Introduction

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Such a satisfying idea – noise annoys – at once simple-to-grasp kernel and yet capable of inflation into the most grandiose theories of subversion. But... who is there to be annoyed and in what ways?

REYNOLDS, 1990, 57

From the loud lawn-mower that shatters the suburban peace to the intrusive noise of unthinking neighbours to the unceasing cacophony of the post-industrial metropolis, noise is conventionally apprehended, in social terms, as an irritant. John Stewart *et al.*'s recent study of noise (2011) immediately frames the phenomenon in terms of 'problems, policies and solutions' in respect of planning, pollution and health, and argues that noise has been overlooked by Green and environmental campaigners and by politicians. Yet at the same time noise has functioned, since the industrial era at least, as a powerful pole of attraction, and not only in the articulation of theories and practices of noise music from the Futurists' early twentieth-century 'Art of Noises' to exponents of 'Japanoise' such as Merzbow. Noise 'annoys' then, to continue Reynolds' paraphrase of the Buzzcocks song, but in this annoyance (of others) it also provides new forms of pleasure, not least of which are the pleasures of transgression and subversion to which Reynolds alludes. Beyond this initial duality however, noise opens up on to a variety of levels beyond the simple consideration of whether noise practices are, or even can be, subversive.

The social level with which we began is arguably already a departure from a merely sonic apprehension of noise, since what counts socially as noise in an urban environment is not only relative to the position of the perceiver but also dependent on a number of extra-sonic factors such as social norms,

temporality and duration. Thus the loud party may be tolerated before midnight on a Saturday but the same 'noise' is less likely to be treated with such indulgence in the early hours of a Sunday morning. Similarly, a car alarm is a useful device for its owner, and a screaming menace for those subjected to its insistent wailing when it malfunctions. And even, or especially, children can function as pathological agents of urban noise, however much their 'noise' is adored or at least tolerated by their doting parents – and hence the Victorian advice (of the time when families began to live cheek-by-jowl) that 'children should be seen but not heard'. In all these instances noise operates on the thresholds of normative social interaction as a potentially disruptive agency, but this tells us very little about what noise in its sonic forms really constitutes.

Another approach to the sonic aspects of noise is to consider it as disorganized or, more appropriately, 'unorganized' sound. In this respect noise functions as the 'other' to both language and music, considered as so many systems for organizing noise into meaningful or even beautiful modes of expression. Noise, on the other hand, is considered ugly and destructive of meaning or, in other words, functions as the disturbance or interference of a meaningful sonic system. In this way noise, which remains a pejorative term, would typically be understood to be a kind of metastasis or anarchic proliferation of audio occurrences, unwanted and unpleasant, and making for a discord that becomes disorientating. The ways in which we shape our soundscape to what we favour, or into something upon which we rely, and that therefore become an essential aspect of our habitus, are disrupted by noise that intrudes into our subjective or personal or virtual/digital soundscape, and that cannot be organized in this way.

And yet this negative potential already indicates the nature of the positive dimension of noise, in that innovations in musical form ranging from new forms of classical music, via jazz, rock, punk and hip-hop to industrial and electronic musics, from ambient to dance, have often initially been perceived as ugly and rebarbative noise, meaning simply that they departed from the norms of a previous system of sonic organization. Noise music itself could be said to represent or capitalize on this tendency, even to the extent of forming a genre (as these categories and subcategories indicate), and as such requires a particular set of coordinates for its reception and discussion. The subject of noise musics is therefore better suited to specific studies. In addition to noise music, something similar could be said of linguistic phenomena such as new forms of slang or dialect, equally perceived by outsiders as a horrible noise, relative to 'proper' languages and their rules of organization and articulation. This may even apply to groups of deaf people communicating in sign language in pubs, who on occasion are subject to discrimination for so doing.

Equally, it may be the 'insider' who hears noise, say, in the form of a foreign language being used.

It is questionable, however, whether this account of noise as a lack of sonic organization, or the irruption of another mode of organization, has not already passed into another level of noise that is the technical and communicational account of noise as the Other of information. From classical theories of information, such as that of Claude Shannon, noise is perceived as the shadow of or resistance to a signal being passed between two points in a system, from a sender to a receiver. In a technical system of communication, therefore, the aim is to maximize the signal-to-noise ratio, to attain the most perfect possible transmission of the message. Nevertheless, no technical system is ever perfect, and there are no messages free of their accompanying characteristic forms of noise or interference. This also highlights the crucial role of technology in accounts of noise. It is not that it is impossible to conceive of noise outside of technical systems, but rather every technical system of communication is accompanied by its own characteristic forms of noise, from which no complete separation, or perfectly transmissible message, is possible.

What is covered over in this account, however, is the generativity of noise alluded to above in relation to musical and linguistic innovation. Far from being a mere residue of a communicational system, noise is primary, or even primal, and we are always already 'in' noise or, as Michel Serres puts it, 'we are surrounded by noise. And this noise it inextinguishable [...] We are in the noises of the world, we cannot close our door to their reception' (Serres, 2007, 126). For Serres, at least, noise comes before any meaningful system as its transcendental field, which is why noise can never be fully eliminated. In this perspective all living systems in their negentropy are temporary escapes from entropic noise, but escapes that are destined to failure by the laws of thermodynamics. In more aesthetic terms we might think of noise as ground, and meaning as figure, rising from the ground, but caught within its field in order to function. More basically, what any system necessarily excludes as noise are all the levels of organization above and below it that include its own conditions of possibility, hence the informational account of noise as a lack of organization being a state of fundamental distortion. Noise is indeed static or interference but not that of an unorganized chaos so much as patterns of organization alien to the norms of a specific system – that which Serres refers to as 'the parasite'.

This abstract yet materialist account of noise brings us back to the social and political dimensions of noise, as so many interferences among differing systems of organization, however they might be defined – whether in relation to urban and civic environments, differing and even antagonistic

subjectivities, or modes of sonic expression. The Public Enemy track 'Bring the Noise' (from the 1988 album *It Takes A Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back*) self-identifies a decisive 'blackness' to the group's noise ('Turn it up!/[spoken]: "Hey, yo' Chuck, they're saying we're too black, man."/Bring the noise!') which in turn hampers or discourages disseminations of these 'truly' black sounds and militant subjectivities ('Radio stations I question their blackness/ They call themselves black but we'll see if they play this'). Such a social and political mapping of noise is no more and no less than what Jacques Attali accomplished in his now famous book *Noise* which, according to Russo and Warner, aimed to 'expand the range [of noise] to cover virtually any cultural channel' (Russo and Warner, 2004, 48). Of particular interest to Attali was the ways in which modes of the sonic organization of noise in the form of music were not only explanatory of historically specific modes of power but even premonitory, as if noise was first organized sonically, before becoming organized socially and politically.

The experience of our research into noise adds credence and nuance to this idea of noise as the forerunner: sound-waves before matter. Disarmingly, in the first instance, noise seems to deftly deflect critical attention or analysis. Rather than presenting itself as an area ready for exploration and mapping – at least from a philosophical or sociological rather than scientific position – noise signals continually towards its seeming polar opposite: silence. It is telling that the piece of 'music' to which the authors in this volume return time and again is John Cage's celebrated *4'33"* of 1952: the 'silent' performance arising from an empty musical score. Noise may represent an acoustic disorganization, as argued above, but what noise is not, then, is silence. And so silence becomes the natural measure of noise.

Silence would seem to represent a series of disturbing absences just as noise represents a series of disturbing presences, with the habitus soundscape, our 'middle way', seemingly only the temporary and fluctuating passage between the two. Upon encountering noise in cultural texts and events, the question that suggested itself time and again was simply: What, then, is silence? What needs to be detracted from the habitus to achieve silence? What is perfectly audible, and yet is taken as the sound of silence? And what, then, is an unacceptable level of silence? And yet silence itself has become equally contested, and the index of a contemporary symbolic order: as a valuable commodity in the post-industrial city, as the condition assumed as prerequisite for 'thinking', as an architectural imperative, and as demanded and imposed in its courts of law.

But if noise and the systems to which it gives rise are immediately political, they are also aesthetic, and this aesthetic is in no way limited to musical or sonic arts. Already in information theory the concept of noise is by no means

a necessarily sonic one and can be equally applicable to a blotch on a page of newsprint or to the visual static on a television screen, as phenomena that, like sonic noise, obstruct and interfere with an intended message. Elsewhere, in conspiracy theories seeking to address 'numbers stations', it is the short-wave static noise itself that delivers coded information with the spoken word merely illustrating the clarity of frequency. Noise aesthetics, then, can be textual and visual or, rather, audiovisual and tending ultimately in digital conditions towards synaesthetic, 'glitch' phenomena.

Nevertheless, the question that noise aesthetics raises, and that was already touched upon in Reynolds' account of noise cited at the beginning of this Introduction, is that if noise, as the supposed 'other' of any meaningful system of communication, is desired – and in the digital context even designed – does it still even function in a subversive sense *as* noise, or has it already been fully domesticated as a new system of meaning? In Reynolds' terms (1990, 58),

> [T]o confer the status of value on excess and extremism is to bring these things back within the pale of decency. So the rhetoricians of noise actually destroy the power they strive to celebrate; they are the very start of the process by which subversion is turned into contribution, which is absorbed as a renewal for the system.

This is less, however, the contradiction that Reynolds sees it as, locating it in so many 'anti-pop gestures' and 'reality effects', than a productive paradox generative of numerous fields of sonic, aesthetic and even political experimentation. Rather than a subversive fallacy, what Reynolds identifies points to the ways in which engagement with noise necessarily opens up specific technical or meaningful systems to outside interferences, to systems and durations other than our own. This process, rather than disqualifying noise as a subversive paradigm, opens its specific modes of subversion from a restricted system-defined economy to a general economy, whether conceived in terms of Bataille's 'accursed share', or Serres' account of noise as parasite.

Such multiple levels and domains of noise prompted and informed the event 'Bigger than Words, Wider than Pictures: Noise, Affect, Politics' held at the University of Salford in Summer 2010, and from which several of the chapters in this collection derive. While some academic papers explored multiple forms of noise music (ranging from avant-classical musics and jazz improvisation to psychedelic rock, punk and industrial musics, to the noise musics of Furudate and Karkowski or Filthy Turd), others engaged with some of the more philosophical dimensions of noise alluded to here, for

example, in the work of theorists like Attali, Steve Goodman and Gilbert Simondon. Still other presentations were concerned with the social and political aspects of noise as a constitutive element of everyday urban life, while there were also engagements with a range of aesthetic practices beyond the strictly sonic ranging, from the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, via the cinematic deployment of noise to digital glitch aesthetics. These presentations were accompanied by an evening of noise performances, including the Brazilian noise group Simbiotecnoise, iPollytouch (who attacked various objects with electrified shears), Safe and The Telescopes (Infinite Suns). These performances were enough in themselves to indicate the multiplicity of conceptions of noise and produced both pleasant and unpleasant sensations and responses in their auditors, which in turn fed back into the event. The questions raised by these diverse levels, practices and experiences of noise have been expanded upon in this collection, according to the three sub-domains of the philosophy and aesthetics of noise, audiovisual noise practices and the ethical and political dimensions of noise. Underlying all these areas, both in their distinctions and their many interrelations, are questions of the affect of noise, both its capacities to affect us, and our capacities to respond to noise, be that on an ontological, aesthetic, social or political level.

The philosophy and aesthetics of noise

In Part One, contributors examine the what, the how, the where and the when of noise. The question 'What is noise?' is of course central to the whole project of using noise as an analytical, artistic or subversive tool, but in these chapters, the writers also begin to open up questions of noise as a function, a locatable process, event or sequence. Paul Hegarty opens by thinking about the question of noise's relation to time, on individual and historical timescales. This is reflected in the duration of 'musical' noise pieces and performances that create barriers to our common-sense understandings of quotidian time. Bergson, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari all help formulate the question, and in turn the noise of 'harsh noise wall' in particular responds to these philosophies to offer its own theorization of time. In Chapter 2, Scott Wilson looks at noise as an internal processing of an unreceivable exterior, opening with the thought of 'amusia' – the incapacity to hear/understand music. A Lacanian reimagining of this phenomenon unleashes the hidden desire of and for music transformed into the unlistenable, become threatening. From an Oliver Sacks case study, through rock 'n' roll, Edvard Munch and arriving at Jacques Brel's hatred of the accordion, a pattern of an audio unconscious

emerges, in which the ineffability of music turns to abjection, to a continual process of 'othering'.

In Chapter 3, Brian Massumi opens up the field of communications theory, via the exemplar of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's light signal-based artwork, in which communication is revealed to always need a third, a 'more' than the two ostensibly speaking (as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin suspected). Language comes to be about thirdness, about the sea in which communication drifts. The piece also signals that the drift, the sea, are themselves communication – above and below the material of shared speech. Language's sociality is revealed to operate through constant iterations of signal and noise, each inflecting the other. In Chapter 4, Cécile Malaspina takes us further into notions of communication and cybernetics, with a strong push from Gilbert Simondon, and also the drive of Ray Brassier's idea that noise is productive, and does not need to be an object/area of confusion once we look to certain radical sound practices, which in turn feed socio-political action. Malaspina takes this and the idea of noise in systems theory to ask whether (and how) noise can work as a cross-disciplinary tool, or even a 'cross-discipline' in its own right (what Dick Higgins might have included in his idea of 'intermedia'). As well as looking at sound and noise informing each other, sound and non-sound also play off one another, and noise offers itself as an open-ended paradigm, the *prospect* of a crossing.

In Chapter 5, Dean Lockwood hears just such a crossing in the writings of H. P. Lovecraft, which are riven with odd sounds, impenetrable and threatening alien tongues, and the menacing combination of advanced technology and alien essence. In contrast to Wilson's chapter, where noise is mobilized internally in a kind of ecstatic repulsion, for Lockwood, Lovecraft feels the noise creeping ever inward. Noise as ingress is encouraged and feared simultaneously. The coincidence of the then new presence of radio in homes and the noise of 'the other' is brought into the present by José Cláudio Siqueira Castanheira, in his piece on how analogue and digital models of sound production play with our sense of noise (Chapter 6). The more we become digital, or are exhorted to be, the more we can understand the history of audio technology and of our ideas of noise and music as intertwined. There is mutual mediation, but above all, our attention is drawn to recall that what is sound/noise/music is always technologically and culturally mediated – and, in fact, our bodies are only one more type of sound-processing technology. These bodies are in turn shaped by cultural and technological expectations and discourses.

All of the above attempt to address not just an aspect of noise, but address it in all its aspects while acknowledging that a different set of parameters could have been selected. For that reason, the chapters in Part One are

modellings of noise that are far from irreconcilable, for all their different approaches, examples and methods.

Audiovisual noise practices

Part Two presents a number of theoretical approaches to the presence of noise in the visual arts. Rob Gawthrop, Benjamin Halligan, Robert Walker, Felicity J. Colman and Laura Wilson all discuss film, from the mainstream (Halligan), to art house (Walker and Wilson), to the avant-garde or underground (Colman, Gawthrop). Colman, Daniel Cookney and Gawthrop consider site-specific artistic practices – investigating them, interacting with them and, in Cookney's case, presenting the processes of capturing these findings. Gawthrop and Halligan also consider theatre and performance.

A frustration shared by the majority of these writers is apparent: the question of sound in film per se, let alone noise, is often overlooked or marginalized, and so lags far behind the visual in terms of aesthetic import in the academic disciplines associated with film. In part this is due to the relatively recent innovations in sound design and sound reproduction – innovations brought about, as discussed here, by unlikely figures in the mainstream and that, as Halligan argues, immediately require spectrums of noise rather than, or even over, norms of diegetic sound and incidental music. As Colman and Cookney illustrate, investigating acoustics represents the opportunity to overturn the given coordinates and sets of meanings and readings, and so enact a radical 'breaking open' of the found environment or artistic text. This potential may also be seen in evidence in the chapters that substantially discuss film too: audio-mapping, audio analysis, its aesthetics, affects, ambiguities and negations.

In Chapter 7, Halligan contextualizes sound innovations as an effective second 'expansion' of cinema (where the first, which failed, was associated with the counterculture), and dates this from the late 1970s. But noise, for Halligan, is seen to function in an ambiguous and even dissembling way – as denoting or circumnavigating impossible dramaturgical demands, and often working to censor what is seen. Following this line of thought, Halligan finds common ground between theological conceptions of the problem or impossibility of divine art, and post-structuralist thought on the 'impossible image'.

The dramatic impact of the image is enhanced or even transformed by the use of noise in the analyses mounted by Walker and Wilson, and both present considerations of what to this end might be termed the 'sound affect' rather than 'sound effect'. In this instance, noise enables the break from the secondary roles more typically allotted to sound in terms of film – as

emphatic, incidental, as a 'reality effect' – and may best be understood as establishing a second dimension to cinema-going: that of biological as well as neurological response. In Chapter 8, Wilson argues that the experience of *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) is founded upon the ways in which sub-audible sonics alter the physical state of the viewer from one of relaxation to anxiety. She identifies this experience as 'physical spectatorship'. Wilson then approaches the centrality of the rape scene in the film to regenerate the more familiar debates in film studies concerning voyeurism and violation, the gaze and assault, and the therapeutic uses of seeing or revisiting trauma.

In Chapter 9, Walker surveys cinematic renditions of the condition of tinnitus, but does not find the rendering of the loss of hearing simply a matter of sonic equivalents. Rather, the resultant hearing-loss noise comes to constitute a subjective aesthetic mode that reorders the world presented, and is best considered in relation to silent cinema. In this, Walker is indebted to the pioneering work of Michel Chion, as are Wilson and Halligan. The image of violence against hearing – the blood that trickles from the ear in both Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985) and James Mangold's *Copland* (1997) – recalls and reprises the celebrated image of violence against seeing: the human eyeball, sliced by a razor, of *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, 1929).

In the chapters by Colman, Cookney and Gawthrop, the focus is more on noise and event or place. In Chapter 10, Cookney presents a series of investigations into that which may be termed the noise of silence. The provocative rationale and methodology which follow, and the discussion of the investigation of noise that is nominally outlawed in the institutions of silence, illustrate the ways in which noise itself functions as the entry point into otherwise unheard (rather than invisible) aspects of the governance of public spheres. As with Cookney, Gawthrop (Chapter 11) also considers the ethics and mores of noise, of what is and what is not deemed acceptable, and how this collective position may be seen as representing a collective policing of aesthetics in the public sphere. Noise therefore retains a potential or even a will to usurp, and Gawthrop's concern is the use of noise in avant-garde and underground art and film as a conceptual wedge that calls into question, in philosophical terms, assumptions about the fixedness of the image, the author as creator, art and happenstance, and the tenuous but dominant analogue relationship between sound and image that has been the principal point of departure for the examples considered in Part Two. Likewise, for Colman (Chapter 12), noise possesses the possibilities of liberation, both against 'fixed' readings of works of art, but also against the assumed perspectives or positions of readings of works of art. As noted elsewhere in Part Two, the 'point of view' and 'point of audition' may be some

way apart. For Colman, noise is intrinsic to the shift in art practice – historical, conceptual, financial and institutional – from the canvas and the site-specific installation. Noise restores an individual experience and regenerates subjectivity when it comes to considerations of art. Colman's model is Lee Ranaldo's noise responses to Robert Smithson's artworks, and her thesis is that noise can function as an inter- or transdisciplinary dialogue or tool. Such a notion of reverberation, which is shared with Cookney and Gawthrop, represents the integration of a situationist or psychogeographic element into the theorization of noise.

Noise, ethics and politics

Part Three switches attention to the political, ethical and social dimensions of noise without, for all that, abandoning its aesthetic and philosophical resonances, which is hardly surprising considering that several of the authors are also noise practitioners themselves. In Part Three, though, there is a shift, less away from aesthetics than towards practices that interrogate, in a number of contexts, noise practices and 'performances', in relation to subjectivities, experiences and contemporary social life. Whether this is in the context of noise musics or everyday urban coexistence, these chapters trace the rudiments for a politics of noise, and show how a rigorous engagement with the latter has the potential to transform conceptions of the former.

Chapter 13, written by the anonymous GegenSichKollektiv, considers performances of noise and silence within and against the context of the contemporary capitalist commodification of all experiences, including transgressive aesthetic ones. In a highly speculative yet materialist analysis that brings together Marx's accounts of machines and labour with the latest developments in speculative realism, and especially the work of Ray Brassier who has also engaged directly with noise, this chapter articulates an experience of noise as one of 'anti-self', against the commodification of noise as yet another medium or material for consumption. Following on from this, in Chapter 14, Marie Thompson begins with two noises, that of the car alarm and the opening of a Melt Banana performance. Thompson uses both of these experiences as a springboard to the affective plane of noise as it has been theorized by post-Deleuzian theorists like Massumi and Steven Shaviro. This is done in order to pose the question clearly of the differences between everyday noise, largely perceived in terms of 'negative affect' and 'threat', and noise music which is also part of a framed experience with positive connotations, at least within a certain community, arguing that noise musics convert the negativity of noise into something desirable and generative, operating within a 'theatre of affect'.

The register shifts in the next two chapters towards the social and the everyday, via two different accounts of the problematics of urban noise. In Chapter 15, Saeed Hydaralli begins his investigation by situating social noise as an urban phenomenon, but one that is highly problematic for planners and policy makers. Complaints about noisy neighbours, for example, often go against any objective metrics, suggesting the need for a qualitative account of social noise. For Hydaralli, noise is a relational term, referring to the relations between the sounds of foregrounded and background activities, with sound becoming perceived as noise when it crosses these borders, producing interferences between different spaces. In Chapter 16, Khadijah White begins from similar premises of the relativity and unmeasurability of urban noise but explores less its everyday experience than the metaphorical language that is used to refer to noise. As in Hydaralli's chapter, noise's capacity to trouble boundaries is emphasized here, in this case pointing to ethnic boundaries at work in differing responses to the 'noise' of the 'Harlem drummers', which have as much to do with temporal as sonic expectations of appropriate urban behaviour. In these negative responses to urban noise, White detects a number of metaphors of noise, ranging from 'noise as a prison' to 'noise as a contaminant' to 'noise as an invader' used to condemn and marginalize sonic practices and practitioners deemed to be violating social mores, while at the same time pointing to the activist potential of noise for claiming social territories for marginalized groups.

The final chapter in the collection returns to questions of sonic and noise practices, in a polemical reactivation of the work of Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord and other iconic figures of twentieth-century radical thought and practice. In Chapter 17, Bruce Russell, a member of the legendary New Zealand noise group The Dead C., embraces rather than rejects the apparent anachronism at work here, arguing that it is only by activating the apparently outmoded that a cultural practice can be fully critical, radical and even revolutionary (and one could also extend this approach to the use of 'modern' radical theory, made in the chapter itself). That this new habitus is based precisely on an active relation with the past and the outmoded renders this provocative argument both paradoxical and compelling.