

Rewinding the Tape of History: King Tubby and the Audiopolitics of Echo

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Fast Forward. Kingston 1974.

King Tubby's Studio is a small-sized bungalow on Drommilly Avenue, in the heart of the infamous Waterhouse ghetto. King Tubby, nee Osbourne Ruddock, is an electronic engineer who has made a name for himself as a builder of hand-wired transformers able to stabilize the uncertain voltage of Jamaica's electricity network. The studio holds rather frugal equipment: a four-track tape recorder and an MCI mixing board; a spring reverb unit and a tape delay; a machine to cut the outcome of the mixing process to acetate plate straight away. One thing makes this studio unique in Kingston's vibrant musical scene: it doesn't provide a recording booth for the musicians. Despite that, this is the most requested studio in Kingston today. King Tubby masters a new science of sound: and that's what will arguably

make his place the most influential studio in the history of the island. At King Tubby's a piece of music is split in its essential components, and recomposed according to the inspiration of the moment. Bass, drums, guitars and keys, vocals: four tracks to fit in the limited possibilities of the MCI board. Fingers run fast over the faders; whole melodies and single chords appear and disappear in unforeseen ways. Faders run fast under the fingers; vocals are broken, words are fragmented. Echoes and reverbs fill in the void, floating on a rhythmic foundation of drum and bass more intense than ever before. A new storyline unfolds from the smooth alternation of presence and absence, a sound weft both rarefied and unpredictable. The body becomes machine; and in the process of becoming it finds a new logic. The faders are the fingers

themselves, and together they move at the same speed of thought. It's dub: and King Tubby is the dub originator. The echo of Tubby's black science of sound reverberates far beyond the studio. Amplified by the huge sound system sets, it resonates throughout the dark night of Kingston. It eventually departs from the island of Jamaica, travelling throughout space and time. Pricking up our ears we may still be able to hear it.

On the Echo of Creation

While providing another possible version of the common "scientific myth" of the world's origin, Louis Chude-Sokei (1997) claims that the result of the Big Bang was nothing but the echo of that original noise, a mere propagation of soundwaves in the infinite space-time of the universe. The biblical story offers a fairly similar outline when imagining the origin of creation: it all started with silence, and the world had only begun with the sound of the word uttered by God. Regardless of their verisimilitude, and despite the fact that scientists have recently argued that the Big Bang was actually a rather silent event, the two main Western narratives on the origin of the world seem to unexpectedly converge on indicating sound as the primary force; that which has breathed life into the universe, as that which has switched on the circuit of history as we know it. It would then be reasonable to assume silence as the opposite - absence of sound sounds like absence of life. Therefore, building a bridge between the two opposite sides of sound/life and silence/death, the echo may be claimed to be an intimate expression of "the experience of life, the source of narrative and a pattern for history" (Chude-Sokei 1997). But what are the wider implications of accounting for the echo as a pattern for history?

In acoustic physics, the echo is the auditory effect of the sound waves returning towards the source after having encountered an obstacle on their path. If they reach the source with a delay longer than the tenth of a second, then we can truly speak of echo. If the delay is beneath the tenth of a second, the phenomenon will be catalogued as reverb. As everything which is related to sound, the echo is then first and foremost movement: basically a return movement, often unexpected and astonishing. But the notion of return doesn't exhaust the complexity of the movements of the echo. On their return journey, the sound waves are influenced by the physical features of the surfaces that they encounter, as by those of the medium that they are propagated through. The echo is, therefore, a complex movement, made of propagation and resonances, reflection and refractions. In its course, it gets charged with the effects of its contingent reality. In this sense, the echo stifles, carries, and accumulates. Its materiality is heterogeneous, porous, impure. The echo tarnishes both

its surroundings and itself. When applied to history and its narrative, it may provide a method to problematize the cause-effect relation, which solidifies the order of the events, while separating this order from the vector of progress. It may then challenge the notion itself of history as a linear formation. The echo may then challenge the notion itself of linearity of history. But, for this method to be effective, it must be emancipated from one of its most intrinsic features: ephemerality.

On the Creation of the Echo

The echo is probably the most distinctive feature of dub. And it is in the dub music produced at King Tubby's Studio that the experimentation with the technical possibilities of the tape echo reaches its creative apex. While turning a rather simple machine into an aesthetic trademark and a fundamental operative strategy, King Tubby emancipates the status of the echo from being a mere ephemeral repetition and imitation of the real. He, thus, reveals the echo's potential as a means for the production of another possible reality.

Our thoughts, here, cannot but go to the nymph, and to her unfortunate destiny. Echo seems unable to rework the fragments of other people's speech, which the anger of Hera condemns her to eternally repeat, into some kind of new reality. She thus remains a prisoner to her punishment: complementary, but forever incomplete. The end is, thus, inescapable. When she reunites with the earth, Echo does nothing else than ultimately actualizing her own submissive role. The earth is the epitome of reality; and, while uniting with it to become the voice that answers the wayfarers, the nymph accepts the last, desperate possibility to reunite with that which she had been previously separated from. Echo's mistake, if one might call it such, lies in the perseverance to play by rules that will forever see her lose, therefore passively accepting her predictable defeat.

This is precisely what happens at King Tubby's: the table is overthrown, the rules are rewritten. The echo of the myth doesn't reach the ears of the dubmaster; that's probably why he's able to apply an exquisitely technical method. Here the practice stretches out the limits of thought. More than that: the practice renders the thought its own consequence - only provided that the latter is able to move fast enough. The structural limit of the echo is precisely the one incarnated by the body of the ill-fated nymph, with her progressive decay. The echo repeats, only to then quickly fade away, thus losing its ontological battle with the real. By sending the echo back into that same machine by which it is generated, return upon return, feedback over feedback, King Tubby emancipates

the echo from any residual dependency upon the real. Once the umbilical cord that ties the echo to its sonic origin is severed, the first has acquired that very same status of the latter. Its materiality is now the materiality of sound itself; it no longer requires any further justification. And, by the way, this newly acquired materiality is the same one shared by the other elements of the mix - the only one that holds any relevance. Once it is translated into electric impulses, the sound of a music instrument ceases having anything to do with the actual instrument that has generated it. Semiotics aside, they now inhabit two totally different worlds.



With his use of the tape echo, as well as of the spring reverb and of the equalizer, King Tubby dives his hands in that sonorous matter, that should constitute, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard (2009), the main interest of the musical research once we've overcome the threshold of modernity. Alternatively, drawing from Jaques Attali

(1985, 147), it could be argued that dub music carries repetition into the age of composition, the last modality in the evolution of the social organization of music, as one that holds an "unstable and open" conception of history. As a matter of fact, the echo keeps the past alive way beyond its physical limit. Time boundaries are rendered increasingly fuzzy; the margins dissipated. It's worth interrogating ourselves then, in which way the Waterhouse studio collects and relays - conveniently amplified, hyper-realistically saturated - the echo of history. At the same time, the interrogation touches upon the status of the small island of Jamaica, location of a collective sonic intelligence which has been able to rewrite the rules of modern music production. But what are the boundaries of modernity then?

Echoes of a Remote Past

According to Michael Veal (2007, 198-200), the echo holds a privileged relation with the cognitive function of memory and with the remembrance of the past. Within this understanding, it's possible to connect the radical use of the echo in dub music with the wider cultural context of Jamaica in the seventies. During those years the island was animated by a homegrown articulation of the Black liberation narrative, structured around the watchwords of Panafricanism, Garveyism and the return to Africa, which spread both within and beyond the national borders. It can be easily claimed that the popularity of Rastafarianism across the routes of black diaspora at this stage has been primarily driven by reggae music. Yet in the same way, as Paul Gilroy (1987, 187-191; 1993, 100) has argued, it can be claimed that dub music - reggae's mysterious counterpart - held the evocative force which has sustained the imaginary of the movement in its global reverberation. However, thought of in terms of sonic picture of the past and memory switch, the echo is subjected to a certain degree of structural ambiguity. It is not necessarily a faithful image of the past; in fact, it always subtends a margin of approximation. The echo corresponds entirely to the past only when the latter adheres to the dream; in that small time-space between sleep and vigil, when the boundaries of that which is real and that which is imaginary become porous. It is precisely here that the echo may sustain the materialization of a past marked by definitely fuzzy historical boundaries, as the one evoked by Rastafarianism.

The echo is, indeed, the sound of something that doesn't exist, or - at least - doesn't exist anymore. A ghost sound, or the sound of a ghost. Yet it exists, insofar as our senses experience it: we hear it with our ears, we see it through the VU meters of the mixing desk. In this sense, the echo forces the frame which contains the experience of the real to bend, by introducing the uncertainty of fiction in the space-time continuum. On the axis of space

it dilates, producing an enhanced, fictitious dimension – and this is precisely the reason of its employment in music production. On the axis of time, the echo interrupts the dogma of consequentiality that supports the official historical narrative, opening towards the complexity of an oblique temporality. It subverts the linearity of time as Chronos to open up towards time as Kairos - the master of the event, the lord of the opportunity. The Italian language tends to express the power of the echo mainly as a force that brings the subject back to the past. In this

from the space-time of the official history. In other words, it is exactly because of this lingering between reality and fiction, that it allows to create a breach in the solidity of the archive by means of the battering ram of desire. Echo's history is both the mystery of a rewritable past and the prophecy of a future yet to be written.

A complex and stratified space-time continuum reverberates throughout King Tubby's dubs: reality and fiction adhere to one another as the magnetic tape



sense it's a sound that ambushes, snatches and carries the listener elsewhere, in the manner described by Kodwo Eshun (1997). But, through the tape manipulation, King Tubby's feedback loop generates a push that is both equal and opposite, as it materializes the past into the present. Yet this act of materialization will never be the exact copy of the past - rather a watercolour painting, drawn by memory in the pouring rain. The analogical process is a profoundly dramatic one: it requires contact, it implies decay, and it holds no guarantee over result nor reversibility. The past survives grabbed onto the volume knob as a castaway onto the shipwreck. Yet by recognizing this element of fiction there is no intention to signal a limit of the echo's potential, rather to assign it a certain excess of power to it. That's the reason why, when assumed as a method of re-production of the historical narrative, the echo can actually provide a line of flight

wraps up onto the coils. This lively overlapping of past and present, real and imagined, could bring to mind the heterotopy, thought of as a counter-space of history, in Michel Foucault's evocative description. Yet it would be ungenerous to attempt to force the radical sound practice of dub within the Western theory canon. At King Tubby's the theory is cut straight to acetate plate, a one-off copy. By producing the conditions for both the creative appropriation of the past and its return into the present, the tape echo is, indeed, articulated as an audiopolitical technology. And, conceived as such, it resists its integration within a necessarily progressive ideological frame. What the echo produces is just noise: a degradation of the original signal, and an interruption in the organization of the system. A space within the sound that can, potentially, become a space for thought. However, this space requires our involvement in order

to be mobilized as such. In other words, the tape echo provides us with a trace, certainly not the solution. More generally, politics is to be sought for not within the audio-machine, but in the way the wiring has been done.

Echoes of a Remote Future

Despite the evocative undertone of the expression echo chamber, rather recurring in the dub idiom, technically the tape echo is a tape delay. This definition in fact only considers the echo from the perspective of the source: that

perception of the future in terms of a space towards which we move, is based on its implicit visualization. In this sense, rethinking history in terms of the paradigm of the echo imposes a shift in the perspective - an alternative modality of connection, or wiring - which relies on challenging the primacy of sight as the organizing principle of experience. The echo as method suggests a mode of conceiving the historical time such that the future no longer necessarily appears as an image, much less as a pipe dream. The future of the tape echo is rather



which generates the original sound and receives the return movement thereof, with its typical delay. Yet, as claimed so far, the return doesn't exhaust the complexities of the movements of the echo. It's therefore worth considering in detail the implications of the concept of delay as a synecdoche of the echo, and the further impact of such implications on the adoption of the echo as a pattern for history.

The delay refers to an erroneous positioning within time and space. It implies the existence of a frame, and the failed adherence to it. When applied to the historical time, the delay expresses the exit from the frame of progress, usually intended as the gradual movement of the present towards the future through a series of predetermined stages. Here, technological advancement constitutes a fundamental guideline. This conception of the historical time, articulated within the common

a specific mode of functioning of the social machine that produces the real, of which bodies and technology are the main inner workings. According to this paradigm, the future doesn't move towards us, nor do we move in its direction. It's not an arrival point, but rather something that wraps around us, that invades us. The future unfolded by the tape echo is nothing but sound vibrations enveloping the dancer's body during a night out in downtown Kingston. Breaking ties with the visual conception of historical time allows us to liberate delay from the yoke of progress, thus rendering it a method of producing a qualitatively different temporality.

The adoption of the echo as a paradigm for history through the radical sound practice of dub pioneered at King Tubby's Studio therefore induces us to rethink the convergence between future, progress and technology, beyond the parameters imposed by a Western culture

eager to overlap its boundaries upon the ones of modernity. Only to the ears of the source does the echo sound as delay. In the same way, it is only from the perspective of the West that progress is irradiated from its centre towards the outside, with a characteristic, gradual decay. Whether there is indeed a technological delay at King Tubby's Studio, expressed by the quality and quantity of the equipment available, this is turned into a strategy, in accordance with the local habitus: in Jamaica, "every spoil is a style." By collecting the

where the Black diaspora connects itself to the global techno-informational flows. In other words, it is precisely in the music production, articulated through a particular modality of technological appropriation, that the Black subject builds his/her own body into a crucial machine within the techno-cultural apparatus of future production. In this case, as Julian Henriques (2014) writes, overturning the Hegelian expression, "where Africa leads, the world follows."



alleged delay of the postcolonial space in order to send it back, feedback over feedback, King Tubby and the other Jamaican practitioners of the black sonic science of dub have rewritten the boundaries of modernity by the means of the echo machine. The tape delay becomes the drive of revolutionary expressive forms, propagated on a planetary scale through unpredictable interactions between the human body and sound technologies. As the focal point of a widespread formal and technical experimentation, it is thus necessary to rethink Jamaica in the seventies as one of the most influential sonic laboratories of modernity. This also means to open up our understanding of technology beyond "the white boxes of computer technology," so as to include "the black boxes of modern street technology," in Samuel R. Delany's incisive definition. After all, as Alexander Weheliye (2005) claims, popular music represents the main arena

Furthermore, the works of King Tubby and that of the other Jamaican sound wizards pushes us to update the conception of reggae as a music genre necessarily tied to the dogma of the authenticity, imbued with nostalgia and ultimately driven by a conservatory ethos. The genre's canvas of utmost importance, the 7" single vinyl, reveals how the obsession for "the roots," yet very present in the lyrics, is just one side of the coin. On the other side of the coin, those same roots turn into electric and signal cables, into springs and magnetic tapes, able to trace the multiple routes of a sonic diaspora solidly grounded in the future. If too delayed or too in advance in relation to modernity timeframe, it depends uniquely on the direction in which the tape is played.

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Images (in order of appearance)

Dub Side of the Moon, Napoli, Davide Adamo
Capra Records Studio, Valencia, Baodub
25th Toys Studio, Lyon, Brian D'Aquino
Ital Soup Studio London, Petah Sunday
25th Toys Studio, Lyon, Brian D'Aquino

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