Noise threshold: Merzbow and the end of natural sound

PAUL HEGARTY

Department of French, University College Cork, Ireland
E-mail: Phegarty@french.ucc.ie

1. ATTRITIONS

When we ask what noise is, we would do well to remember that no single definition can function timelessly – this may well be the case with many terms, but one of the arguments of this essay is that noise is that which always fails to come into definition. Generally speaking, noise is taken to be a problem: unwanted sound, unorganised sound, excessively loud sound. Metaphorically, when we hear of noise being generated, we understand it to be something extraneous. Historically, though, noise has just as often signalled music, or pleasing sound, as its opposite. In the twentieth century, the notion of a clear line between elements suitable for compositional use (i.e. notes, created on instruments) and the world of noises was broken down. Russolo's 'noisy machines', Varèse and Satie's use of ostensibly non-musical machines to generate sounds, *musique concrète*, Cage's rethinking of sound, noise, music, silence . . .

Jacques Attali argues that noise is an attack on established forms of meaning, but one that brings something new: 'despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information' (Attali 1985: 33). Noise then is an intervention at the level of meaning, one that challenges existing meanings and patterns, leading to questioning (and therefore highlighting the attribution of meaning) and, eventually, if not always, in the recuperation of noise as new system. Cage also notes that 'hearing sounds which are just sounds immediately sets the theorising mind to theorising' (Cage 1968: 9). Noise is both in and outside of the system of sound and meaning: 'with noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion' (Attali 1985: 6). So noise is not the opposite of sound or music. It is, however, of a different order of phenomena. Attali endlessly reiterates this layering of noise and music, as for example in the following statement: 'noise is violence: it disturbs. [. . .] Music is a channelisation of noise' (Attali 1985: 26).

The difference in orders is not accidental – music is the controlling of noise (and noise itself is a simulacrum of murder). Attali writes that 'noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualisation of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder' (Attali 1985: 24). Noise is part of the violence of the sacred – brought into being as part of sacrifice, then gradually domesticated into order. Here, noise is a vector of the human – the location of humanity setting itself up apart from nature. For Georges Bataille, the sacred, as that which we fear, is the founding of humanity: 'everything leads us to believe that early human beings were brought together by disgust and by common terror, by an insurmountable horror focused precisely on what originally was the central attraction of their union' (Bataille 1988a: 106). As time goes by, the replaying of that originary moment (in sacrifice) is also 'too much', and its scope must be reduced. Music comes into being as part of that reduction. Only then, if we go on with Bataille, can we recognise noise as sacred, as that which is being withheld and delivered in sacrifice:

> Moments of repulsion would not have been able to enter the realm of consciousness, therefore, without detours. It is only to the extent that a mind has been led to recognise the fundamental identity between the taboo marking impure things and the purest forms of the sacred that it is able to become conscious of the violent repulsions constituting the specificity of the general movements that create human community. (Bataille 1988b: 121)

Noise has been seen as something more natural than music, and whilst that has meant its exclusion as humanity defines itself as apart from nature, it can be recalled. This occurs, paradoxically, perhaps, when humanity is surrounded by noise it has made: these 'artificial' noises bring out the notion that noise is more natural, or alternatively more profoundly musical, than 'restricted' music – Russolo notes that 'ancient life was all silence. In the 19th century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born' (Russolo 1986: 23). Whilst we do not have to accept Russolo's idea of primordial silence, if noise is awareness of noise, then it is human intervention that brings noise into being *as if it had always been there*: noise becomes something that has always been there (but only retrospectively). Attali echoes the sentiment of the Futurists, in writing that 'life is full of noise and that death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and noise of beast' (Attali 1985: 3), and that 'if an excess of life is death, then noise is life' (Attali 1985: 122).[1]

---

[1] Compare this with Bataille's statement that 'eroticism, it might be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death' (Bataille 1962: 11). Noise would then be both life and death – perhaps the siting of the crossing from one to the other, and from nature to human, or animal to human.

Cage too insisted on noise as part of our environment, arguing that 'wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise' (Cage 1968: 3). In this way, the distinction between natural and artificial noises does not have to be made – it suffices that 'noises' constitute a natural category (see also Russolo 1986: 41–8). If we listen properly, all noises can be brought into the realm of something like music, and this will drastically increase the remit of sound making and listening. Noises become superior to notes (although by definition not distinct from them, which would be a reversed reiteration of exclusion currently performed as 'music'), as 'they had not been intellectualised; the ear could hear them directly and didn't have to go through any abstraction about them. I found that I liked noises even more than I liked intervals. I liked noises just as much as I liked single sounds' (Cage 1968: 116–17). Russolo, too, saw noises as being inherently rich, full with sound, writing that 'noise is generally much richer in harmonics than sound' and 'more intense' (Russolo 1986: 39). 'Following on' from Cage, Russolo posits noise as an excess of interval, as 'noise [. . .] is caused by motions that are irregular, as much in time as in intensity' (*ibid*.: 37).

Cage's view of noise and the possibility it holds is utopian – we can learn and improve (ourselves and music) through broadening what we can actively listen to rather than simply consuming. Even his 'moment' in the anechoic chamber, where he discovers there will always be some noise, is a pointer to the potential of our approach to sound. The sounds he hears are that of 'the nerve's [sic] systematic operation, blood's circulation' (Cage 1968: 13). So in the end, noise tells us we are alive – and to a large extent the functioning of these noises is beyond our conscious control. Noise, then, becomes a marker of the 'human condition' in technology – even when we try to remove noise, the impossibility of silence is revealed, and this impossibility in turn signals the relation human–noise–nature.

But noise is not just 'good' to music's 'bad': the primordiality signalled by noise remains a threatening one, one with actual biological effects, as 'in its biological reality, noise is a source of pain' (Attali 1985: 27). Noise is that which was excluded as that which is threatening – the exclusion is not just one enacted by music, but by the development of systems and structures of meaning. Noise is that which remains *the* outside of these systems – but not just as opposite: noise is the process of interference between music/sound and 'its' other. This means on the one hand, accepting Attali's view that what is adjudged to be noise must be seen as a historicised judgement, but also that something like 'noise music' could endlessly live on in the line between music and that which is perceived as noise or noises.

This article seeks to set up the work of Merzbow (Masami Akita) as an example of such 'noising'. He has been producing experimental music since the early 1980s, and sits within a non-genre of 'Japanese noise' or 'Japanoise' that takes its inspiration from free jazz, progressive rock, 'improv', traditional Japanese musics, punk, and throws these together in different combinations, taking the old genres to extremes. 'Japanese noise' represents a diverse take on the interaction and furthering of Western contemporary musics. It can apply to the noise ambience of Aube, the disparate activities of Keiji Haino (from the power trio of Fushitsusha to the improvisations on traditional instruments and vocals), the 'power electronics' of Merzbow and Koji Tano's MSBR, the processed field recordings of Koji Asano, Otomo Yoshihide's experimental band Ground Zero as much as his electronica, the found sounds and percussions of K2, the grinding rock of the Ruins, or of High Rise, the amplified blasts of guitar and voice of Masonna . . . So, the term might not be of any obvious utility – but the development of a cross-genre, cross-category, ultra-amplified and often ultra-processed music is something specific (in its breadth and range at least) to Japan. Recognition of the new Japanese musics has come only relatively recently, with John Zorn, for example, influential in signalling the vast array of innovation that had been occurring in Japan since the early 1970s.[2]

The volume of Merzbow's output (over 150 releases, on a huge range of record labels) as well as its intensity does, however, single out his work as possibly exemplary of 'noise music'. Starting from percussion and found sounds, with varying degrees of additional processes, Merzbow's music reaches a peak of noise in the mid 1990s, arguably largely as a result of the development of affordable digital technology. Merzbow has moved back or on from this, however, into more of a lateral diversity (i.e. the releases of 2001, for instance, vary more than the releases of 1995–7). The following section of this article lays out a possible theorisation of 'noise' and of 'noise music'. The third and fourth sections work through some of Merzbow's releases, and aim finally to suggest that this 'music' is itself a theory object, capable of turning back, undialectically, or postdialectically to theorise contemporary theory, and to question the relative positioning of noise and nature.

2. EMIT

Douglas Kahn argues that noise is a strategy to expand the realm of operation of Western art music, often at the specific expense of someone else's sound, voice or music having its signification removed ('celebrating

---

[2]There is the issue of the potentially ethnocentrist or exoticist approach here. David Toop, for example, suggests that 'moral judgements and oppositional categorisations imposed on noise and silence, or human and machine, are less clear cut in Japan' (Toop 1995: 150) – a statement that acts both as warning and as possible cultural presumption. Having said that, 'Japanese noise' musics specifically identify themselves with Western musics, which makes it easier to draw conclusions. That these are limited by the culture of the observer is a truism. The intercultural positioning of 'Japanese noise' is still in need of theorisation.

noise easily becomes a tactic within the suppression of something else'; Kahn 1999: 21). Cage stands as the endpoint of a process of a utopian 'neo-Pythagorean' belief in an infinity of sound, existing to be found (Kahn 1999: 73–4, 201). With Cage as the turning point, perhaps, this belief transmutes into one where infinite sound, and an infinity of sound can be produced, as if there were such an infinity. Passing via Lamonte Young, we arrive very rapidly at Merzbow. Akita's work exemplifies the combination of amplification used to broaden the 'sound spectrum' and the mobilisation of noises, sound, sound as noise. Merzbow music is, *as if it were possible*. Merzbow is the pursuit of noise, as if it were music, and *vice versa* (for example in the sampling and processing of earlier musics – as is particularly clear in *Door Open at 8am* [1999]). The question of the distinction between noise, sound and music that late twentieth-century art music struggles so worthily to dismantle is left to come apart in Akita's hands.

Amplification, and the use of electronics are crucial in the development of any 'music' with 'noise' as its basis or material. 'Contemporary' composers may have pioneered the use of these devices, but it is in rock music and, sometimes grudgingly, jazz, that they come into their own. From the late 1960s on, feedback becomes a standard tool, and concerts become ever louder, peaking, ironically, not with punk, but with the music it sought to displace. Punk, new wave, no wave, grunge and hardcores developed other types of noise: a seeming lack of skill led to new sounds, new criteria for judging the 'success' of live performance. Meanwhile electronic music was opening up and would end up launching hip hop, rap, house music, techno, jungle, drum and bass and so on. This 'line' combines the clean sounds of synthetic drums and electronic keyboards with the dirt of old records, played 'incorrectly' (this eventually – in the mid 1990s – becoming a genre of its own – turntablism). All this to say that whilst John Cage usually did it first (or substitute in Stockhausen, Varèse, Henry, Oliveros . . .), we need to look beyond art music to find what happened to experimental music. If anything, the tables have turned, and it is experimental 'rock' groups that precede developments in electro-acoustic music. Japanese noise is the sound of those tables turning, as it combines all the above, with the awareness that it is noise as genre, or transgenre – that instead of completing a line of great artists, or being in dialectical opposition to such a line – it is the outside of the line (particularly important given Kahn's assessment of the line being that which '*contains* noise, in both senses of the word contain' (Kahn 1999: 72), the site of the commentary on the line between noise/sound, noise/music, classical/contemporary, safe/experimental, as it performs the line. All these lines.

The problematic of where or what noise is in relation to sound or music takes different forms – the answer is always to be historicised, but we must also question the problematic. As long as we stay in the realm of music or sound production, we will be attributing a timeless, ahistorical value to the problematic of sound against noise, music against sound, meaning against noise.[3] What if, beyond Russolo and Cage's hopes for a world fit for all noises, we are in a world of noise – a world brought into being through the technique of noise-making (as in Heidegger's work of art bringing the earth and world into being)? This noise would come from the proliferation of sources of noise – of sound, of messages that carry less and less meaning. This world is that of McLuhan seen through Baudrillard: a world where medium has become message such that neither exist anymore – there is nothing left to mediate. When there is nothing left to mediate, there is no more content, no more medium, and no more meaning. The excess proliferation of 'media' ensures the disappearance of reality, in favour of 'the real', a world where 'real' is used as a signifier rather than guarantee.

Baudrillard argues that there has been implosion of the real and representation, of medium and message, and that this eventually results in a fractalisation of culture:

> At the fourth, or fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value, there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity. At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general. Properly speaking, there is now no law of value, merely a sort of *epidemic of value*, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value. (Baudrillard 1993: 4)

Each message has its meaning removed, and a 'meaning' inserted, and the world made from these messages is one of dissonance – one where information and fact seem to enhance the possibilities of signification, truth and so on, but whose all-pervasiveness ensures there is nowhere from which to judge. This is noise: noise of conformity ('it all sounds the same' – consonance as noise); noise of excess (too much information); noise of [dissonance] – competing messages; tectonic noise – models of the real colliding. Above all, the fractalisation does not mean total loss of meaning, but that the value of meaning is itself null, but still likely to be imagined – chaotically.

This dispersal is neither good nor bad, as within all of this comes the very mundane world of Muzak – tunefulness as noise?[4] 'Music' is everywhere, fulfilling many socially useful functions, playing out capitalism's

---

[3] The meaning of and within music is itself problematic – whilst it has meaning in terms of structure (as does a language, and speech acts within that language), it does not necessarily carry musical meaning. As Adorno notes, 'a piece that glides effortlessly along with the flow of the sound frequently arouses the suspicion that it is lacking in meaning. The idea of musical meaning ceases to appear self-evident – both in composition and as a criterion of reflection' (Adorno 1999: 158). Meaning is, for Adorno, historically constituted for and by both composer and listener, and is then a reflection of the conditions of creation of the piece. Meaning is not, for Adorno, inherent to any piece of music.
[4] On this point, see Hainge (2001).

yawing from deterritorialisation to reterritorialisation. Noise, on the other hand, thanks to twentieth-century experimental music, has its own niche, and lives there, not disturbing its neighbours. Has noise become quiet? If we accept Foucault's view of power as omnipresent, Baudrillard's view of 'the real'/hyperreal as all-pervasive, Derrida's view of there being no escape from systems of meaning, what is the place of noise, in the form of noise music? Where can it go? Many hold out the possibility that noise music is a form of resistance to the other types of cultural noise (see, for example, the essays in Woodward 1999). But where is it resisting from? I would argue that noise has nowhere to go, but that its not getting to this nowhere is what gives it interest, informs its impulse. As Baudrillard suggests, 'the state of utopia realized [i.e. everything is possible], of all utopias realised [is one where] paradoxically, we must continue to live as though they had not been' (Baudrillard 1993: 4).

But hang on. Noise music is situated very much apart from other genres – especially if we take Merzbow as our example. Perhaps it offers the ecstatic sound/hearing of Coltrane's *Ascension* (1965)? Maybe it offers a brutal critique of the limitedness of other musics, or even all music (instead of hoping to open the world of all sound, Merzbow music attacks what is there). Does the release strategy (innumerable works, in many different formats, for a huge number of record companies, in a range of 'styles') attack corporate 'recuperation' of radical music? All of these are possible, but we need to think of the dynamics of 'noise music' in a world theorised as imploded, where the divide music/noise still persists, but itself without meaning. The line we saw earlier is now only 'line', expanded to fill the space, or, better still, now replacing the space brought into being by the line.

Accepting for a moment the distinction noise/music, we see that noise music has to provide a challenge. But when it 'wins' (i.e. by existing) it becomes music, or at least recognisable sound. Arguably this occurs when a recording is made – but to insist on this would be to insist on the purity or spontaneity of playing, listening or finding. Perhaps it is the first listening that allows for noise to be heard. It is questionable whether a music as rigorously (or whatever its opposite is when not meaning casualness) noisy can ever let the listener settle, and to compound this, the volume (number) of releases means that you are unlikely to be spending time familiarising yourself with old recordings. To respect Merzbow is to not listen (again) – a noisy listening.

Noise music tries not to definitively succeed – in this it is more Bataille's notion of sovereignty – a headless Hegelianism – that we see rather than the mastery of modernists, however post. But in aspiring to go nowhere, either linearly or cumulatively, it must not even get nowhere – e.g. the attaining of some sort of nirvana. As with the model of the expanding universe, the matter at the edge is not going anywhere, neither is it headed to Nothing – instead its path to dispersal is the making of its own space, of all space.

3. ALL MATTER

Merzbow's œuvre has a beginning: emerging from tape music, percussion and what comes to be known as 'improv'. The name chosen by Akita is a direct reference to Kurt Schwitters' 'merzbau' – an art piece which is a house – its interior progressively covered in 'merz', Schwitters' term for stuff. This debris gradually fills the inside of the house, and even though Akita tells us 'the name is only important to my early work, which I thought related to the concept of *Merzbau*' (Pouncey 2000: 29), we might be able to prolong the usage, in order to think of Merzbow's output as a whole. It does not build logically, or coherently, but it does accumulate – in clumps, in scale, around points of attraction, and in so doing, the edifice of sound or music – or even noise – is filled. Or, more accurately is to be filled, is there to be filled, as noise cannot finish its 'work'. In the 1990s, CD technology and digital recording expand the dynamics of Merzbow's noise, culminating in the extreme phenomena of *Noisembryo* (1994), *Pulse Demon* (1995) and *Hybrid Noisebloom* (1997). Beyond these explosions is implosive diversity. Where to start: the only way is arbitrariness – but we can still, arbitrarily, begin at the beginning.

The earliest recorded work presented to us in *Merzbox* (the fifty-CD set released in 1999) is *Om Eléctrique* (1979). The material is relatively simple: drones, amplified percussion, distortion effects, and, in the final track, a range of objects. Are we to take this as an 'early work'? The danger is that we impose both a coherence and a teleology which, if it is present, should not be. On the other hand, just as music 'unfolds in time', so does an œuvre, and we cannot ignore the cumulative reading entirely. As an 'early' work, then, this album represents a form of *musique concrète*, with no suggestion of harmony, melody or tonality, but there is still an element of musicality – things, at least, are clearly being played, pieces constructed. There is rhythm, or at least something approaching rhythm as Akita spends most of the opening thirty-one-minute track hitting metal, probably one handed (thus reducing the chances of a binary pattern accidentally establishing itself). But this is not just percussion with a complicated *brut* time signature: Akita's 'drumming' stops, slows, speeds up, misses 'beats' – this is a natural hitting – only it is percussion being set up, purposively as if it were natural. Already Merzbow is introducing noise at a conceptual level. The track divides more or less into two parts – again a gesture at musical form, a suggestion that when you listen again a structure will be there for you to unfold,

but all that happens when we reach the second part is the drone carries more lower frequencies, and is dimmer, murkier as we go on. The drone itself wobbles, removing the possibility of a soothing tone, and around the eleven-minute mark, the drone is replaced for two minutes by an electric screech, which then breaks up. Around twenty-six minutes the percussion slips into a rhythm, a metered slowing, and this rises in intensity (distorting further through the amplification), and then fades out. This seems like more than a suggestion of resolution, and could signal the closing off an intense communing with the music, however unpleasant the specific tones might have seemed. Except – track two, without fading back up, carries on where track one 'resolved', and eventually peters out, with the drones more wavery than before, the drumming dissipating. Once again, the promise of music is held out, only to be withheld. The final track on the album could be seen as a precursor of later work – the material consists of some sampled radio, wobbling frequencies, unearthed hums, echoed crackles (and a substantial part of the endlessly mounting noise effects of the mid 1990s albums come from the use of echo effects), scratches, wails, electrical buzzes. But this should only provisionally be seen as an 'early' album – although *Om Eléctrique* is 'simpler' than later work, there is no less noise – in some ways the persistent untuned 'simple' multiple frequencies of the lengthy drones is more of a challenge to listen to than a wall of mutating noise that, eventually, for the listener, can settle into an ambience (although I shall be arguing otherwise below).

One way in which Merzbow's early recordings do set the scene for an œuvre is in the exploration of the possibilities of sound/noise production – and the use of distorted amplified percussion is a dissection that goes on as far as 1991's *Antimonument*. The second album in *Merzbox* is *Metal Acoustic Music* (1980), an album in which we can see Merzbow's differing from *musique concrète*. This album is odd for Merzbow in that it contains only one track (as we have already seen, the division of an album can work as a noise tool), and clocks in at forty-seven minutes. The left channel consists mainly of poorly recorded guitar feedback and effects (although not always recognisable as such), the other channel being mostly the residue of the first (amplifier hum, earthings, other bits of guitar noise) – the two channels never coincide, although there is a suggestion of (re)convergence, when at 10′25″ the guitar track more or less stops, while there is a low hum in the other speaker. This only lasts thirty seconds, so remains an allusion to music – which I think it is important to note never goes away in Merzbow – this 'noise music' is never just noise (like, for example radio static) as that would be even more settled than structured sound – even if, later on, it is only noise(s). The remainder of the piece is exploratory, with the only major change being that of

the relative level of each channel and/or the level of clarity of sound (the amount of detail in recording, the quality, volume, cleanness or otherwise, are all also part of the material of Merzbow's noise – which therefore continually exceeds the noise 'content').

This album is near to the aspirations of *musique concrète*, but is radically different – noises are not to be mobilised into a sound piece, instead the production of musical sound is to be thwarted, diverted – its incidental and/or unwanted noise products brought into a sort of focus.[5] Even when the first album heads toward an inclusiveness of sound, the sound is not to be simply left to itself, or its musicality brought out. The noises are what are brought together in something that is very nearly the double of music – that which music must not be, and that which underpins what music makes itself be (a system of meaning, expression of meaning, truth, etc). Merzbow's noise is an extraneous music, whereas *musique concrète* is an inherent music revealed. In this way, Akita is able to move on from what Kahn identifies, in twentieth-century experimental music, as the wish to bring into audibility the hidden sounds of the universe.

This still leaves us with the question of material – even if Akita has a very expansive notion of material to be used for his work, we cannot ignore Adorno's view of music as material, and the processing of material such that that material becomes what had always been material – i.e. it comes to be that which is there to be processed, having existed 'for music'. Adorno writes that 'by virtue of its basic material, music is the art in which the prerational, mimetic impulses ineluctably find their voice, even as they enter into a pact with the processes leading to the progressive domination of matter and nature' (Adorno 1999: 6). So whilst there is a blurring of music as material and sound as material for music, there is a clear sense of material being the stuff of mastery, and if we extend 'material' to encompass all sound, then we have to ask of Merzbow whether his noise is just a version of mastery.

Akita has a different ontology for material: material is not something in the world (or world itself) as separate from the subject. Instead, following on from both European and Japanese performance art, material is something we are part of. This is illustrated in Merzbow's recordings using the term *Material Actions* – the term used by the Viennese actionists to describe their extreme performance, in which the artists would be physically

---

[5]François Bayle writes that '*Musique concrète* wasn't at all a music of noises, not at all a music of provocation. It was the contrary. It was a music that uses all the resources available to us, a music that uses all the sounds of life' (quoted in Chadabe 1997).

and psychologically at risk, taboos broken, and there would be, quite simply, immersion in stuff.[6] It is not that Merzbow copies this, it is more that the immanent world suggested in immersion plays itself out through the noise music (and of course there is the possibility that the listener is placed in a position where the noise is no longer something exterior that can come in through the ears alone).

Something happens to both music and noise (and therefore how they interact) here – as 'material' acquires a doubled existence (its retrospective existence before incorporation, and its shaky presence in the form of Merzbow's noise music). The gap between piece and world, musician and music thins – it is as if it disappears. For Adorno, this means the piece cannot be an artwork:

> Content and technique are both identical and non-identical. They are non-identical because a work of art acquires its life in the tension between inner and outer; because it is a work of art only if its manifest appearance points to something beyond itself. The work of art without content, the epitome of a mere sensuous presence, would be nothing more than a slice of empirical reality, the opposite of which would be a work of art consisting of mere rationality devoid of all enchantment. *The unmediated identity of content and appearance would annul the idea of art*. (Adorno 1999: 197, my italics)

Merzbow heads toward this absence of content, but instead of an identity of 'content and appearance', what we have is the two overlaid, doubling one another. We are not left with a spurious empiricism of pure sound or noise, but with something like an absence signalling the absent presence of music: music is not here, not possible here, but can take its coming into being from this impossibility. The noise then becomes noise music – the space of not-music, signalling endlessly (not as beginning or end) the status of music as same/self/subject to noise's otherness. This noise inflates the line that would be, has always come to be, between music and noise.

4. 1,000,000 MERZBOW THEORY OBJECT

Or does the line vibrate? In *Hybrid Noisebloom* we have the evocation of flowers, genetics, contemporary notions

of cultural mixing, and of an object that is the more than the sum of its disparate parts. It is not just a more, but an excess, and this excess brings the doubled material of Merzbow's noise to a terminal point – the sounding of the line – the death knell of Derrida's *Glas*. The glas signals the end, 'the end of signification, of sense, and of the signifier' (Derrida 1986: 31), intoning the end – its repetition removing it from the realm of music – such that it can show the end. *Hybrid Noisebloom* and other releases of the mid 1990s are such a signal, and stay within the border by virtue of suggesting structure (pieces of determinate length, with titles, as part of an overall work) and meaning. This meaning is more than the possible contents suggested above: the meaning stands beside itself, because the hybrid noisebloom is the thing itself – again a doubling of 'content' and technique such that there seems to be identity.

We are also at the beginning, with Derrida's reading of Hegel's distinctions between sound, noise and speech as central to the 'origins of the family' and therefore society – paralleling Attali's story of the passage of noise through the sacred to the profane to the banal and ideological:

> [the family] is family starting from the moment it speaks – passing from *Klang*, if one likes, to *Sprache*, from resonance to language [langue] – but it destroys itself as family the moment it speaks and abandons *Klang*. Like natural language, like language in general, it ceases to be what it is the moment it posits itself as such; it denies itself as nature in becoming what it is naturally, just like (the) nature itself (of the remain(s)) after all. (Derrida 1986: 8)

The noisebloom signals the opening that closes off that which threatens (the sacred as noise) – an opening which can become less secure. Metals and glass resonate in themselves, and this is the *Klang* that is more than noise, at least until speech arrives. Noise returns when the material's integrity is breached:

> If, on the other hand, a bell (*Glocke*) is cracked or scratched (*einen Riss bekommen hat*), no longer is only the pure balancing swinging of the *Klang* heard, but also the noise (*Geräusch*) of the matter that obstructs, that grates, that breaks, that damages the equality of the form. (Derrida 1986: 250).[7]

The album consists of a huge range of noise effects, some from percussion, some from electronics, many from effects applied to these, or set to multiply one on

---

[6] See *Material Action for 2 Microphones* (1981); *Material Action 2 (N.A.M.)* (1983) and *Yantra Material Action* (1983). Another important reference here is Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955) wherein Shiraga fights with a pool of mud, gradually merging with the material – at which point the distinction between subject and object breaks down. Performance art of the third quarter of the twentieth century is also useful for an appreciation of Merzbow's interest in erotics, and particularly bondage – which often features in the images accompanying a release, or in the case of the seven-inch 'Electroknots', is imprinted on the object itself – each side has a girl in rope bondage rotating around the spindle. Just in case the reference got missed, there are also the *Music for Bondage Performance* albums (1992, 1996). Extreme performance art and the erotic often merge – but in the case of Merzbow, we also need to get beyond the direct references and raise the question of noise as erotic (see Thacker 1999 for a Bataillean-utopian reading of noise). A full consideration of this issue lies outside the scope of the present article.

[7] *Glas* plays off a reading of Hegel in one column with another column following Genet. The text itself can be taken as a 'noisy' one – with no indications of how to read the two sides together – but it is the difficulty that brings the links. Hegel stands as logic, the Genet text itself a disruption even before the non-combination of the two sides. The text, like many of Derrida's, uses playfulness to undermine itself and Hegel (referring to 'aigle' [eagle]'s phonetic resemblance to Hegel's name to raise the question of the name, of significance and symbols . . .) This can only work because Derrida maintains the work at the threshold of noise, continually working through and against that which seeks to remove noise to establish itself.

top of another. The opening two tracks ('Plasma Birds' and 'Mouse of Superconception') are atmospheric – i.e. they set up possible sound environments and suggestions of situations where technology and 'the world' must continually combine – as in outer space. But Merzbow is specifically referring to such musics, rather than just creating some sort of 'space ambience': the use of the archaic EMS synthesizer and theremin evoke not space but the space of mid-twentieth- century science fiction films. The 'spacey sounds' are accompanied by alternating hums, hisses and noise roars, in and as both background and foreground. The closing two minutes of 'Mouse of Superconception' finally begin the process of a more 'total' noise, with staccato blasts of noise, and thudding metal competing with the strongest pulses heard thus far. The third track, 'Minotaurus' begins with a fierce electronic pulse and low noise blasts, with these raised in pitch through equalising effects. This all starts to implode about half way through the 10′46″ duration, becoming a multi-coloured noise (Merzbow's response to *Klangfarbenmelodie*?), from which rapidly oscillating tones emerge periodically. There is development, both across the album, and within tracks, but this is entropic, a sprawling, a loss of resolution. 'Neuro Electric Butterfly' opens with very rapid pulses at different pitches, and as it goes along, veers between wails, pulse blocks of 15–20 seconds duration and high- pitched howls. Tones degrade into noise both individually and as a whole, while persistent low rumbles rise and fall in the mix. The listener has not been allowed to settle, but once more, a suggested resolution casts a retrospective sense over what preceded, as the stretch from the eighteen-minute mark to the end at 20′28″ heads to a peak in the form of spiked white noise – but then it just drops out, flaring back in again, stumbling to a halt (which never quite comes).

As the album progresses, the questioning of ending is continually raised, and is 'progressively' defeated, left as simulation of the end. 'The Imaginary Coversation [sic] of Blue' is even more excessive – layers of noise and the inevitable pulsings set up rising and descending sequences of sound closer to explosions than the sirens to warn of them. At 9′20″, booming echoed tones from the synthesizer simply override everything else, until they too subside. A persistent pinkish noise sets in, along with throbbing echoes of the already echoed sounds, until the whole thing just cuts out at 14′57″. In the end there can be no ending, and this makes the album a critique without distance, some sort of immanent critique, one with nothing to say, but a nothing that tells us something about itself and its other, possibly music. This noise, though is not nothing.

What kind of ecology does the 'noisebloom' belong to or bring? The titles certainly seem to suggest some form of self-contained ecosystem – one which would not seek to bring out or retrieve the ecology of all sound, but which would instead replace it. Merzbow's work continually rejects the idea of sources for the sounds – they are mutated, processed, distorted, cut up, made subservient to a general economy of noise. This is consistent with Baudrillard's statement that 'we must not reconcile ourselves with nature' (Baudrillard 1994: 82). Nature (and here this is 'all sound') should not be brought under ecological control, wherein it would be 'sacrificed to artificial survival' (*ibid.*: 87). Merzbow and others of the 'Japanese noise' musicians are the outside of this management of nature. But are we just returning to noise as a strategy of avant-garde appropriation, in which case Merzbow becomes yet another who would be insisting on the truthfulness, the inherent natural musicality of noise, of all sound? I would argue that the difference here is in the awareness of the paradigm/discourse of noise as natural, of there being truer (and, oddly, more artistic) sound elsewhere than in music, as conventionally understood. Merzbow plays this convention, sets it in play as a self-defeating strategy of evasion. The resulting 'noise music' accepts the simulatedness of trying to leave music behind in order to return to some more original, primordial sound.

The recent album *Frog* (2001) confirms this direction (or, possibly, absence of direction).[8] Akita rarely uses field recordings as the basis of albums – perhaps reflecting an awareness that that separates off the 'material' too clearly as such. The album is based on recordings of frogs, which we hear as frog for forty seconds at the beginning, and very occasionally, later on. The first track ('Suzumebachi No Kinbu') brings many rhythmical passages, but which are not sustained, nor are they free from interference and, for example, howling sounds. Track two, 'Hikigaeru Ga Kuru' begins with a suggestion of frogs (only because we are aware of the album's 'concept' perhaps) and what seems like sheets of metal rebounding off each other. This builds, with a roaring gradually filling the track – with the noise condensing, in the last fifteen seconds, setting up a stuttering form of violent stasis, which then cuts off. Track three (side two of this 'frog-coloured' vinyl album), 'Denki No Numa', opens with piercing noise, joined by lower tone growls; track four, 'Kaeru No Shima' sees the frogs return, distorted beats emerging from the mess. The closing track, 'Catch 22', combines slow, deep, pulses with noise bursts, loops with the joins left in, building hiss, cycling hiss, repetitive rising buzzes, and ever cleaner sounds, in the last two minutes.

The album travels from the naturalistic (if already abstracted) croaking of a frog to the 'artificial' beats and

---

[8]There is a further internal tension of 'natural' against 'synthetic' which there is not space to explore here: Akita regards analogue equipment as being effectively acoustic – nearer to natural sound, hence the use of older equipment. The favouring of analogue equipment is a testament to its noise-making, including incidentally. Recently, however, notably in Amlux (2002), but also in other recordings over the last three to four years, he has used digital processing techniques much more extensively. It should also be noted that this does not represent a complete turn to digital.

tones of the end, having passed through numerous distortions, mutations, buryings and disappearances. We have not simply moved from nature – we have remained in it or, better still, returned to another one – that of noise, which now cannot be claimed for nature, as it has performed a denaturing. In the midst of this doubling of nature, we can see the chaotic patterning of Merzbow's noise as a version of the development of ecosystems – where populations, water levels, patterns of spawn, etc., are subject to regularised randomness. We are in the ecology of noise, where small effects distort and expand to take form(lessness).

The movement established here mirrors that of Merzbow's noise as a whole, as it sets up a 'maleficent ecology' (Baudrillard 1994: 78). This is a nature 'out of control', but as a result is no longer the nature that is there for humanity's consumption and control. Also, the passage through technology, through the wilful creation of waste, of objects that emerge as and from residue, is hyperecological – that is, freed from nature, it can act ecologically. Two processes are at play: 'exponential stability' and 'exponential instability' (Baudrillard 1994: 111), depending on where we are in an album such as *Frog*, but also in the moments of imploding stasis, as in the end of 'Hikigaeru Ga Kuru'. This static music is not a possible one – it only comes to be as it aspires to never be static, thus playing into Adorno's hands, whilst eluding him, when he writes that 'a succession in time that denies its own progressivity sabotages the obligations of becoming, of process', and that 'an absolute undifferentiated dynamism would of course lapse once more into the static' (Adorno 1994: 297).

Process more than continues – that is the excess of Merzbow over Adorno – and the question of unfolding over time sees Merzbow moving on from Cage's time pieces: duration is a device to signal development, to stop the sound ever settling into undifferentiation, or into a static pattern. The times of pieces hold out the possibility of structure, process, meaning, development, music, music as time, as duration. In the end, though, Merzbow is not the superseding of Adorno, but the noise, the exterior, the distortion, the excess, the death, the catastrophe of –

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. 1994. *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. London and New York: Verso.

Adorno, T. 1999. *Sound Figures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Attali, J. 1985. *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bataille, G. 1962. *Eroticism*. London: Marion Boyars.

Bataille, G. 1988a. Attraction and repulsion I: tropisms, sexuality and tears. In D. Hollier (ed.) *The College of Sociology, 1937–1939*, pp. 103–12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bataille, G. 1988b. Attraction and repulsion II: social structure. In D. Hollier (ed.) *op. cit.*, pp. 113–24.

Baudrillard, J. 1993. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. London and New York: Verso.

Baudrillard, J. 1994. *The Illusion of the End*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cage, J. 1968. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Marion Boyars.

Chadabe, J. 1997. *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Derrida, J. 1986. *Glas*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Hainge, G. 2001. 'Pop Muzak: popular music and desire, or, towards a problematisation of pop' (letter to the Editor).

Kahn, D. 1999. *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Pouncey, E. 2000. Consumed by noise. *The Wire* **198**(August): 26–32.

Russolo, L. 1986. *The Art of Noises*. New York: Pendragon.

Thacker, E. 1999. Bataille/Body/Noise: notes towards a techno-erotics. In Woodward (ed.) 1999, pp. 57–65.

Toop, D. 1995. *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*. London and New York: Serpent's Tail.

Witkin, R. 1998. *Adorno on Music*. London and New York: Routledge.

Woodward, B. (ed.) 1999. *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise*. Melbourne, Cologne: Extreme.