

## On The Positive Power of Extreme Noise

### **Introduction:**

I have had experiences with extreme noise that have been positive. How can I square these 'good' reactions to noise with the common sense idea that noise is a 'bad'; that it is simply a negative judgement on an unwanted stimulus? Going further, is it possible that rather than simply being a judgement, noise is in fact a thing in itself? And if a communion with that thing can be enjoyed, is it possible that through this enjoyment noise carries an agency that can produce a transformative human, and subsequently cultural, affect?

In the essay that follows I will argue that if we accept an ontology of noise we can understand why it may be enjoyed, and then we can begin to describe what that enjoyment could entail.

### **What is Noise?**

In any essay that seeks to discuss the subject of noise and its affect, one must first begin with the difficult task of defining what we mean by the term noise. There are a variety of contemporary takes on this, and as Douglas Kahn states in relation to the concept of noise in his book *Noise Water Meat*: "Where better to find damn near anything".

The task of defining noise as a single concept is clearly difficult and perhaps even impossible. To assist in the navigation of this fluid terrain I have found a very useful examination to be found in the recent book, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* by Greg Hainge (Bloomsbury, 2013). For the first part of this essay I shall be focusing on the ideas that are explored by Hainge. Following on from this I will bring in other contemporary texts that explore a more cultural and phenomenological interrogation of the affects of noise in an attempt to create a synthesis between what noise is, and why it holds an agency. I will use this synthesis to explore the personal and political power of positive noise experiences.

So what do we mean by noise? In *Noise Matters*, Hainge states early in the book that noise is a widely used concept and one that has been used to mean different things for different people:

"(noise)...has been used to apply to everything and nothing at the same time, subject to a whole host of mutually contradictory definitions and uses, its apparently ineffable nature the result of divergent agendas rather than something proper to noise itself." (Hainge, 2013, 8)

Put more simply by Caleb Kelly "noise eludes simple definition" (Kelly, 2009, 61).

Noise is most often (but not always) understood as an audio phenomenon. Scientists would put forward a definition involving the random, intermittent and unordered nature of noise; a non-periodic signal with no discernable pattern. Another basic common sense precept is that noise is a judgement on that which is disagreeable and unwanted. This can be seen in the outlook of both communications engineers and disturbed neighbours alike. Then there are many that class noise by its sheer volume (loudness), this being associated with the physically damaging power of high sound pressure levels upon the human auditory system (See Saeed Hydaralli, *What is noise? Reverberations*, 2013, 220-221), however the questionable nature of this definition is made well by the dripping tap example, whereby even the extremely quiet sound of a dripping tap can be deemed as unwanted noise when it disturbs our sleep.

So it is clear that perceptions and classifications of noise are often related to the context in which they occur. Two conclusions important to my own artistic practice have come out of this understanding – firstly that noise is primarily presented as negative and unwanted, and secondly that it is within the reception of the listener, themselves within a specific context, (and not as some objective truth, or property of noise itself) that this designation is made.

Moving on from common sense understandings of noise, in the work of traditional communications studies we see noise described as any additions or changes to the data within a message in the process of being transmitted, such as distortions of sound, static on the radio or shading of the picture on television. “...*all these changes in the transmitted signal are called noise*” (Weaver, *Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 109). The solution to this problem in communications systems is to attempt to eradicate, or ‘subtract’ the noise from the signal. I would assert that this can be seen as an analogy of the way human beings respond to noise on a daily basis, and as Hainge states:

“...we spend most of our time attempting *not* to attend to it (noise) – as soon as one does stop to think about what noise actually *is*, one quickly realises that its meanings and definitions are highly subjective and unstable...” (Hainge, 2013, 5) (1)

So if we accept that noise is a hugely difficult concept to define, and yet it denotes occurrences within our perceptual and cultural experience of the world which are important, it follows that we must next try to understand *why* and *how* it carries this agency. And in order to understand this we must return to the very substance of noise itself and have a fresh look (and listen) at what it is, going beyond common sense based definitions to look at the power of noise as not only a concept but also a phenomenon.

### **White Noise as the Plane of Immanence**

Returning to the idea that noise is the addition or change to the transmitted signal, we must ask where this information comes from. It would be a mistake to assume we have magically conjured up some extra information from the ether, so it must be

that the noise is part of the substance of the communication channel itself. To Hainge this indicates that all audio is a set of frequencies taken from the infinite set of frequencies available (this infinite set of frequencies when encountered en masse is referred to as 'white noise'). If we look at it from this standpoint, then a message is actually the suppression of all other frequencies other than those needed to convey our message. Taken in this way we can see noise as a trace of the resisted background, the background being the potential material of which the message is formed now seeping in to the act of communication. Therefore in noise we are witnessing the attendant white noise of which all communication is born. If we relate this process to the way we experience all the activity of which existence is made, then this could be seen as synonymous with the foundational metaphysical concept of the plane of immanence. The concept was put forward by Giles Deleuze and through it he rejects that life and creation are opposed to death and non-creation, but that all real differences collapse into an even plane of immanence, of which actions and events are originated through the relations between different speeds, potentials, effects and becomings (2). If white noise is taken to represent the impossible representation of all potential frequencies (as we would need infinite equipment to create it and infinite time to perceive it) then experience with noise itself is, as Hainge puts it: "*the trace of the virtual out of which all expressive forms come to be*" (Hainge 2013, 13-14). So in noise we are witnessing the infinite plane of which all things emerge, and into which they will also dissolve.

### **Experiencing Noise**

So if we accept that everything is born out of a potential (virtual) noise field, how does this relate and explain human engagements with noise? I have shown above that in traditional terms noise has been seen as a negative, to be subtracted, suppressed or ignored. Could this new understanding of noise as the potential field from which our experience is formed help us to understand alternative responses to experiences of noise, experiences in which it is found to be positive, de-stabilising and even emancipatory?

As evidence of (and indeed the genesis of my theoretical interest in) this alternative relationship with noise I would cite here my own positive experiences gained at 'noise music' events, or whilst experiencing the powerful sound of large waterfalls, or when undertaking field recordings of huge roaring power station turbines in action. In each instance I have been filled with feelings of awe and of a dissolutionary, almost spiritual experience. A very good account of this affect can be found in the essay *Make a Joyous Noise: The Pentecostal Nature of American Noise Music*, by Seb Roberts. In it he states:

"A musical event more directly resembles a religious ceremony the wilder and more raucous it becomes". (Roberts. S. 2013. 108)

Roberts goes on to explore how through exposure to extreme noise we explore the reverse of sensory deprivation. The result is not the clearing out of the

consciousness so that a calm removal from the present can occur, but rather an overwhelming cramming in, a jamming of the signal, a white out. This overload works not to envelope or obliterate the consciousness, but rather to absorb it, to assimilate it into the infinite sea (Plane of Immanence) from which it came:

“Subjectivity is enthralled by an aggregation of energy that, by its very intensity, defies explanation, purpose or even perception. But, again by its very intensity, this is not simply no meaning: it is ‘any, all and no meaning’ (Slates, 2009, 159), the totality of possibility (Roberts, 2013, 119)

With all lines jammed we gain access to the very medium in which we transmit our communications. When the overwhelm invades even our own internal messages, we encounter a negation of the subjectivity of the subject. This is not an abandonment of self, but a reconnection of the self with all others (see Hegarty, 2007, 125), for in noise we encounter the dissolution of the disparate self:

“Such power – formless, sublime, total – defies preconception or representation. Language as a relational media becomes useless and decomposes into glossolalia. This desperate failure to correspond is not so much pre-linguistic as extralinguistic: above and beyond the capacities of human discourse...Language is the subject’s means of representing itself and its relationship to the other, so with linguistic deconstruction comes a concomitant dissolution of identity. Self understanding is further troubled as noise becomes physical through volume and vibration... the body is made aware of itself, as a body but not as a self.” (Roberts, 2013, 118/119)

### **Noise, Death and the Infinite**

In these ideas I find a powerful resonance between Hainge’s assertion of noise as the evidence of the essence of which the world is formed and the concept of noise music as carrying a dissolutionary power. In this synthesis of an ontological rendering of the concept of noise and its subsequent use as a spiritual force, I want to assert a connection that can perhaps explain this agency. And that connection is this: In experiences with noise we engage with the underlying substance of existence itself. Like the scientist that finds no pattern, we are confronted with chaos. For some people (in certain contexts), the reaction is one of fear and irritation, a force to be suppressed and ignored, for others (in certain contexts) the reaction is one of acceptance and a connection with the void (or rather the anti-void). I believe that a positive experience of an engagement with noise stems from this ‘communion’ with Hainge’s infinite white noise of potential and Deleuze’s Plane of Immanence. Perhaps by experiencing the field of potential we get a sense of freedom and a solace in the positive engagement with our inevitable return to chaos, a coming to terms with, and even a pleasure in, a new understanding of mortality **(3)**. In the foundational book on the subject of noise and politics, Jacques Attali’s ‘Noise: Towards a Political Economy of Music’, Attali states:

“Thus in most cultures, the theme of noise, its audition and endowment with form, lies at the origin of the religious idea. Before the world there was Chaos, the void and background noise ... Music then constitutes communication with this primordial, threatening noise – *prayer*” (Attali, 1985, 27; Attali’s italics).

### **Noise, Anti-Mortality and Affect**

So what does this positive and dissolutionary experience found through noise mean for the wider reality of culture, society and political structure? I would like to forward the idea that this positive reconnection with noise experiences has a destabilising effect on existing societal structures; if we stop fearing and compartmentalising away the noise around the message we find that by engaging with it there is pleasure, and in this pleasure there is solace. This new relationship with a previously ignored phenomenon can lead us to question wider aspects of our perceptual directivity. Through experience with noise a questioning has been established. If we again look at this through the concept of the virtual field of potential we can see that noise represents a freedom; a freedom from accepted forms and their inherent boundaries; a chance to focus on what lies beyond, beside and behind normalised structural hierarchies.

Notes:

(1) This aspect of the fluidity of the meaning and reception of noise is distinctly related to its manifestation in the auditory. This has been explored by many theorists of late and is well examined in critical responses to sound art, and in particular its contrast to the reception of the visual. For example the Hayward touring show, 'Listening' (curated by Sam Belifante, who recently gave a presentation at our Tuesday seminar) was inspired by the writing of Jean-Luc Nancy who espoused 'listening' over understanding. As Nancy states, the ear draws the world inward and creates resonances, whereas in the eye there is manifestation and a making evident, listening folds into the other senses and works together with them, as well as challenging and contradicting them (Nancy, J. 2002).

(2) See - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plane\\_of\\_immanence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plane_of_immanence).

In the introduction to Noise Matters Hainge makes a very impressive argument regarding the ability of noise to exist both ontologically and phenomenologically. He explains in great depth his theory (which moves from Spinoza, through Nietzsche, to Serres and Deleuze/Guitari) that all existence is relational, born out of a virtual plane of noise, matter itself being unveiled as expressive. This is in line with contemporary writings on the subject by thinkers such as Giles Deleuze, Micheal Serres, and Brian Massumi. For reasons of brevity I cannot expand on these ideas further in this essay but I would urge readers to visit Hainge's introduction to noise matters, and to look at Deleuze's Plane of Immanence, to explore this further. It indeed forms a basis on which this essay is built but I avoid prolonged interrogation of this concept in order to later bring to the table my own conclusions as to what this can mean to my practice, along with the other issues touched upon in this essay.

Whilst writing this essay I was also struck by the relevance of an article in the guardian (Yes, Androids do dream of electric sheep –See <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/18/google-image-recognition-neural-network-androids-dream-electric-sheep> ) which reported the strange images created when Google's AI based image search software was set up in a feedback loop and fed images of 'white noise'.

(3) Perhaps this is the actual political power of noise; its ability to free the individual from their fear of mortality. If this is the case it is not hard to see the political implications in the contemporary landscape of government/media instigated fear (See Manufacturing Consent, Chomsky, 1995) where neo-liberal globalisation is facilitated via the consent of the masses, this consent produced through the dissemination of fear by the powers that be. What does a lack of fear mean in this landscape? And if a lack of fear is perhaps going too far, the least we could say is that by embracing noise we are at least aware of an alternative to fear.

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Wikipedia - Plane Of Immanence

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