

# *Full With Noise:*

## *Theory and Japanese Noise Music*

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### **1. Scratching the Surface**

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"Full with Noise,..." is about noise music, specifically the version that has come to be called Japanese Noise -- itself composed of many different strands. The first half deals with the question of noise. What is it, whose is it, and how can we think about it. Also, how does noise inflect our thinking, rather than being an object; at what point does noise lose its noisiness and become meaning, music, signification? Or -- is there even a point where noise can subsist? Mostly, the text below takes the view that noise is a function of not-noise, itself a function of not being noise. Noise is no more original than music or meaning, and yet its position is to indicate the banished, overcome primordiality, *and cannot lose this 'meaning'*. Noise, then, is neither the outside of language nor music, nor is it simply categorisable, at some point or other, as belonging exclusively to the world of meaning, understanding, truth and knowledge. Instead, noise operates as a function of *differance*. If this term is what indicates and is subsequently elided, in/as the play of inside and outside (of meaning, truth, language, culture....), then we can form another binary with identity on one side and *differance* on the other, but with this difference - that difference is both one term in the binary, and that which is the operation of the binary. This is what noise is/does/is not. For Douglas Kahn, noise drifts across the binary empirical/abstract, such that "when noise itself is being communicated, [...] it no longer remains inextricably locked into empiricism but it transformed into an abstraction of another noise" [1]. In other words, noise is (taken to be) empirical, belonging to the world that is there in itself, a world of sounds without conscious sources. When such a view is mobilised, by the *dadas*, the futurists and so on, then noise becomes second order: a demonstration of the noise that subsists beyond.

As Kahn rightly notes, there is no noise without the thought of noise, and ideas about sound can therefore "make an audible event called noise louder than it might already be" [2] - noises come from specific places and specific conceptualisations. At some level, the use of noise is a bid (however unwitting) to master it (at least in Western modernism), and reduce its quality as noise: "avant-garde noise, in other words, both marshals and mutes the noise of the other: power is attacked at the expense of the less powerful, and society itself is both attacked and reinforced" [3]. This of course includes the "actual" others of the Western male - woman and the foreign other particularly significant here. For the purposes of this essay, it is the use of the exotic other that might be at stake. Kahn observes that the early modernists' love of "the primitive" led them to (in)appropriate so-called

primitive musics, and "thus, the grinding sound of power relations are heard here in the way noises *contain* the other, in both senses of the word" [4].

Perhaps this is what is going on in trying to theorise Japanese noise music, even when rendering this a theoretical agent. Maybe crucial cultural elements are missing, leading to presumptions about what is being produced, based on underinformed hearing. This may be so. But what needs to be added is that if noise is to be noise, then an authentic reading (of true meaning) cannot be, cannot take place. More importantly, Japanese noise has its roots as much in free jazz, experimental rock music and contemporary classical music, as in traditional or classical Japanese musics. Part of the "noise" that unites highly disparate musics under the banner of noise music is precisely a disruption of Western music and its genres.

Japanese Noise music has existed since the early 1970s, and since the late 1980s has been increasingly influential. This essay concentrates on the figure seen to epitomise Japanese noise: Merzbow, essentially the work of Masami Akita, and even then, only a tiny fraction of his output. The second half of the essay, including the conclusion, is an attempt to create a Merzbow/theory object -- failing.

## II. Scraped Subjectivity

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A recent exploratory political document states that "noise is sound which has a negative effect on people (unwanted sound)."[5] According to C.S. Kerse, noise is "sound which is undesired by the recipient", "a sound without musical quality or an unwanted or undesired sound" (The Law Relating to Noise, 8)[6]. Noise, then is subjective, and this is what vexes the Law, which exists, according to Jacques Attali, as result of the transformation of noise into music, into a regulated system, which heralds all regulated systems, all that comes from the buried sacrifice at the origin of society.

Attali: "Primordially the production of music has as its function the creation, legitimation and maintenance of order. Its primary function is not to be sought in aesthetics, which is a modern invention, but in the effectiveness of its participation in social regulation. Music - pleasure in the spectacle of murder, organizer of the simulacrum masked beneath festival and transgression - creates order"[7].

Is noise subjective? Could we not instead say that noise has to do with the subject: that which occurs as/at the limit of the subject; that which signals an immanence outside of the subject/object divide, however re clothed in phenomenology? It would not then be enough to say "one person's noise is another's music" in some liberalist fantasy - rather we would have to acknowledge the constructedness of the "subjectivity of noise".

Technical books on acoustics often assert that noise is in some way biologically coded - 'we' perceive certain sounds as noise because the vibrations are too close to the frequencies, rhythms, wavelengths of bodily functions. Others are noise because they are too alien. This is not totally false, but what is really at stake here are discourses which presume that there is an absolute, shared biology, layered with personal freedoms of judgement, feeling and so on. Such a stratification is also not false, but that does not make it natural, nor the specific layering a given: it makes an apparent

end-result (or beginning-result), where there could simply be process [8].

If we are to listen to noise as music, noise designed as music, noise perhaps designed to stay noise, but to be heard in the conditions music is listened to, then something must give. Two possible models: firstly, learn to live with it - adopt an Adorno pattern (didactic) over a Hegel pattern (post-Hegelian, (un)phenomenological), unwittingly championed by John Cage, and argue that we can, as result of listening to noise, rather than hearing it involuntarily, relearn how to approach the world and its cultural 'world' (of course, world and 'world' can be quickly reversed); second model - create a situation which exposes the 'noise-afflicted subject' to remain so - through an act of sovereignty (something in Bataille that seems to be mastery, but undoes itself) consign the subject and its supposedly subordinate vessel to chora-ness.

How to be a body without organs without being a fusion-loving hippie: after the schizo, paranoid, hysteric bodies, comes the masochist body: retrained and subjected as the last choice of the subject, the masochist body is "further" than the schizo body, leaking its internal organs, becoming pathway, becoming solid, becoming-becoming. The masochist body has the option of losing itself as organism through restraint, enclosure, containment (whilst also becoming someone else's body without organs, becoming body of the other): "it has its sadist or whore sew it up; the eyes, anus, urethra, breasts and nose are sewn shut. It has itself strung up to stop the organs from working; flayed, as if the organs clung to the skin; sodomized, smothered, to make sure everything is sealed tight" [9]. As a result we have a version of 'the' body without organs: it "is what remains when everything is taken away. What you take away is, very specifically, is the [masochist] phantasy, the whole made up of significations and subjectifications" [10]. Except that not everything has been taken away - the ears remain open.[11] Is this so the masochist body can hear instructions? Is this because the body without organs is really about listening?[12] It is perhaps that the ears constitute 'an' organ that we cannot control, so to leave 'it' open is to close the possibility of control through closing - if the ears were closed, the masochist would again be in charge of the soundworld. The ears become wound.

A suspicion remains that the unclosed ears maintain a link to the world of sense - whilst the ears themselves might constitute a wound, it is an enabling wound, one that (like the pain now disallowed as warning signal) allows the possibility of processing the world into meaning. To block the ears would also instigate a possibility of self-awareness as organism, although a sense of panic, if it occurred, would be the undoing of this. Even so, the end-result, once we consider the ears as hearing device, whether open, closed, blocked, unblocked, the body without organs but with ears is a naturalised one, one that returns us to a primordial condition (even if a primordiality that was not primordial, but becomes that which is returned to as if it were primordial).

The body without organs whose ears are filled with noise, however, is more (or, more accurately, less) of a body without organs: the noise-filled ear is no longer capable of hearing the voice of reason, the warnings of danger, the patterning of sound we somehow have always come to believe constitute not-noise. The body without organs does not hear or listen to noise, but is (in) the hearing of noise that exceeds the body that first lost in the sound of its muffled breath, the movement of liquids and gases, the slight panic pulse.[13]

Deleuze and Guattari are right to note that the body without organs is about the failure to become: "There is no attaining the Body without Organs -- you cannot attain it, you never finish getting to it -- it's a limit." [14] The body without organs cannot become itself, or anything else, and the way in

which this specifically cannot happen is through the multiple failure of hearing/ears: its mysterious amnesty in *\_A Thousand Plateaus\_*, its failure through noise to process sense, the failure to stop processing, the failure to return to the 'true' body, and the failure that is the return to the "true" body (in, for example heightened awareness of the body's function -- although even if this were possible, it would constitute a forcible intervention in the functioning of the body). The body without organs is the failure of completion, the failure of this failure (organ resistance). The failure is the process of becoming, and becoming-failed is the noise of the attempt to get to the body without organs - the supplemental 'place' where it cannot be, where only it 'is'.

Another story of the ear related by Kroker is one in which "the ear finally comes into its own. But not the old ear attached to a living head".[15] The ear moves into (non)being as a post-masochistic organ without a body. But as we have seen, also an organ without a body without organs.

Noise can be seen as structural: in the realm of law, of good citizenship, it is "undesired", or "excessive" sound.[16] In the realm of Law as that which operates rationality, noise is that which has always to be excluded -- the exclusion having always already been and (not) gone, in order that the Law exists. This seems to indicate noise as a category, like the sublime, of domesticated exclusion. But noise can be conceived of as process. For Russolo, "[the timbre of noise] is no longer an *effect* bound to the causes that produce it (motive energy, striking, friction through speed, bumping, and so on) owing to and inherent in the purpose of the machine or thing that makes the noise",[17] and if noise is process, is always a becoming-noise -- or, alternatively, (not) coming into (not) being as noise, this exclusion (what we take to be in the exclusion) is undone when noise 'is', as noise is the coming-undone of noise/organised sound. Most particularly when noise 'is' where it cannot be -- music.[18]

Noise also has to contain judgement: it is 'unwanted'. Can noise be wanted - clearly that would then define the noise in question as not-noise. If we are happy with tautology, we can stay there. Or - let us presume that noise is always unwanted as a function of wanting (desire, if you must) - it might even be "what you did not know you wanted" -- as suggested by Attali, when he writes that new music always emerges as noise in what is to become "the old order": "despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information";[19] as of course suggested by that prime mover of de- and re- territorialisation, the 'capitalist machine'. The unwanted is not a function of some lack-oriented mysticism about desire, but the actuality of wanting, once removed from subject/object control. More simply, though, what if you actually do want to hear something that is noise - in the shape of unorganised, unpredictable, violent (sometimes in terms of volume) sound? Attali makes the case that 'music' is heading toward noise, in the form of unavoidable background music[20] and in its increased standardisation, where "it is trapped in identity and will dissolve into noise".[21] The judgement 'I want to listen to noise' is a deterritorialised one - it is occurring without the subject intervening. Nonetheless, it might be the sign of the dying Subject grasping for some form of Authentic Existence before disappearing (accompanying the world of "performance art" into a world of hyper-simulated sacrifice).[22]

Music, according to Attali, is "the organization of noise".[23] Noise has an existence outside of our conscious control, which is partly natural, partly social environmental: "life is full of noise and [...] death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, noise of beast".[24] Life, then, is rationalised, brought into line, and rigorously limited. A general economy of sacrifice, murder, waste is lost, in

music, "originating in ritual murder of which it is the simulacrum".[25] Attali, however, cannot go so far as to see that noise cannot be natural -- that it is the equivalent of the Nature left behind at the signing of the social contract -- only coming into (not) being as retrospective, excluded and forbidden. He clearly states that noise is that which is to be excluded, but not that the endless and impossible exclusion is where noise 'is' -- crossing and not crossing the line that is (not) there, as with Foucault's transgression line. Why is death silent? At a literal level it is noisy -- organs becoming extinct, collapsing, expanding, rotting -- an endless carnival even before the arrival of other creatures. Death is silent in the sense of the subject not being there to hear it. Is this what occurs in Cage's silences? Is the hearing subject absented, rather than, as Cage wished, brought forcibly into the presence of sounds usually unheard?[26] Silence, however, is structurally speaking, death - the death of the system of organised sound, priority of voice, meaning, music.[27] The death that is fully recognised by the system that excludes it. Silence, unlike noise, does structure, or let come into structure, systems of meaning. Noise is too much, is excess as the working of excess (not just the excessive product).

Noise is excluded for being too natural, but also for being unnatural. Rupert Taylor, in a burst of retrospective utopianism, asserts that "at the same time man was learning to create pleasurable stimuli to his sense of hearing, in other words to create music, he was beginning to pollute his surroundings and blunt his hearing by making more and more loud and unpleasant crashes and bangs, grindings and rumbles" (The Law Relating to Noise, 16). Much, maybe all considerations in terms of noise as a social issue presume noise is that which is to be reduced (not wrongly, but...) -- so that we can return to what is best for us ("like water and air pollution, most noise is the result of the decision for technological progress at the expense of the human environment".[28, 29] The "human environment", endlessly stabilised, is not nature, however, and is not to contain silence. In fact, contain silence is precisely what it does, offering endless background noise (sometimes in the form of music) in order to actively silence, argues Attali.[30]

### **III. Endless Oscillation of the Material**

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Merzbow (aka Masami Akita) plays the double game of ambience Attali identifies: omnipresent sound, becoming noise; noise becoming background. Merzbow music consists of the debris of music, of sound: pulses, feedback, hisses, whirs, blasts, distortions, pure tones, shrieks, machine noise -- all played extremely loud.[31] But this music is noise "all the way down" -- there is no space for recognisably musical sounds to be overlaid with distortions (as in 1980s music in the wake of punk), just combinations of noises, that do not settle into a mantric pulse, or continual explosion ("not music at all, but rather the intensive expenditure of sound and silence").[32] The listener struggles to find a way through, in or above the noise music but gives up at a certain point: rhythms are to be found, frequencies to be followed -- it is not just random, but - eventually "the listener" is pulverised into believing there is a link. Noise music becomes ambience not as you learn how to listen, or when you accept its refusal to settle, but when you are no longer in a position to accept or deny. Perhaps the "experienced listener" can manage whole albums, concerts -- Merzbow has the answer in the shape of the 50CD *Merzbox*. The possibility of mastery, of "learning to hear anew" etc. -- *held out as if possible* -- endlessly broken (to keep the possibility open as indefinite promise) by alteration, by blurring of the strata of sound, is what feeds the continual excess of noise music. Noise

music is the endless sacrifice of art music didacticism and of restricted economy "noise" (metal, hardcore of all types).[33]

It seems like a claim could be made for Merzbow to be *the* avant-garde, perpetually renewing the art, moving the boundaries etc., but actually noise music inhabits the failure of the avant-garde to be, to come to be. Schwitters wanted his *Merz* to redefine our relation to the material, to value, to what art could be. This then is brought to the interior, and *shores up the monument of art*. Merzbow does not want to live in a house full of crap, or outside it, neither does it want to live in a new crappy house: it wants to knock down the house it lives in, to live in it. Even this is too much, though: Merzbow actually wants to find a rundown house made up of broken stuff, and break it. Over and over.

The reason Merzbow cannot be avant-garde (or is the avant-garde that cannot be: i.e., the avant-garde) is that the breaking is static: like Paul Virilio's **speed**, Merzbow's destruction of music attains a point of stillness, one composed of total movement (and like Nietzsche's "moment" of eternal return). The world of 'the now', this now, always now, comes together as interface, as the non-place of speed as non-movement.[34] This in turn signals the possibility of "crash music",[35] emerging at a new stage of hearing (generally neglected with the presumption that the digital world is one of images alone), such that we can now take noise/"crash music" to be "so seductive because of its fascinating logic of an always promised imminent reversibility: pure ecstasy/pure catastrophe".[36] This imminent reversibility, occurs *as solid*, as immanence.

Merzbow eludes Adorno's critique of aleatory music (whilst wilfully staying within its purview): "today's artists would rather do away with unity altogether, producing open, unfinished works, or so they think. The problem is that in planning openness they necessarily impart another kind of unity unbeknown to themselves".[37] The apparent aleatorics of noise signal an endless closing, a ceasing filling, but always, at any one time, ceaseless. Noise music (which is admittedly not the same as Adorno's actual target -- the music of Cage or those who followed in the 1960s and 1970s, but bearing in mind his even stronger 'critique' of jazz, I think we might be able to infer a line of tech flight to noise music), seems to fall into Adorno's trap: in terms of the title which takes on an increased significance, as we search to impose some form of sense, even if we do not necessarily seek to do this. Not having any titles would be just as caught within the loop: the subject now the ineffable abstraction of sound, noise, music etc., or as with some abstract painting, the subject becomes the Subject, working itself through on the canvas. The title (in Merzbow's music) sets up a process wherein it cannot become the subject of the music: there is no metonymy, mimesis, metaphor to be had - and yet, the title makes it ~as if~ such things were possible - as with the structure of the 'pieces' (Akita: "When I use words, say album titles, they are not chosen to convey any meanings. They are merely selected to mean nothing".[38])

With this in mind, Merzbow's *Antimonument* (1991) can be seen as a mission statement -- both for and against Schwitters, Merzbow attacks the solidity of Hegelianised Western culture, through five tracks of seemingly arbitrary lengths, made up of arbitrarily selected sounds, moving along but not. In fact, *Antimonument* is quite 'readable' - centred on arrhythmic, treated percussion: the monument has yet to be left behind -- but this is still music with the music taken out - hardly any attack in the percussive sounds, distortion, and unpredictable 'interruptions' by hisses, static and so on constituting the material proper. Akita specifies that the reference to the *Merzbau* is one of decreasing relevance:

"the name is only important to my early work, which I thought related to the concept of *Merzbau*".[39, 40] *Antimonument* is Akita leaving the building. The building, the monument that is progressively deserted in *Antimonument*, as the tracks grow sparser, is a double one: it is the leaving of a traditional Japanese music (that Merzbow never completes -- "Japanese sounds and instruments are used but their character is often purposely extinguished in the mix",[41]), and also the leaving of the Western monument. Why should he even be near this, except in a Western-centred model? Because philosophically, musically, politically and economically, Japan has not stayed outside the Western monument. This despite a certain exoticist attribution of lack of meaning, of, therefore, an atheoretical purity -- "Japanese artists use Noise simply as cathartic release without the philosophical underpinnings" [42] -- emptying the space to fill it, if not with Western meaning, then with Western emptiness. Masami Akita is interested in philosophy: in Eastern: "Japanese Noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself and the concepts come from the sound. It is a tradition of eastern philosophy to base theory on real experience" [43], and in Western: in the form of explicit references to contemporary theory (Derrida, Foucault, and Bataille, whose use is contemporary), and implicit ones: "noise is the nomadic producer of difference" [44].

In today's restricted (but generalised) music economy, we have had the ludicrous 'world music', and also the real world music Attali hints at: ambient pop. Alongside these particular versions, is another (anti)global music: Japanese noise music: a refusal through over-acceptance of Western genre, such that genre does not work: hence Japanese noise music's different take on violence and sound, away from heroic (tragic) mastery of or submission to "the horror, pain etc., of the world" (this despite the importance of bondage as a reference for Masami Akita). Against generic noise, but with the noise of genre.

There is a sense of progression in Merzbow's oeuvre, as the materials alter, and the recording capacities of CD technology allow a greater range of frequencies to seep in. David Keenan argues that *Noisembryo* (1994) "is the quintessential Merzbow release"[45] due to its power, volume, and force - this, then is what had been aimed at all along, in the teleological version. Noise, however, does not necessarily have anything to do with these factors, and their having an apotheosis. The "sheer noise" of the mid 1990s releases could be described as a different sort of zenith in terms of the fact that there just is 'more'. Instead of a Hegelian progress, a Sadean, additive process. This 'more' has to be more than more; otherwise we are just in the realm of groups such as Whitehouse, whose purpose often seems to be to *attain* a position of mastery over noise.[46] This more than more is, perhaps inevitably, a less: Merzbow can never get to the zenith, because Merzbow's music is doomed to fall: it is always open to assimilation as music -- or, it is not assimilable, and therefore it claims transcendence. Or, in some notional noise/music dialectic, in being on the limit, it fails to resolve, and fails to fail - because it is noise music, it cannot belong, dwell. Instead it is dwelling, part of a plateau, rhizome etc., with 'the listener', noise as becoming-noise, as well as becoming-music.

*Noisembryo* opens with a blast of noise that endlessly mutates across the album, interrupted by (the noise of?) silence three times. Always differentiated, this is noise that does not settle, where even the volume -- or mass of sound -- cannot be perceived as consistent as the pitches of the specific strata are continually shifting, whilst not at any one time covering the whole range. This album is noise as the immanence beyond, beneath, above the noise/music divide: noise as the emptying immanence.

It might seem that some form of communing, however perverse, might be possible. If so, it is that community which is not realisable, the one 'present' in Bataille's sacrifice -- Thacker notes that in *Music for Bondage Performance* (1991) we see "the body of music filled with excess and volume, presented as the tension-filled inability of excess to fulfil itself",[47] and this "body of music "is" the body of listener, the music as material, the hearing as solid, and the un-communion of these, all at once. Thacker further claims that noise is the accursed share of the sound worlds, and therefore itself in the position of that which is to be sacrificed.[48]

But it is Bataille's conception of immanence that is of interest here, as its dividing off of animal from human stands in parallel to that of noise and music, with the former term the always (to be) excluded that can return, but which 'we' cannot be. Bataille suggests that the animal is like "water in water",[49] which seems to be what is happening if immersed in noise, if liable to suggest some kind of sacrificial wholeness, a form of rescue.[50] Japanese noise will not get us there, any more than sacrifice. Immanence is not only what is beyond (performative negativities like object, nature, the other) but what is (not) beyond: that which is the beyond of the beyond, only insofar as there is no such place to be.

Bataille: "I am able to say that the animal world is that of immanence and immediacy, for that world, which is closed to us, is so to the extent that we cannot discern in it an ability to transcend itself. [...] It is only within the limits of the human that the transcendence of things in relation to consciousness (or of consciousness in relation to things) is manifested."[51]

There is no place for the object or the subject's transcendence, coming to be, getting beyond that coming to be in knowing about it, or being known, when immanence is the field. The 'consciously' constructed sound of *Noisembryo* moves into the smooth space of immanence as it eludes the knowable world of other noise (of noise 'in the world'), which is held at a distance. This set of sounds brings the distance near, and this just as much when blasts of 'different coloured' noises slide across each other, a third of the way into "Part Two" as when 'the' noise falls away into a distorted drone halfway into "Part Three". Noise as event, as excess of eventness, because unlike late serialism, it does not leave gaps peppered with inane atonalities. It is gap, non-tonality.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the non-place of the body without organs is (in) immanence, and is itself (as immanence) the non-place of desire.[52] However, they do not see any totally free music being the way, as "a material that is too rich remains too 'territorialized'"[53] -- too diffuse, too noisy. Such emphasis on getting outside music has held us back/in, as "people often have too much of a tendency to reterritorialize on the child, the mad, noise".[54] We are back once more with Deleuze and Guattari's still open ears: open but not too open (not open enough?). These are ears that can learn, that can discern patterns, and the undoing of patterns, not ears that might be held forcibly open.[55]

What happens when you hit something like ultimate noise (it cannot be described as pure)? Where is there to go? In order for it to always (fail to) be ultimate, it must go nowhere, but go it must, dromological. Before the sovereignty of *Merzbox* (which is largely older materials in any case), comes *Pulse Demon* (1995). The title obliges an attribution of purpose: we know what Merzbow is up to, maybe he is becoming increasingly Hegelian, and attempting to map all noise, with this being his exploration of 'the pulse'. I suspect there are no more or less pulse actions in this album than any other mid 1990s Merzbow albums.[56] What is indicated is the arbitrariness of signification, an

arbitrariness which serves to highlight another difference between Merzbow and Western 'avant-garde' music: randomness, as Deleuze suspects, is not really very interesting, but arbitrariness - chance as destiny, read as if there were variation (or indeed as if there were not) - carries noise as process, as that which intervenes 'between' noise and organised sound. *Pulse Demon* is undeniably 'organised sound' - it has differentiated tracks, titles for these, and seemingly significant times: we might get the impression that if all this noise has been split into 6.42 ("Woodpecker no.1"), or 24.53 ("Worms Plastic Earthbound"), that the duration might be significant. But many (possibly all) Merzbow 'pieces' of this period are cut, not ended. Their *beginning* is often cut, so there will never be a sense of attack -- we are immediately in the realm of distortion, hiss, pulse, squawks etc., -- of the effects of actions, not the direct products -- noise all the way down. The organisational frame of the album undoes the possibility of this being 'pure noise' or even an exploration of duration (very few Merzbow albums consist only of one track). Instead we are in the curious position of listening as if it were noise (i.e. because framed as if it were music). Any settling into listening to this 'stuff' as if it really were either noise or music is very much the 'consolation' Nietzsche hints at in *The Birth of Tragedy* as being our way of minimising the otherness of sounds presented in a musical frame.[57] Such a 'consolation' is not an individual failing, but a systemic success of failure to fail.

#### **IV. Is Nothing not Enough?**

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Once again, and still: what if we do not want the consolation (consolation of noise being music really; of noise being natural; of noise being an escape, a line of flight that might go somewhere; of noise being a ruse of power)? Noise can perhaps never escape (it might be the 'as if' escape were possible), as it comes in with voice, language and meaning.[58] Derrida asks of philosophy (here, as often, standing for sense, rationality, discourse, (search for) truth, etc.) whether it can exceed itself: "can one violently penetrate philosophy's field of listening without its immediately -- even pretending in advance, by hearing what is said of it, by decoding the statement -- making the penetration resonate within itself [...]" ("Tympan", xii). Derrida's answer is, as always, that the outside of philosophy (or of organised sound as philosophy) is to be found at work in/on/as the inside of philosophy - with the inside being the outside of the outside, and the process that (never fully) establishes the divide. Zarathustra's hammer instead is the condition of its other, and the othering between Same and Other (xii-xiii), such that we should be interested in the limit itself, and not what is beyond it, the marginality of the margin itself, and so on. Japanese noise might be such a negotiation of the limit, but one that only works as such because it declares itself outside, is the declaration, the announcing of outside. The 'real' noise in noise music is this (not) crossing of the line that is (not) there: noise is not the other of the other that equals the same, but the other of the other as non-line, as what cannot be the same and cannot inhabit otherness. Where Derrida is outflanked by Merzbow is that Derrida says you cannot get outside, you cannot consciously undo philosophy with a hammer, therefore you should not do it -- instead you should not attack directly (xv); should take an interest in "timbre, style, and signature [as they] are the same obliterating division of the proper" (xix). Why *not* do it? Why not do it, knowing it cannot be done, that your noise is fatally compromised, part of failure?[59] Merzbow is the getting outside that is not the completion of a new "inside", but an endless outside, fated to be inside only to fail to ~ever be~ because of this arbitrary and perverse relation to the inside (of organised sound). Where Derrida says "no", Merzbow is an immanent "yes".

## Notes

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[1] Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), p. 25.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[5] *European Commission Report: Position Paper on European Union Noise Indicators* (Luxembourg: European Communities, 2000), p. 71.

[6] C.S. Kerse, *The Law Relating to Noise* (London: Oyez, 1975), p. 8. Rupert Taylor also describes noise as "unwanted sound" (*Noise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 22).

[7] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 30. Originally written in 1977, this text remains vital in assessments of freedom, control, subversion, radicality, recuperation etc. in terms of human-produced sound. The argument here that "Japanese noise" is that which specifically exceeds his argument should in no way be taken as criticism of Attali. One criticism that could be made of Attali is that he presumes that music has a single origin/reason/purpose. Music could be said to be always already plural. Such would be the argument of Philip V. Bohlman's "Ontologies of Music", in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds.), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17-34 -- even if this article provides nothing in the way of ontology, as understood since phenomenology.

[8] Arthur Kroker: "Hearing has always been alchemical, a violent zone where sound waves mutate into a sedimentary layer of cultural meanings, where historical referents secrete into contemporary states of subjectivity, and where there is no stability, only an aural logic of imminent reversibility" (*Spasm: Virtual Reality, Android Music, Electric Flesh* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). The alchemy is one the body, the ears, the sound, noise, codings, listening practices etc. and cannot be definitively described or known, except as a statement about how a particular society, at a particular time, seeks to encode, to end transformations.

[9] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 150.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 151 (translation modified).

[11] The body of organs, of identity (not forgetting that organs without a body might be more dangerous still) has privileged the eye, and in contemporary culture, makes this privileging a site of

control: "the eye is a masochistic orifice in the age of panoptic power, capable of endless discipline and of being seduced beyond bodily subjectivity into a floating free fall within the society of the spectacle", leaving the ear repressed, except in terms of receiving "spectacular" sound (muzak, MTV) (Kroker, Spasm, 49). The body without organs, though, would not free us from this, but drive us further in, playing masochism beyond jouissance. "Freeing" the ear would not liberate us, either. Rather, the ear has to become masochistic, in the Deleuzian sense (see "Coldness and Cruelty" in *Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1994), 9-138) instead of being forced to submit. It must then renounce both control and contract. There is, of course, another story of the eye -- Bataille's, followed up by Foucault, in which the upturned eye, removed, trans(un)figured, is the site of the loss of meaning. Eugene Thacker assimilates this story with noise music: "the visuality of Bataille transgressing itself is analogous to the music of noise" ("Bataille/Body/ Noise: Notes Toward a Techno-Erotics", (63), in Brett Woodward (ed.), *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise* (Melbourne, Cologne: Extreme, 1999), 57-65). The comparison is perhaps too easy as the ear does not have the status of the eye, nor is music of noise in itself capable of the reversibility of the eye, which seeks to be both medium and control of media.

[12] Derrida seems to "prefigure" this in writing that "to forget it [the role of the ear, and of listening] - and in so doing to take shelter in the most familial of dwellings - is to cry out for end of organs, of others" "Tympan", (*Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), ix-xxix), xvii. This occurs because the ear allows hearing of one's own self and voice, leading to the non-conception (as unproblematised) of self-presence or "absolute properness" (ibid.). Derrida, however, in turn, has not questioned whether an ear can be less than open or closed, and could in fact be filled. See also Hegel, making essentially the same point: "hearing [...], like sight, is one of the theoretical and not practical senses, and it is still more ideal than sight", as it gets the subject to "the first and more ideal breath of the soul" (*Aesthetics*, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 890).

[13] C.S. Kerse, citing Samuel Rosen, notes that "at an unexpected or unwanted noise, the pupils dilate, the skin pales, mucous membranes dry; there are intestinal spasms and the adrenals explode secretions. The biological organism, in a word, is disturbed" (*The Law Relating to Noise*, 7)

[14] Deleuze and Guattari, op. cit., p. 150.

[15] Kroker, op. cit., p. 47.

[16] Kerse, op. cit., p. 3.

[17] Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon, 1986), p. 87.

[18] Noise is not *differance* - it is an emptier of links, relations, processes, not that which holds them mysteriously together. It is Bataille's "NOTHING", not the nothing that is the opposite of something, or the reason why there might be something instead of nothing. It is the thing which stops there having been a reason for something over nothing.

[19] Attali, op. cit., p. 33.

[20] Op. cit., pp. 111-12.

[21] Op. cit., p. 45.

[22] The dying subject is not one reaching out for the answer, but reaching into its disappearance in noise. For Nietzsche, "the Dionysiac, with its primal pleasure experienced in pain, is the common womb of music and the tragic myth" (*The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (London: Penguin, 1993), 115). In looking at tragedy, he writes, we seek to go beyond its pain, and, similarly "with reference to artistically applied dissonance [...] we want to hear and long to go beyond hearing" (ibid.). Rather than take this as the suggestion we might learn from what is difficult, painful, etc., we could take this as stating the case for not going beyond noise: the act of listening to noise is one of supplementarity: the beyond of noise (initially music) is the precondition for listening to noise, so as to get to "the beyond of noise" (which now is that there is only noise, and that the beyond of noise is what can never have been attained). In listening to noise, though, the loss is played over again always for the first time, as opposed to being the excluded loss of foundation (the "birth of sense" ...).

[23] Attali, op. cit., p. 4.

[24] Op. cit., p. 3.

[25] Op. cit., p. 4.

[26] Michael Nyman notes that Cage discovers the impossibility of silence on a visit to Harvard's anechoic chamber, where he still hears his own body (*Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25-6. Cage's famous 4'33" "is a demonstration of the non-existence of silence" p. 26.

[27] This has led many others, as well as Attali, to assert that noise is life, or nearer to life's "real processes". Russolo states that "noise [...] has the power of immediately recalling life itself" (*The Art of Noises*, 27). This, coming as it does from the "pioneer" of noise in/as music, could be taken not as a simple naturalism, but as a parallel with "bare" or "mere" life (Benjamin, Agamben). Noise for Russolo also signals the life that had already moved on from nature, that is the excluding of nature - i.e. the city. Masami Akita (Merzbow) concurs: "noise is one of the most primitive music forms in the modern city" (in Woodward (ed.), *Merzbook*, 11). Is this to naturalise noise? Only before we think about music: for noise to be some sort of fundamental music demonstrates Akita's awareness that the noise of the city comes as a result of organisation, of power systems, of restricted economies of signification.

[28] Kearse, op. cit., p. 1.

[29] Adorno claims aeroplane noise ruins walks in the forest (*Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 311) -- noise is wrong because not part of true nature, but what Adorno is also claiming ("despite himself") is that noise is also ruinous of nature as acculturated Nature - as it is an uncontrolled incursion into a humanised sphere, immanence in the subject/object field. Hegel argues that to overcome this "problem", music must moderate "the natural": "the notes [are] not to be a purely natural shriek of feeling but the developed and artistic expression of it" (*Aesthetics*, vol II, 910) - so music is neither too natural nor unnatural (it is to express what is now left behind as natural).

[30] Attali, op. cit., p. 20 and passim.

[31] Amplification - the technological means for producing noise as volume of sound, as well as

feedback systems (if not the only means) is an essential part of the development of noise music, which at the risk of being slightly determinist, arises (in the Japan of the early 1970s) out of the combination of improvised music in the form of free jazz, and the improvised rock of a similar period, which relies for its effect, on the power of amplification, the distortions of feedback. Douglas Kahn, dealing with experiments with noise and sound, signals the importance of technological developments in the alterations in ways of thinking sound, noise, music (see *Noise Water Meat*, 2-13 and passim).

[32] Thacker, op. cit., p. 63.

[33] Noise music is also the sacrifice of the "music business", the rendering of it as general, rather than restricted economy, through its disruptive methods of releasing recordings on many labels, in limited and peculiar editions, direct sales. Woodward notes "the creation and production of such items intentionally subverts late capitalism's notions of the marketplace, the performer/audience relationship and entertainment commodity production and distribution" ("A Machinic Scream" (33), in *Merzbook*, 33-6). Before we get carried away with some postmodernistic praise for the artisanal symbiosis between musician and listener, it is worth noting that concerts are infrequent, and a literal distance maintained, a distance allowed by the very processes of subverting "late capitalism". This is a deterritorialisation that stays one -- i.e. carries no autonomous radicality.

[34] See Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

[35] Kroker, op. cit., p. 54.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Adorno, op. cit., p. 204.

[38] Akita in *\_Merzbook\_*, p. 40.

[39] Akita cf. Edwin Pouncy, "Consumed by Noise", *The Wire*, vol. 198 (2000), p. 29.

[40] Op. cit., pp. 26-32. This interview and overview is a solid introduction to Merzbow, whilst being caught up with the "musicality of the noise". Pouncy stresses the learning experience, with statements such as "when the listener has attuned his or her hearing perspective" (26), "the fact is that to understand, enjoy and eventually reach noise nirvana through Masami Akita's work, you have to listen to a hell of a lot of it" (27). These sentiments are echoed by David Keenan's top ten Merzbow albums (*The Wire*, vol 198, 32-3).

[41] Akita, in Woodward, op. cit., p. 11.

[42] Woodward, op. cit., pp. 14, 12-15.

[43] Akita, in *Merzbook*, op. cit., p. 23.

[44] Op. cit., p. 9 and elsewhere, as the contributors love repeating it.

[45] *The Wire*, Vol. 198, p. 33.

[46] See for example Never Forget Death (1992), which warns that "Torture Chamber" (a track of

mounting "white noise") should not be played excessively loud -- i.e. because it is inherently loud.

[47] "Bataille/Body/ Noise: Notes Toward a Techno-Erotics", op. cit., p. 58.

[48] Op. cit., p. 59.

[49] *Theory of Religion*, (New York: Zone, 1989), p. 23.

[50] Op. cit.

[51] Op. cit., pp. 23-24.

[52] Deleuze and Guattari, op. cit., p. 154.

[53] Op. cit., p. 344.

[54] Ibid.

[55] To be fair to Deleuze and Guattari, Japanese noise was far from a breakthrough in 1980, although nearly all of today's "recognised practitioners" were active then. Their unfortunate espousal of the "influential" Varese is just one example of why caution should be taken with imagining Deleuze and Guattari as signposts for the future. In one sense this lack of awareness of the contemporary is itself contemporary -- not in terms of some sort of "dumbing down", but just in terms of the retro-future we seem to inhabit in terms of future music (for example in *The Matrix*, whose future remains 1985).

[56] If this seems a very specific dating, it nonetheless applies to perhaps 20 albums. Merzbow's output is immense: in addition to the 50 contained in *Merzbox*, there are another 150+ recordings.

[57] Nietzsche suggests that if music can rediscover its links to the emptiness that is "true reality, through an appreciation of every "phenomenon", then we will experience some kind of catharsis (see 94, in particular). In the light of the later preface, however, where "perhaps as laughs you will consign all metaphysical consolations to the devil -- and metaphysics in front of the rest!" (12), much of the main text suggests a proto-Bataillean recognition of a fearful, sacrificial, dangerous general economy of "ugly" sound, brought inevitably into a restricted economy where we "get something from it". See for example 83-4, where "consolation" with regard to the ineffability of things is one of "three levels of illusion" (84), not the hidden truth, or goal. The inevitability of the restricted economy can be seen in the inevitable influence of Apollo (rationality, wisdom, accumulation of knowledge): "the Apolline lifts man out of his orgiastic self-destruction, and deceives him about the universality of the Dionysiac event, deluding him into the idea that he can see only a single image of the world" (102).

[58] This despite the ineffability claimed for noise (and claimed throughout history for "that which goes beyond language" - music, the image, the world, gods, etc). Woodward's version of this: "It's almost the inability to definitively describe Merzbow's music with the limitations of the written word that is the testament to its thrill and power, intricacy and convolution" ("The Nomadic Producer of Difference", in *Merzbook*, 9).

[59] We can compare Derrida's deconstructing binaries with those Attali establishes through noise

and music, as in the following: "Music responds to the terror of noise, recreating differences between sounds and repressing the tragic dimension of dissonance - just as sacrifice responds to the terror of violence. Music has been, from its origin, a simulacrum of the monopolization of the power to kill, a simulacrum of ritual murder" (*Noise*, 28). Noise and music blur when sacrifice is at issue, when music is excessive and essentially ritual, such that "music functions like sacrifice; listening to noise is a little like being killed" (ibid.).

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