Stephen KENNEDY, *Chaos Media. A Sonic Economy of Digital* Space, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2015, ISBN 978-1-6235-6706-4, 181 p.

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The premise of Stephen Kennedy's work is the Western philosophy's fascination with the image. Since Democritus and Plato, sight has been thought to represent the main sense through which humanity has gained knowledge of the surrounding world. Still, recalibration of the paradigmatic role of the image seems to be required in contemporary society, as sight can no longer guarantee the accuracy of experiential insight within the complex environment in which people live nowadays. An "anti-ocular turn" (Adrienne Janus) is necessary, not only to be able to analyse the real world, but also the digital space, perceived by Kennedy as "not just the virtual space beyond the screen but a unitary existential space that shifts constantly and which defies conventional visual logic, a space where entities take up superpositions of location and dislocation" (15). What the author proposes is to adopt the perspective of a sonic economy, meaning "the idea of song as an object that is transmitted as part of complex cultural exchange," (12) because, since *The Cantometrics of Alan Lomax*, an experiment which studied the differences between several populations using the songs listened in specific territories, it has been scientifically demonstrated the connection between music and different spheres of human interaction, such as science, politics, aesthetics, economics and culture, the five dimensions Kennedy tackles in his book. In his vision, music is important in order to "understand broader issues in human history and the mathematisation of characteristics using digital data modelling to make sense of chaotic environments" (14).

With regard to the study of digital space, it is important to note that the concrete world and the virtual realm must not be taken as two opposite principles, the binary thinking representing another obsession of the Western philosophy, which started with Plato's definition of the intelligible world as opposed to and distanced from the visible one, and continued up to Quentin Meillassoux, who made the distinction between the mathematical real and the human perception. However, Stephen

Kennedy does not adhere to this manner of representation; instead he claims that the real world and the digital space should not be perceived in a dualist perspective, as "the contemporary or 'new media' landscape might be described in simple terms as a space where real and virtual worlds collide" (18).

Another concept that, in Kennerdy's vision, needs to be clarified is that of chaos, which is usually misperceived as having a negative connotation and representing the disorganized placement of data in the digital space. His ambition is to find a pattern in chaos, "not as a fixed universal phenomenon, but as a relative continuity punctuated by difference" (1). The question that raises from the coordinates which Kennedy sets for his work is: where is man placed in this complex chaotic digital space? It will be of no wonder to discover that the new universe is not necessarily anthropocentric and recent experiments, such as *DarwinTunes*, conducted by a group of researchers at Imperial College London, started questioning whether noise can be arranged and turned into music without the help of a composer.

Furthermore, Kennedy's analysis centred on the functioning of the sonic economy and digital space from scientific, political, aesthetical, economic and cultural points of view is noteworthy. In the first chapter, entitled *Sonic Dimensions*, he approaches the scientific perspective, focusing on how the time and space have been regarded over time. Firstly, it is important to note that, in this case, digital space ought to be seen not only as place, but also as time. Juggling with the concepts of universal and relative space, Kennedy presents Descartes's relative theory which argues that space is equivalent to corporeality and can be measured visually. This theory cannot be considered valid today, since being an abstract place, the digital space cannot be understood through sight, but rather through sight accompanied by that sonic dimension. According to Locke, space represents a specific coordinate on an axis and can be measured only in relation to other coordinates. The author is interested in how they are able to change in relation to aspects such as speed or communication exchanges in the context of the digital space. Following these observations, Kennedy found it necessary to establish whether digital space should be seen as continuous or discontinuous; he concludes: "This is digital space: a continuous discontinuity of relations that are themselves not spatially extended. Rather, they are infinitely reconfigurable insofar as they constitute a space of what is possible as much as what is present and perceptually verifiable" (33). Moreover, he claims that it is essential to relate to the digital space as a space "of a series of interconnections that need to be

understood as relative and qualitative phenomena" (34), a space that manifests spatio-temporal relations with the real aspect of the world. In order to understand this new concept, Marshall and Eric McLuhan created the concept of "acoustic space", which had existed in Ancient Greece, but was eradicated by Aristotle, who chose visual knowledge over the acoustic. It implies both sensual and chaotic simultaneity and offers a 360 degree knowledge of the world.

In the chapter based on the political frame of digital space *Territories of Resistance*, Kennedy points out the general interest in the power that the new technology exerts, concentrating on the period named "the digital turn", namely 1994-1995. He shows how politics has found a way to infiltrate people's lives through the new media, making it clear that "the political realm is not an abstract self-contained structure with a simple cause-and-effect relationship to technology, but is itself embedded within a nexus of interrelated realms or spheres of activity, both discursive and non-discursive that contribute to what technology itself essentially is" (51). More specifically, political discourse was formed simultaneously with the development of the new media, as governments got involved in fields such as micro-electronics or information technology. Still, it is not accurate to say that politics manipulated the mass media discourse, but the insight that Kennedy facilitates to documents such as the Command Paper, *Creating the Superhighway of the Future Developing Broadband Communications* reveals the manner in which governments offered instructions of use for technology, planning "to consume" it according to political interests.

Furthermore, an analysis on how society received the new technology constituted the centre of the discourse. According to *The Guardian*, the twenty-first century began in 1994 and people were convinced that the rise of technology would subprime the political power. It has been argued that the new media symbolizes the rebirth of the world: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" (Katz, 1995). The excitement shown towards new technology was visible also in the academic environment and in the cinematographic field, due to the belief that film could advertise through images of the new discoveries. Kennedy argues that "new media does not name an age that can be assigned a clear linear definition, but a technological phenomenon that is always in process relative to the conditions of its existence and where space emerged as a space relative to real-world political concerns." (65). Moreover, Kennedy exemplifies through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *In a*

Thousand Plateaus the relation between music (which has the power to deterritorialise) and politics, showing how music was used as an act of rebellion pointed against different ideologies. But it is also to be mentioned that, according to Kennedy, music itself can be considered in some cases political, always being in a process of territorializing or deterritorialising.

In third chapter, *Echostate*, Stephen Kennedy compares visual representation to sonic phenomena, arguing that, while the first is fixed in space, the acoustic phenomena is mostly related to time and, drawing a parallel to Kevin Lynch's temporal city, digital space should be regarded as vibrations: "not a taxonomy of visual similarity but a cacophony of sonic difference" (73). Still, this digital environment ought to be taken into consideration both temporally and spatially. The author uses the term "echostate" (an invented concept derived from Foucault and Bachelard) in order to investigate the "multi-temporality" of the sonic dimension and, by extension, the spread of statements, seen as "operational performances that cohere with objects to create a kind of materiality that is repeatable and melodic, rhythmic and harmonious" (75), through the new media, that became coherent discourses. The author also emphasizes the importance of silence, borrowing the concepts of "the silence of the desert" and "the silence of the forest" from Sara Maitland. According to Kennedy, digital space is similar to the forest, because it is shaded and hides secrets that need to be uncovered. Noise represents another characteristic of this new space, and it is most visible in silence, because it is the time when its constant vibrations become audible.

Studying the theories of Marx and Engels, in the chapter dedicated to economy and entitled *An Invisible Exchange*, Kennedy notes that both relate to the distinction between appearance and reality, inverting Plato's myth of the cave. In their perspective, Sun is a negative element, represented by capitalism, which hides the working class protected by the factory gates standing for the cave. Digital space is regarded as a successor of the marketplace in the traditional economy, having notions of political economy, such as "information" and "medium of exchange", at its base. However, in order to speak about the economy of digital environment, the author needs to provide definitions for technology, as Heidegger sees it both as a means to end and an activity, and Foucault affirms that it could be also perceived as language and discourse. Kennedy opts for Slack's perspective, "viewing technology as an expression of the wider social process, as part of a totality that demonstrated essential

qualities" (115). As a consequence, it is obvious that a change in technology is only an expression of a change in society. Furthermore, Kennedy make an analysis of various approaches to economy, showing how they perceive technology. Hence, whilst the liberal or free market approach understands technology as liberated from the political oppression, the Marxist and post-structuralists assert that technology is strongly related to class relations. It is also important to note that economy is regarded here as "a constantly shifting noisy ecosystem of co-evolving relative parts" (123); it is an unpredictable system, that proposes listening as an analogy for political engagement. Another concept inevitably arises from this definition, namely that of "sonic economy," meaning "a mode of thought where multiple aspects of production, communication and exchange are assigned and/or assume interrelated value, duration, and speed/ tempo" (126).

Chapter five, *Motor Cities*, emphasises the cultural dimension and it is structured as a case study on how music developed from 1970s to 1990s in Coventry and Detroit, cities with many similarities (motor manufacturing, racial division, and a rough economic crisis), even though they are 3,688 miles away. As Kennedy states, "they are also both examples of places where music external to the territories in question entered the milieu, colliding with rising discontent and political unrest" (136). Converty is related to Ska music, which was brought from Jamaica, while in the case of Detroit the influence was from Germany, in the form computerized music of Kraftwerk. Along with the economic crisis and The Year of Technology, a "chaotic noise" was also being created in Converty. "This chaotic noise was audible not only in the music that was forming, but also between that music and wider social, economic and political concerns. The sound was one of decay as the concrete in which the economic boom had been built started to disintegrate, both metaphorically and literally" (139-140). In other words, the sound of Ska music (represented by The Automatics who eventually became The Specials AKA) can be perceived as a mirror of the economic situation in the Converty of that period. Detroit's situation is similar, with the rise of electronic music, which appeared in the work of Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, in the form of "a peculiar assemblage that drew on the past, both locally and globally, while simultaneously pointing to the future" (146). What Kennedy points out in this chapter is the power of sound in a specific place to catch the essence of the formal political economy, without claiming at any time to advertise political issues.

Stephen Kennedy's book is of great importance because it offers a total experience of the world in the time of digital space, analysing it from five different perspectives and proposing a crucial turn in the manner in which we experience both the real space and the virtual one, or the digital space, the turn from the eye to the ear, from image to sound. As he claims, a sonic economy is fundamental to the contemporary society, as virtuality is not a concrete place, but an abstract one, which cannot be seen, but, as its functioning is based on the principle of vibrations, it can surely be heard.