The Aesthetics of Noise
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Noise can blow your head out. Noise is rage. Noise is ecstatic. Noise is psychedelic. Noise is often on the edge between annoyance and bliss. Noises are many things. Noise is a difficult concept to deal with.

Some would say that it is no longer meaningful to talk about noise as something special, since we have finally reached a state in which all sounds are equal. That may be so for certain avant-garde artists and advanced listeners, but I will assert that we still hear a difference between noise and more traditional musical sounds. Noises are the sounds which used to be denounced as non-musical. To include noise in music thus still has an effect and bears a certain aesthetic power. That power is the topic of this essay. To give an exhaustive explanation of it, though, is not only beyond the limits of an essay, but seems *to be* fundamentally impossible due to the evasiveness of the matter.[1] There is a constant discrepancy between the essentially indescribable object and the attempt to verbalize and understand it. It is my hope that the following reflections are nevertheless able to sketch out an approach to understanding the important part noise plays in the music of today.

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After defining noise and giving a brief history of noise in music, I will take a closer look at Sonic Youth, My Bloody Valentine, Merzbow and Curd Duca as four very different aesthetic approaches to noise. Ranging from aggressive ecstasy to soft intimacy, from melodic sweetness to abstract hard-core noise, from the guitar to the computer, these examples serve to indicate the variety of noise in both rock music and electronica. Reflecting these in a broader perspective I will then turn to philosophical concepts such as the sublime, the Dionysian, multiplicity, and the abject.

What is noise?

Etymologically, the term "noise" in different Western languages (støj, bruit, Geräusch, larm etc.) refers to states of aggression, alarm and tension and to powerful sound phenomena in nature such as storm, thunder and the roaring sea. It is worth noting in particular that the word "noise" comes from Greek *nausea*, referring not only to the roaring sea, but also to seasickness, and that the German *Geräusch* is derived from rauschen (the sough of the wind), related to Rausch (ecstasy, intoxication), thus pointing towards some of the aesthetic, bodily effects

of noise in music.

A single definition of noise is not possible; instead I will provide three basic definitions: *an acoustic*, *a communicative* and *a subjective* definition.

A. Acoustic noise

In the field of acoustics the concept of noise is in principle purely physically defined. Noises are sounds that are impure and irregular, neither tones nor rhythm - roaring, pealing, blurry sounds with a lot of simultaneous frequencies, as opposed to a rounded sound with a basic frequency and its related overtones. To name different kinds of noise, synaesthetic

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metaphors are derived from the spectrum of color so that 'white noise' is a signal ideally containing all of the audible frequencies at the same time, like an untuned radio. A signal in which certain frequencies are preferred to others is thus called "colored noise," ranging from "violet noise" (a bias on the high frequencies) to "purple noise" (a bias on the low frequencies).

B. Communicative noise

In communication theory, noise is that which distorts the signal on its way from transmitter to recipient. There will always be an element of distortion, either externally or internally, coming from the medium itself. In music noise is often originally a malfunction in the instruments or electronics (a disturbance of the clear signal), which is then reversed into a positive effect. The distortion effect of the electric guitar, for instance, which is now ubiquitous, was originally an overload of the amplifier, causing it to fray the sound. In the early sixties, guitarists began to deliberately construct this distortion by fiddling with the amplifiers, and soon the industry marketed pedals with names like "fuzztone", "overdrive", and "distortion" as an easy way to obtain the same effect.
In the same way electronica artists work with different sorts of overloads of the devices, or they deliberately induce errors with unpredictable results. One of the methods is giving the midi too many signals for it to handle, resulting in an uncontrollable musical output. Another technique is the obvious one of creating distortion by overloading a digital amplifier.
When you reverse a disturbance into a part of the music itself, it is not smoothly integrated but infuses the music with a tension. There is still a play on the formerly negative relation between noise and signal when a noise is legitimated. This tension is an important part of the musical power of noise.

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C. Subjective noise

"Unpleasant sounds" – this is the common and colloquial, but also the most intricate, meaning of noise. And it is obviously a subjective definition. There are very few general rules as to which sounds are unpleasant (the higher the frequency and the louder the sound, the more unpleasant it feels); it is to a great extent a matter of personal idiosyncrasy and cultural-historical situation.

An important factor in coming to dislike certain sounds is the extent to which they are considered meaningful. The noise of the roaring sea, for example, is not far from white radio noise, but is nonetheless not considered unpleasant and irritating. We still seek meaning in nature and therefore the roaring of the sea is a blissful sound, whereas radio noise (even if we were to hear it as indistinguishable from the sea) is normally considered a disturbance. Artists, who deal with noise in their music, as well as their audience, have a different approach to white noise, no longer considering it a nuisance.

One might conclude from this that the subjective definition is not relevant to the aesthetic use of noise in music. But, as I have already suggested, that would be a hasty dismissal of the important tension you get from infusing the formerly negative. To reach a point where a harsh, white noise is not considered unpleasant demands a training of the senses to the point of being familiar with this expansion of musical sounds. Reaching that point, noise will still contain a certain power due to the tension of listening to what used to be dismissed as repulsive (cf. below on the abjective character of noise).

The history of noise – a brief sketch 2

The origin of music was in principle a process of purifying certain sounds by filtering out the irregular sounds, the noise. The church music of the Middle Ages was an extreme in this

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respect, allowing only the pure sound of the male voice and considering the interval of the third (today essentially consonant) a dissonance. The classical, Western tradition has (generally speaking) fostered instruments of pure sounds and maintained the exclusion of the impure, with some exceptions for dramatic effects (thunder, canons etc.). During the 19th century music became increasingly complex and dramatic, and at the same time the orchestra began to include more percussion instruments that were considered noisy. They were nevertheless far from what is today considered noise.

The first composer to consciously operate with noise as music was the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, writing the manifesto "The Art of Noise" in 1913. He constructed the so-called "intonarumori" (noise intonators) and composed a few works for these machines. They were quite primitive, each instrument making a single sound when turning a handle, and the music still had a residue of the mimetic, illustrative function. But the idea of

allowing all sounds to be music was a crucial turning point.

Edgar Varèse and John Cage both started from that point. For Varèse, the important thing was to expand the possibilities of music within the tradition of an autonomous artwork, i.e. including new sounds, formerly rendered non-musical, now without their illustrative effect. He tried to emancipate noise from its mimetic function, abstracting it as purely aesthetic in works like *Ionisation* (1931), where he used sirens because of their glissando-possibilities rather than alluding to an emergency. By shifting the focus from the notes to the sound, by seeing music as layered, organized sound rather than melodic-harmonic development and by experimenting with electronic instruments, Varèse is the probably most important pioneer of electronic music.

John Cage had similar visions, developing from an expansion of musical sounds in his invention of the prepared piano to the postwar philosophy that all music is just sound, and

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hence that all sound is music. He wanted to open our ears to all the sounds that surround us, emancipating all noises. This vision is still a long way from fulfillment.

After the Second World War *musique concrète* evolved in France, using tape technology to make music of found sounds. Pioneers were Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. Pure electronic music was made possible by the mid-fifties, centered around the Cologne studio with composers like Gottfried Michael König, Karlheinz Stockhausen and György Ligeti. The inclusion of electronic noise and a distinction between various noise qualities was an integral part of this period. Since then, numerous composers have worked with acoustic as well as electronic noise.

Rock music and guitar noise

Noise in rock music is centered on two effects, both connected to the electric guitar and developed in the sixties: feedback and distortion. Feedback is the back-coupling of the sound when the small pick-ups on the guitar react to the sound from the amplifier, i.e. the sound they themselves transmit. Distortion is the fraying of the guitar sound originally produced by amplifier overload, now normally by pedals.

The deliberate use of these effects can be traced back to Link Wray's "Rumble" (1958), but it was garage bands like The Kingsmen, The Kinks and especially The Who, who made it an integral part of their sound. The great innovator, however, was undoubtedly Jimi Hendrix, who constructed a whole catalogue of noise effects, using them with virtuosity in his blues-inspired rock compositions.

Aesthetically, however, the influence on noise rock came not from Hendrix, but rather The Velvet Underground, with their minimal, lo-fi, sinister music and disillusioned texts. On tracks like "European Son" and "Sister Ray," the noise is

alarming in ways that has made Velvet Underground a reference point for all noise rock.

In the 70s The Stooges continued the noisy garage tradition, combining it with free jazz elements, and paving the way for the punk rock movement. Lou Reed made his outstanding concept album *Metal Machine Music* (1975) – four vinyl sides of sheer guitar noise and nothing else, made partly as a provocation directed at the record company, the record has gained a reputation as a place for weird, noisy beauty. I will also mention Pere Ubu's legendary first single "30 Seconds Over Tokyo" (1975), one of the most disturbing pieces of rock music ever made, and the provocative Throbbing Gristle debut *2nd Annual Report* (1977).

The term "noise rock" (in Danish: *støjrock*) denotes a part of the post-punk scene rising from the ashes of punk in the late 70s. The use of guitar noise becomes a characteristic feature for a lot of bands, exploring its possibilities further. Post-punk is characterized by a certain preoccupation with the sinister, melancholy, pain, fear, death, excess, perversion – in short, what the philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) has called "the heterogeneous". This term denotes that which does not fit into the normal and rational in modern society, that which cannot be subjugated by the public utility or profit. Post-punk thus tries to distance itself from the smoothness and cheerfulness of pop, though mostly without discarding its melodic qualities.

One of the important ways to achieve this is by using noise. Noise rock is not a coherent style, but a loose term for quite different approaches to a noise aesthetic within a post-punk idiom. It began in New York under the label of "No Wave" in the late 70's and in Germany with Einstürzende Neubauten and other bands centered around "Die Geniale Dilletanten" around 1980. In the UK, actual noise rock did not emerge before 1985, when The Jesus & Mary Chain created the

British, more melodic, variant.

It is not within the limits of this essay to give an overview of the noise rock and electronica scene and all its different sub-categories, but I will mention some of the most influential styles and names: Sonic Youth took off from guitar composer Glenn Branca to create their very own harmonic style and guitar techniques (see example below). Bands like Swans and Big Black used noise as a dark, hellish force in their aggressive, Gothic tales. Hüsker Dü, Dinosaur Jr. and others bridged the gap between post-punk and the impending grunge scene with their straightforward use of noisy guitars. My Bloody Valentine (see example below), A.R. Kane, Lush, Ride and many other British bands used guitar noise to create a more poetic, dreamy atmosphere, labeled 'dreampop' or "shoegazer". Band of Susans made a minimal, mantra-like use of guitar noise with a British equivalent in bands Loop and Spacemen 3. Young Gods and Ministry, among others, used the sampler as a noise generator. In Japan, a noise scene grew out of the 70's free jazz environment of Tokyo, featuring Keiji Haino, High Rise, The Boredoms, Merzbow and others.

By 1991 the development of guitar noise seemed to come to an end, culminating with My Bloody Valentine's Loveless as a worthy climax. Guitar noise had gone mainstream with blockbusters like Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins, and the sound possibilities seemed permanently exhausted. The place for noise exploration was no longer to be found on the rock scene but rather in electronic music.

Electronica uses noise in many different ways, sometimes so integrated that any distinction between noise and music is heavily blurred. Samples, drumloops, fast breakbeats, dub bass and of course all sorts of computer-generated sounds can be more or less noisy. An important trend is "glitch", where errors are inflicted on CDs causing it to skip and get stuck. Oval is probably the most convincing glitch-artist, crea-

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ting a blurred atmosphere not unlike that of My Bloody Valentine. Only few electronic artists, such as Merzbow (see below), deal exclusively with noise.

Four music examples

Sonic Youth

Sonic Youth made their debut at the so-called *Noise Festival* in New York, 1981, an event that marked the end of No Wave and the beginning of something new. With guitar composer Glenn Branca as their father figure, they set out to 'reinvent the guitar', considering the guitar a far richer instrument than normally acknowledged, containing a wide range of possibilities.

The guitar can be used as a percussion instrument, beating the strings with a broken drumstick, a screwdriver, or what-ever is at hand. Combining this effect with feedback, Sonic Youth created a bell-like, pealing sound. Every possibility of the instrument - the guitar, the pick-ups, the amplifier, even the electric plugs - were explored, and, as their most original characteristic, the strings were tuned differently, creating a new, more dissonant (sometimes even microtonal) harmonics, far from the general rock idiom. Sonic Youth developed an arsenal of more than 40 guitars each with its own tuning; often the two guitarists play with each their tuning at the same time.

A characteristic trait is what I shall call "the maelstrom of noise," in which the tune and rhythm break off into a whirl of noise, gradually intensifying tempo and volume, absorbing the listener into its ecstatic black hole. This chaotic vortex is in opposition to the structural, formal elements of music, exceeding the boundaries of the senses, although still controlled on a higher level. The maelstrom is at the same time an explosion of energy and an *im*plosion of meaning, turning away from the distinct and semantic into the sublime and ecstatic.

The common effect of noise in music is the aggressive,

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raging expression also found in the maelstrom of Sonic Youth. Noise is a vehement means, reflecting inner and outer chaos and conflict. But, as the next example will show, noise can also be used to evoke a very different experience.

My Bloody Valentine

My Bloody Valentine also had the ambition of reinventing the guitar, albeit with entirely different means and effects than Sonic Youth. In their music, noise is not aggressive, but low-key. Noise becomes introvert, dreamy, almost languidly erotic. This especially goes for the album Loveless and the related ep's *Glider* and *Tremolo*. Listening to My Bloody Valentine one encounters a diffuse blurred harmonics. The guitar chords are gliding, swimming in a muddy sea of distortion. The guitarists' strokes are cut off in the mixing process, so that every sound seems to be growing out of nowhere, with no distinct edges. My Bloody Valentine extract all kinds of sound from the guitar, manipulating it in different ways, also by means of the sampler, so that, for instance, feedback can be transformed into a whistling, melodic instrument. The vocals are placed in the background of the sound stage on the same level as the other sounds, making the words almost undecipherable. The noise on *Loveless* is extraordinarily integrated in the music, not as a distinct layer of sound and not placed in opposition to an otherwise structural clarity.

All these effects put together with the sleepy motion and sweet, dreamy tunes, form an unreal, disorienting sound picture, "the-not-quite-really-there-sound", as they themselves have called it. The dense sound makes no illusion of an acoustic space. It is claustrophobic; almost like being in an infinitely intimate place. There, the music affects you like the most coveted, yet vulnerable, states: tenderness, love, sex. You have to get very close, to immerse yourself in the

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web of noises to be able to let the vocals whisper sweet words in your ear. The blurriness of My Bloody Valentine's sound is like the blurriness of getting so close to an object that you lose the outlines of it. And this object is as soft as a tender body.

But the disorientation takes the experience even further than a concrete sexual encounter, towards a more abstract, impersonal intimateness. There is not really an I-you-relation (as in a normal pop song), there is no room for such a distance; the intimacy is overwhelming, ambivalent and transgressive of any subjectivity, suggesting something akin to an incestuous, narcissistic or pre-oedipal relation.

My Bloody Valentine has made a new psychedelia without turning to the effects of the old; a psychedelia of noise. At their live concerts the band experimented with ending the performance with a sustained dose of sheer noise. They developed this stunt to perfection, culminating on the *Loveless* tour 1992, where a piercing, dazzling white light was thrown out into the faces of the audience while the pure noise took on new dimensions in volume and lasted for more than 15 minutes. This was a stark contrast to the soft, colorful preceding concert

and provoked two different reactions: half of the audience left in protest or aural pain, while the other half stayed to find out what this would bring. And the experiences were very special. People underwent different ecstatic states, all pertaining to the trans-individual or pre-subjective: out-of-body-experiences, nirvana-like states, visions of being swallowed up by a giant vagina; and my own: hearing phantom lullabies that I've never heard before – very detailed and continuing to play in my head when I got home in bed. These experiences are not only an effect of an overload of the nervous system but are also inextricably tied up to the preceding concert, opening the mind towards the most intimate feelings.

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Merzbow

Under the name of Merzbow, Tokyo based Masami Akita has produced pure noise music since 1979, and especially in the 90's he has released a staggering number of electronically based releases, culminating in the 50 CD (+ artwork and CD-ROM) set *Merzbox*, a giant compilation of his finest work. Not only very productive, but also very consistent, he is constantly operating close to the limit of what can meaningfully be called music. Starting from Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music, considered by many a terminal point for music, he exploits the varieties of noise without supplying it with any melodic material. Merzbow's music is an ear-splitting assault on the body, at least, that is, until the nervous system is allowed to gradually relax from the state of alarm and enter the world of sensing extreme noise as music.

The name Merzbow is derived from Dadaist Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau (aka *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*), a work in progress built by the use of found garbage material. If noise is the trash of music, the sounds that we traditionally discard as non-musical, then Merzbow is a trash artist, tirelessly seeking odd and convulsive beauty in the garbage cans of sonic waste. And, like Schwitters, Merzbow's art is essentially urban, reacting to the overload of sensuous impressions in the big city. As a sort of apotropaic[3] shield he throws the noise of Tokyo back into our ears, transforming it into an aesthetic experience.

No specific phenomena are recognizable, though. The Merzbow noise is abstract, minimal, deprived of mimetic content. Its effect is immediate, an overload of the nervous system, not being able to sort out the information into categories of relevant and irrelevant – hence the normal reaction of fear and discomfort when confronted with Merzbow noise. "Noise is the unconsciousness of music", Merzbow states, in the same way as his other main interest, pornography and

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bondage, is the unconsciousness of sex.

Merzbow noise is linked with fear, conflict and aggression as in rock music, but defying any melodies, the pure noise does not incite the listener to ecstatic bliss, but remains hard and somewhat conceptual to most of its

audience.4

Curd Duca: Touch

Curd Duca's "Touch" (1999)5 is a recent example of communicative noise, continuing a tradition of cut-up vocals that can be traced back to Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956). A female voice sings a line with a keyboard in the background, but we never hear it as a line, it sounds like the CD is damaged, causing it to stutter for a while and then jump to another stutter. The message is disturbed, almost indecipherable. The word "touch" is clear, though, several times manifest in its full length followed by a few notes before it collapses into the ongoing fragmentation. It is almost like a cubistic painting, a fractured view seeing things from different angles, constantly shifting its focus.

The music of this radical sample collage is beautiful. The vocal is gentle and sensually affectionate, singing the few notes of the sample in a longing way, as if reaching out to touch someone. Actually, after a reconstruction, the words seem to be "you'd be like heaven to touch". This message, this gesture, is too disturbed to be communicated. The disturbance is, of course, not really a device error, but it hints at the familiar sound of a CD player not being able to read the digital information on the disc.

A work like this could be seen as a reflection of a cultural situation in which clear communication is disturbed and direct exchange of affections is threatened. The undamaged sample would risk being too sentimental, too pathetic to survive as more than a cliché in a postmodern world of information overload. Cutting it into pieces and transforming its banal state-

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ment into a more disturbing beauty actually makes it more authentic by virtue of alienation.

In this piece, noise is not a certain acoustic quality, as in the other examples, but a distortion of the message and of the melody by use of malfunction-like effects

Towards an aesthetics of noise

In various ways, noise as a sensual, aesthetic phenomenon points out of the field of the subject as a divided entity, towards what could be called the transsubjective, that which transgresses the individual. This applies to the explosive ecstasy as well as the implosive intimacy. This transsubjective point is also bridging the gap between rock music, normally considered subjective, and electronica, normally considered objective. With noise, rock turns away from its standard focus of a subject expressing his/her feelings, towards a more anonymous state. This was manifested on stage by My Bloody Valentine, having no focus on the band members, who appear only as shadows in front of a big screen with abstract psychedelic films projected on it. The following reflections on noise as Dionysian ecstasy and as abjectal intimacy points in this direction.

The Dionysian and the sublime

The ecstasy of noise is predominantly aggressive and vehement, as the maelstrom of noise in Sonic Youth. This is often an aesthetization of violence and suffering, the noise being an ingredient in what one might call a Dionysian aesthetic. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy) Friedrich Nietzsche described the Apollonian and the Dionysian as two principles of aesthetic attitudes toward suffering, working together in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner.

Apollo represents appearance, form, individuality, beauty and dream; the Apollonian aesthetics is an embellishment of suffering, a self-conscious lie, a veiling of

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cruelty by use of form and elegance, a semblance of beauty. Dionysus, on the other hand, represents ecstasy, being, will, intoxication and unity; the Dionysian aesthetics is a direct confrontation with the terrible foundation of being, an absurd will driving us all in our meaningless lives. In the Dionysian ecstasy individuality is transgressed6 in favor of identification with the universal will - a frightening yet blissful experience. Frightening, that is, because it is a death-like giving up of the Ego, if only for a few seconds; blissful in letting go of the responsibilities of being a subject. The Dionysian experience is a "metaphysical comfort", knowing that suffering is a necessary part of the effects of the eternal will – the destruction of things in order to create anew. In the Dionysian ecstasy one is no longer concerned with one's individual suffering, seeing instead things from the universal point of view.

In music, the ecstasy of noise is undoubtedly a Dionysian effect, as opposed to the Apollonian melody and form.7 As mentioned above, the German words *Rausch* (ecstasy) and *Geräusch* (noise) are related, pointing towards this fact. The Dionysian is that which is not totally controlled or formed, e.g. screams and noises. The Apollonian elements are seductive, inciting the listener to enter the ecstatic bliss of the Dionysian, enabling the listener to dare the confrontation with the dreadfulness of existence. Therefore, Nietzsche says, the Dionysian needs the Apollonian.

Merzbow is so demanding exactly because he refuses this; he does not soften the harshness of noise with any Apollonian elements. Listening to Merzbow is thus a very different experience from the Sonic Youth maelstrom. One of the reasons for the ecstatic effect of noise is its sublime character. The sublime is that which exceeds the limits of the senses, perceived as chaos or vastness. Despite our ability to put these words to it, the sublime goes beyond making sense - we never really understand it. The complexity

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of noise (in the acoustic sense) overloads the ears and the nervous system and is perceived as an amorphous mass, incomprehensible yet stirring. The delight of the sublime is the satisfaction of confronting the

unfathomable.

Abject noise

As mentioned above, noises are the sounds that are discarded as being impure, unmusical. Music traditionally expurgates the dirty noise and fosters the pure tones. But noise belongs to the same pool of sounds from which music stems. Ideally, music is thus defining itself by a detachment from its origin. This is abjection, using the term coined by Julia Kristeva.

The abjects, in Kristeva's sense, are the rejections from the body: stool, sperm, spittle, snot, nail clippings etc., considered dirty and repulsive. The reason why we are (more or less) repelled by the abject is that it threatens our individuality, being neither subject nor object, but something in-between, confusing our delimitation as individuals. The bodily cleansing process is a way of upholding one's individuality, fearing the blur between the objective surroundings and ourselves. To confront ourselves with the abject is strongly ambivalent, a combination of pleasure and fear, reminding us at the same time of the pre-oedipal symbiosis with the mother and of death, the end of individuality.

Taking noise back, music confronts itself with its abject, plays with it, like a child playing with its stool, metaphorically speaking. This is perhaps a reason for the effects of My Bloody Valentine's music, combining extreme intimacy and noise into something very sweet, but also implementing the fear of this (almost incestuous) closeness.

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Noise as multiplicity

In his book Genèse the French philosopher Michel Serres develops an idea of the ultimate being-in-itself as noise. Behind the phenomenal world (the world we perceive) is an infinite complexity, an incomprehensible multitude, an analogue to white noise. All concepts, all understanding of the world is an ordering of this chaos,[8] this multiplicity, "noise." Serres uses the term "noise" with two meanings: the English (noise) and the old French word "noise," meaning quarrel. He also hints at the Greek, maritime origin, "nausea" (see above). The multiplicity is conflict-ridden and noisy.

Noise and conflict are normally closely related in music as well. This aspect of noise is the reason why it is often used to express anger, fear and violence. Noise in music belongs, of course, to the phenomenal world, but exists at the limits of our senses, pointing metonymically towards a more fundamental noise, the chaos of the pre-phenomenal world. When we are confronted with a massive dose of noise, we often create our own sounds in our heads, "phantomic sounds", as a desperate way of relating to the audible chaos.

There is also, I think, a more sociological perspective to this. In today's society it is impossible to take in all the information that surrounds us; we are constantly forced to sort out loads of information to be able to find (hear) the desired or relevant information. Information society is verging on noise society, a state in which the

information, meant to convey knowledge, ends up losing the ability to speak at all. Our culture becomes taciturn without being silent, moving towards a noisy muteness.

So what?

I have often been asked whether noise is subversive. I tend towards the answer "no, not directly, but it has a critical poten-

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tial." If subversion is what punk imagined itself to be, a riot that shocks bourgeois culture, I do not see any such possibilities in music. It might even be questioned whether punk really had that kind of effect. In the present historical situation, youth culture riots are verging on kitsch. There are a lot of reasons for this, the most visible being that rebel youth has become a lifestyle segment in commercial marketing.

Noise does not have a fixed, aesthetic meaning. Its phenomenological character depends on the musical as well as institutional context in which it is integrated. As we have seen above, noise is for instance not always aggressive and loud. Still, there are some common features: noise tends to abandon subjectivity, individuality, rationality, homogeneity and control in favor of the objectively irrational, the pre- or non-subjective sublime, something unstable and complex. This is a marginal phenomenon and not a permanent realm for anyone to enter. Still, it has (or has had) the potential of being critical of smooth calculation, ascetic rationality and habitual life. Such a critique does not come automatically with noise, of course, but only when reflecting a historical situation and at the same time embodying what is culturally repressed.

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Notes:

(1) This brief essay is partly based on my comprensive research in Støjrock og støjens æstetik.

(2) For an unfolding of the composed music part and especially the rock part, see Sangild: Støjrock og støjens æstetik.

(3) Apotropaism is a ritual way of warding off evil by depicting it, for instance by making an image of some evil threat. This is one of the most ancient motivations of art.

(4) Sometimes the hard-core noise audience experiences a certain trance effect, though.

(5) From the album "Elevator Music 2" (Mille Plateaux 1999).

(6) The word Ecstasy (derived from Greek) means "standing out (from oneself)".

(7) I am not following Nietzsche's connection of the Apollonian with poetry and the (metric) rhythm in music, making melody a

Dionysian element. For an unfolding of the argument, see Sangild: Støjrock og støjens æstetik.

(8) Serres does not use the word chaos, lest being associated with chaos theory.

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