

Walls of theory

NOISETHEORYNOISE#1, Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy,
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'Noise is an unmapped continent, in comparison with which everything we recognize as music remains a parochial backwater', announced the organizers of this conference. Disdaining 'postmodern academicism's ostentatious displays of theoretical chic', noise will invent its own theory. With its large and attentive audience, NOISETHEORYNOISE certainly felt as though it had trapped a beast with life in it, as yet unpinned to the racks of either commerce or academe. The music/noise couplet did, however, allow speakers to rehearse the neo-Kantian paradoxes beloved of poststructuralism, where knowledge is always tragic because it misses out on the unknown.

Yet continental philosophy was not what brought in the hundred or so punters: it was Noise. Although definition is endlessly contestable, *Radical Philosophy* readers should be told that Noise emerged as a subgenre in the mid-1990s. Noise makes the apparatus of rock amplification the main event, displacing the song form (now demoted to 'mere rock'n'roll'). It's been particularly active in Japan. Finding shapes in random inkblots has a long history in oriental landscape painting and Japanese painters responded to abstract expressionism in a peculiarly pretty (or at least 'not ugly') manner. The Japanese take on Noise is characterized by a similar aestheticism: Merzbow and Keiji Haino have become celebrated exponents of Noise, with countless releases and many prestigious appearances. *The Wire* became house journal for the movement, and there are Noise sections in record shops. As Scanner informed us in his response at the end of the conference, Noise has arrived: it was recently granted a half-hour window on BBC Radio 1. The slippage between 'noise' as a description of non-music and Noise as a genre was occasionally awkward and baffling, but had to be accepted since it was the conference's premiss.

In his talk, 'Noise & Modernism', David Cunningham tried to forestall some undialectical oppositions which might hinder debate. He quoted Jacques Attali saying that noise is not the opposite of music, but music's way of articulating social conflict. He quoted Theodor Adorno saying that noise is the residue of the physical in music, and can no more be extirpated from it than nature can be extirpated from history. Using Sonic Youth, Merzbow, Oval and John Cage as examples, Cunningham voiced a gentle critique of some of the more exaggerated claims of Noise to emancipate the sonic 'in-itself', and reminded us that, according to Adorno, what sounds like the immanent historicity of an art work is actually a social development. A fiercer critique would need Marx's concept of alienation: if the critic doesn't explain how capitalism alienates us from musicality by reducing musical traditions to commodities (whether the classical 'heritage' or pop product), emphasis on the 'social' can sound like a pious wish.

Nick Smith's title – 'Why Hardcore Goes Soft' – was another critique of Noise ideology. Having listened to Japanese Noise artist Masonna's CD on headphones on a transatlantic flight, Smith found its jagged transgressions (achieved by overloading PA systems so the sonic picture breaks up, the equivalent of an artist ripping into the canvas) 'predictable, redundant and boring'. His curiously banalized Adorno – essentially an extension of Kant's 'beauty is ruleless' – resulted in a 'but porn is so boring'-style put-down of Noise. As Colin Cod from the group Zion Train pointed out from the audience, Smith had failed to notice the sarcasm and satire in Masonna's work, its reflection on its own limitations, and hence its musicality.

Paul Hegarty's 'Voice as Noise' resembled a hack 'primer' feature in *Wire* magazine: a string of examples from the twentieth-century avant-garde presented as positive culture, omitting the only principle that can make sense of such works – the avant-garde's negational dynamic. Kant was quoted on bird song as if Olivier Messiaen's researches hadn't proved him wrong, and we were played gruesome snippets of avant-exhibitionism by Antonin Artaud, Joan La Barbara and Diamanda Galas. Anyone who casually refers to Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* as 'rubbish' is unlikely to convince this listener that he has anything useful to say about either noise or music. In the discussion, Nick Smith revealed more of the Cage-inflected version of Adorno which circulates in the United States, where his sublime has become 'contentless' and 'intentionless'. But Adorno had no time for Zen, and interpreted the formal transgressions of Schoenberg as recognition of painful social facts.

Greg Hainge's talk reminded us that the sensual rush of much Noise comes from focusing on the sound of a needle in a vinyl groove. His use of PowerPoint to illustrate his musical examples with images and texts exposed the *slowness* and *inertness* of bureaucratic technologies compared to the directness and physicality of Noise (improvised visuals is something only the French group Metamkiné has so far cracked). We were shown tattooed arms and told we needed to 'map music at the molecular level'. Hainge's glamorous post-structuralist buzzwords weren't getting us anywhere.

Steve Goodman's 'Turbulence: The Art of War in the Art of Noise' resembled an article in *Mute*, full of fascinating facts about sinister new technologies of domination, but somewhat unclear about what to do about them. Although the (brilliant) Jungle artists he played from black pirate radio use names like 'Turbulence', 'Rocket Science' and 'Vortex', the connections drawn to Paul Virilio seemed forced. Using Michel Serres on Democritus, Goodman followed Deleuze in leaping from physics to crowd theory. The relative quiescence of anti-capitalism means that Goodman's talk of 'swarming' sounded less sexy than it did two years ago, while the Deleuzian jargon's reduction of political agents to things is somewhat sinister in itself. As a way of voicing alienation it packs an aesthetic punch, but as a blueprint for revolutionary politics, it's thin indeed. Marx also began with Democritus and his doctrine of the immanent tendencies of atoms, but his dialectical critique of the Platonic split between matter and form didn't jump straight to mapping riots; it went on to criticize capitalism's own rationality. Marx opens the door to conscious left politics, which Deleuze closes.

Rather than drawing genuine connections between consumerism and war, comparing Jungle to the US military's research into the use of sound to disorientate the enemy at long distance ('sonic war machines') is a *Loaded*-style fantasy. Genuine analysis would need to factor in youth unemployment, new technology, the price of oil, the rate of profit, international relations. The stunning, uncompromisingly de-referenced rhythms of Jungle are certainly blows against the black middle class's concept of heritage, but merely to celebrate Afro-diasporic polyrhythm versus bad 'laminal' thinking is dualist and wishful. Some concept of social identity and class oppression, the motivational eroticism of new beats and the packaging of black music as a racialized



commodity might help. The problem with Deleuze is not simply that he was a confused anarchist with a corny taste in literature and painting, but that his ability to feed adolescent fantasy immunizes his enthusiasts from the deeper radicalism of Freud and Marx.

Aled Rees presented a poetical polemic called 'Location and Forces: Sound, Noise and Human Reality'. Rather than succumbing to their jargon, he used Deleuze and Guattari to voice what he wanted to say: the noise/music distinction is irrelevant; what needs to be studied is affects inculcated by sound; the intent of the noise-maker matters; sound needn't be manipulative, it can be organized to make listeners aware of how it works. Rees was speaking from a genuine engagement with music. Peter Osborne's characterization of his stance as 'Deleuzo-mysticism' failed to dent it. Rees made a crucial observation when he said musical pain is not absolute: given the presence of open-minded, unrepressed listeners, the 'pain' of Cecil Taylor's piano playing or the 'racket' of *Trout Mask Replica* may be experienced as joy.

However, this aesthetic fact introduces a dimension which Rees's Deleuzian subjectivism, lacking class analysis, cannot use. One suspects the Deleuzeans' view of music would be broader if they took fewer drugs and went to more weddings: certainly, by the time commitment to Noise as genre has become this partisan, we are very far from Marx's 'nothing human is foreign to me'. Musical forces like Ornette Coleman, Frank Zappa, Derek Bailey and Eugene Chadbourne may be dismissed as noise by their detractors, but they ask their listeners to open up to musics outside the range of the cool and saleable: practical rebuttal of conspicuous consumption of commodities in favour of musical use value. Rees took Keiji Haino (Japanese guitarist, hurdy-gurdyman, speaker-in-tongues) to be the very pinnacle of the Noise aesthetic. In genre terms, that may be so, but such unquestionable aesthetic 'facts' (Glenn Miller as the king of swing) are usually covers for mass deception. To these ears, Haino is a bombastic and incompetent thespian-in-black hyped by ex-*New Musical Express* journalists astute at selling rebellion to alienated and sexually frustrated young men: a prime example of the commodity fetishism Rees thinks Noise contests. But even if Rees's judgements were clouded by his identity as a Noise consumer, his paper broke the ice and created some theoretical turbulence.

Down with a bump for Julius Nil, whose unwittingly absurd presentation data-projected portrait photos of Adorno and Barthes as he quoted them, thus fetishizing the anti-fetishists. Using as examples three recent *Wire* favourites (Helmut Lechenmann, Autechre, Resplendent) Nil tried to apply Adorno's Beckettian concept of 'failure' to them. Seldom have theory and music been less well matched, since all three musics shine with musical and technological competence. Nil lacked the courage to voice his own opinions (one missed the soul-baring which made you warm to Rees), using theory as a machine for distributing Brownie points. Nil no more got inside his theory than his music, a failure no amount of laptop software could hide. He was pretentious, derivative, paratactic, unconvincing... to use his own, oft-repeated phrase, *I could go on*.

The conference was capped by a chill slice of classical Adornoism from Wesley Phillips: 'On Incomprehensibility in Music'. For once, a philosopher was found with something helpful to say: Schlegel observed that incomprehensibility is a means of creating artistic tension. At one blow, the neo-Kantian antinomy of noise/music had been smashed! Phillips explained Adorno's belief that music surpasses the mind/body distinction with impressive eloquence. This linked with the materialist monism of Rees's pointing out that all sounds (whether environmental noise or deliberate music) have an emotional affect. As often at a conference, you felt the best papers laid a foundation which should become the premiss of another day's discussion. Aided by Rees's commitment to musics outside the canon, Phillips's ideas could be sprung from the upholstered chamber of classical composition and be given some real explaining to do. Judging by the way Colin Cod – probably the most knowledgeable musician and pop/noise enthusiast in the audience – was gradually silenced by the shifting walls of theory, such a breakthrough is sorely needed.

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