (four per theme, two writers per clip), and rounded out the book with thematic introductions, short personal statements, artwork, theoretical discussions, and fieldwork revelations. In total, “two hundred and fifty scholars, journalists, bloggers, and musicians from Bolivia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Switzerland and forty-six other countries” (10) contributed to this collection, an editorial and collaborative undertaking of imposing complexity.

This edited collection shares much of that complexity not only in the range of views and topics it presents but also because, although a print document, it has been specifically designed to be approached in its own networked fashion, with multiple tags (in essence, keywords that function as a kind of metadata at the bottom of the page) provided per entry. So, although one could peruse this publication from cover-to-cover, readers are also encouraged to jump around, exploring connections across a number of uniting terms: activism, bling, dystopia, ethics, ethnomusicology, hedonism, place, protest, ritual, violence. As if all of that were not messy enough, the book’s webpage also features a Spotify playlist of relevant songs and a number of extended audiovisual entries originally published in edited versions in print, some of which are expanded greatly in their online form. For example, filmmaker Monzer Darwish’s contribution, “Syrian Metal in the Civil War” (240-241), can also be found on Norient’s website, where it includes additional text, pictures, songs, two film trailers, and a link to an extended interview.

All of this is to argue that reviewing this collection is no easy task, as it so thoroughly challenges many of the basic structures and tenets of standard academic (or even journalistic) publications. For the most part, it lacks a cohesive narrative, although it produces a number of thematic gestures. It also lacks a comprehensive theoretical focus, though it provides a number of critical interventions. These, of course, are intentional editorial decisions as Burkhalter explains: “our goal is not to create a big theory that is void of examples (or built on old examples), but rather we try . . . hopefully to contribute to a theory of today” (13). Individual readers will need to determine for themselves what that theory of today might be, and how successful the contributing authors and editors have been in developing it.

While this observation may seem like a critique, it is not intended to be, as the great benefit of this collection can be found less in its actual content or theoretical underpinnings, and more in the notion of orientation and disorientation addressed in its blurb. Truly, the book does a remarkable job of both and, in so doing, fundamentally offers an affective reenactment of what it means to encounter music and digital culture as we near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

To read it is to also, almost by necessity, surf the Internet, spend an evening clicking through YouTube videos, search for music on Spotify and other streaming services, and browse numerous long-form interviews with artists, journalists, filmmakers, and the like. Dipping into this collection, as such, sends you down the proverbial rabbit hole of networked culture, functioning less as a summation of what it all might mean and more as an invite to become orientated to its disorientation. Far beyond the contributions of any single artist, scholar, journalist, photographer, graphic designer, or blogger, then, what one remembers most after putting down this publication is the feeling of expansiveness, interconnection, and possibility, as well as moments of discovery, sadness, humor, and sometimes confusion.

This is not to argue that the collection lacks standout contributions. There are many. In particular, John Hutnyk's "Shopping is Civil War" (61-65), Hillegonda C. Rietveld's thoughts on "Burial's Echoic Loneliness" (133-135), the dissonance offered by Elijah Wald and Jorge Verdin's contrasting interpretations of *Los Tigres Del Norte's* video, "La Bala" (194-198), the section on the FOKN Bois (282-290), and Andy Bennett's take on "Music and Place" (414-417) all leave readers with much to reflect on. Burkhalter's multiple interviews with a number of artists are high points as well, illuminating views into a world of richness and depth. As a scholar of music and violence, I found much to ponder in the entire thematic section devoted to war (172-251) and would heartily recommend it to anyone similarly interested in the topic.

Again, it is the cumulative effect/affect of these and other individual sections that most stands here which, after all, is intriguingly modeled after the physical measurement of the "force and duration of earthquakes" (10). In their goal to similarly measure the current developments of "new music, sounds, and noises" (blurb) from around the world, the editors have seized upon a unique formula and presentation that both offers a number of compelling pathways and somehow manages to reproduce the actual feeling of what it is like to survey those cultural earthquakes in the contemporary, networked moment. In this way, this publication functions as something of a simulacrum of the messiness of global music culture in the 2010s. For that, we should all be grateful.