

Also available from Continuum:

THEODOR W. ADORNO
Philosophy of Modern Music

ANDREW HULTKRANS
Forever Changes

ANDY MILLER
The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society

JOE PERNICE
Meat is Murder

STEVE TAYLOR
The A to X of Alternative Music

ROB YOUNG (ed.)
Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music

WARREN ZANES
Dusty in Memphis

Audio Culture

READINGS IN MODERN MUSIC

**Edited by Christoph Cox
and Daniel Warner**



6. Abraham Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, trans. Joel E. Cohen (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1968), 78.
7. Moles, 78.
8. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).
9. Moles, 78–79.
10. Moles, 79.
11. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1985), 34.
12. For a general introduction to futurism, see Angelo Bozzolla and Caroline Tisdall, *Futurism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: Dutton, 1971), and Pontus Hulten, ed., *Futurism & Futurisms* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).
13. U. Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames-Hudson, 1973), 33–37.
14. Francesco Pratella, “The *Intonarumori* in the Orchestra,” in *Futurist Performance*, ed. Michael Kirby (New York: Dutton, 1971), 193.
15. Quoted in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), 3.
16. Duchamp’s work is similar in this regard. His “Green Box” of 1934 is not a curatorial “catalog” for the “Large Glass” but a kind of parallel discourse to the object itself.
17. Serres, 126.
18. Einstürzende Neubauten, “Schmerzen Hören,” *Strategies Against Architecture*, Homestead Records HMS 063, 1983. [Reissued on CD as *Strategies Against Architecture*, Vol. 1, Mute CDSTUMM14].
19. See John Street, *Rebel Rock* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 84–88, for an analysis of the promotion of punk by record companies and the rock press in Britain.
20. Text from a punk rock magazine quoted in Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 177.
21. See Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179–89.
22. For suggestions about new musical consumption, see Attali, 140–48.
23. Jon Savage, introduction, *Industrial Culture Handbook*, ed. V. Vale and Andrea Juno (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1983), 4.
24. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 147–49.
25. Lévi-Strauss, 149.

10

Noise

SIMON REYNOLDS

Simon Reynolds (1963– ; see also chap. 52) is among the most insightful and wide-ranging of contemporary pop music critics and theorists. A contributing writer at *SPIN*, his articles have appeared in *The Wire*, *Artforum*, the *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, and other magazines. He is the author of two books, *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock* (1990) and *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (1998), and co-author of another, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (1995). The following excerpt from *Blissed Out* examines the discourse of “noise” in rock. It exposes and criticizes the latent presuppositions of rock’s affirmations of noise; and it proposes an alternative conception of noise that Reynolds would later find exemplified by Techno and rave culture.

[. . .] 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? What is noise anyway?

Noise/Horror

If music is like a language, if it communicates some kind of emotional or spiritual message, then noise is best defined as interference, something which blocks transmission, jams the code, prevents sense being made. The subliminal message of most music is that the universe is essentially benign, that if there is sadness or tragedy, this is resolved at the level of some higher harmony. Noise troubles this worldview. This is why noise groups invariably deal with subject matter that is anti-humanist—extremes of abjection, obsession, trauma, atrocity, possession—all of which undermine humanism’s confidence that through individual consciousness and will, we can become the subjects of our lives, and work together for the general progress of the commonwealth.

This dark, unmanageable matter of horror and sickness is a kind of cultural noise, causing a blockage and destabilization of the codes by which we make sense of the world, make life habitable.

Noise then, occurs when language breaks down. Noise is a wordless state in which the very constitution of our selves is in jeopardy. The pleasure of noise lies in the fact that the obliteration of meaning and identity is ecstasy (literally, being out-of-oneself).

Historically, what has happened is that the rock vanguard has shifted its focus from eroticism to the psychedelic powers of horror. When sex was a scarce, invisible, unattainable quantity, to sing about it was publicly transgressive and personally mindblowing (because unthinkable). But after the permission of the seventies, when sex was banalized by becoming available, it could no longer be the instigator of desperation (it's that state of mind that is indispensable to rock, not physical fun). The site, the cue, for *jouissance*, shifted to the unspeakable [...]

Stop Making Sense

The problem is that, to speak of noise, to give it attributes, to claim things for it, is immediately to shackle it with meaning again, to make it part of culture. If noise is where language ceases, then to describe it is to imprison it again with adjectives. To confer the status of value upon 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. As rhetoric enfolds a group or initiative, so fibres of meaning interpenetrate every strand of sound, ensuring that the experience reaches us already placed in a general scheme of significance [...]. We are constantly made conscious. However sick, vile and depraved the material may be, nothing can prevent an aura of moral and spiritual superiority from entwining the latest noise/horror collision, like a halo.

Here are some examples of noise overdetermined by meaning.

Noise as reality effect:

There is a widely held view that beauty and harmony are a lie, presenting a bourgeois vision of nature and society as fundamentally balanced and ordered. And that we have an obligation to listen to noise because it shows us the grim truth of reality [...]

Noise as anti-pop gesture:

With the death of the parochial, the media now constitutes our new environment. Pop looms as the largest thing in our lives, but as something we've lost control of. Rock'n'roll was originally a revolt against straitlaced stuffy mores (encountered in the family, at school, in the small town); but now it's "brainwashing media images and fantasies," the very institution of pop itself, that we define ourselves against [...]. Oblivion is forestalled because we are constantly made conscious that this is a reaction *against*. [Yet] anti-pop doesn't challenge its listeners, as it purports to, it flatters them.

The Subversive Fallacy

Both the above viewpoints represent noise as subversive. There seems to be a need to maintain the belief that "straights," grown-ups would be shocked, dam-

aged, altered, if they were around to hear the music. But the blindingly obvious fact is that no one is around to be disturbed. The fiction that "the enemy" occupies the same space as our noisemaking seems integral to the pleasure people derive from noise, the significance they confer [...]

But the whole discourse of noise-as-threat is bankrupt, positively inimical to the remnants of power that still cling to noise. Forget subversion. The point is self-subversion, overthrowing the power structure in your own head. The enemy is the mind's tendency to systematize, sew up experience, place a distance between itself and immediacy [...]

The goal is OBLIVION (a.k.a. *jouissance*, the sublime, the ineffable) [...]

Out-Of-Your-Head-Is-The-Place-To-Be

[...] Noise is about fascination, the antithesis of meaning. If music is a language, communicating moods and feelings, then noise is like an eruption within the material out of which language is shaped. We are arrested, fascinated, by a convulsion of sound to which we are unable to assign a meaning. We are mesmerized by the materiality of music. This is why noise and horror go hand in hand—because madness and violence are senseless and arbitrary (violence is the refusal to argue), and the only response is wordless—to scream.

A Dead End

The problem is that, as with any drug or intoxicant, tolerance builds up rapidly. The result is an exponential curve of increased dosages of noise/horror, an upward spiral that will one day, sooner than later, culminate in SEIZURE. As the barriers in the head get broken down, the noise buff becomes a kind of hip vegetable, by a process that paradoxically combines both brutalization and weakening. To be shocked (i.e. get your hit) requires that the individual be immersed to some degree in a culture or value system. But noise hipsters have uprooted themselves so successfully from their parent culture, they can cope with absurd levels of outrage/dissonance, and therefore require extreme after extreme in order to feel stimulated/mindblown. Burnout approaches.

The noise/horror aesthetic has driven itself into a dead(ening) end. A sublime, monumental dead end, that has produced some brilliant sado-masochist poetry from band and critic alike. But a dead end nonetheless. Here are some clues to THE WAY OUT.

Inconsistency

Too often, noise has meant a level plane of abraded texture, which can merely add up to a different kind of blandness, a sense-dulling consistency. There needs to be more dips, swerves, lapses, use of space and architecture. HipHop is something the noise bands can learn from. The current HipHop aesthetic [...] is based around the forcing-into-friction of antagonistic ambiances and idioms, sampled from random points in pop history. The effect is psychedelic, dispersing consciousness as effectively as any pure din.

Textural Luxury

The guitar is still privileged as the source of noise. There needs to be renewed awareness of the capacity of the synthesizer and sampling to produce filthy noxious tones. There needs to be a realization of how far rock noise trails behind the avant garde and new jazz. People have to attend to the possibilities for the human voice opened up by Diamanda Galas and Tim Buckley; listen again to Faust, Can, Hendrix, Sun Ra, Cabaret Voltaire, Suicide . . .

The Voice

All this depends still on the assumption that noise is a state with defined boundaries. But if noise is the point at which language buckles and culture fails, then you could argue that noise occurs in moments, tiny breakages and stresses dispersed all over the surface of music, all kinds of music. Maybe we should listen out for the noise in the voices of Kristin Hersh, Tim Buckley, Prince, Michael Jackson—the way they chew and twist language not for any decipherable, expressive reason [. . .], but for the gratuitous voluptuousness of utterance itself. In their voices, you can hear a surplus of form over content, of genotext over phenotext, semiotic over symbolic, Barthes's "grain" (the resistance of the body to the voice) over technique. Of "telling" over "story" [. . .]

Dirtish v. Uneath

There seem to be two choices in noise right now, two routes to oblivion. One is the noise/horror interface, in which violent imagery and musical dissonance are applied concussively, inducing a shell-shocked state of catatonia [. . .] The alternative? [. . .] Noise/horror undoes the self by confronting it with the other that dwells within it, the monstrous potential latent in us all, waiting to be catalysed by an extreme predicament; what I've called the new psychedelia undoes the self by letting it drift off and disappear into the otherworldly.

Noise/horror strikes me as a limited form of self-destruction, that can only yield diminishing returns. Compare its claustrophobic confines and concealed machismo with the open spaces and fragility of the new psychedelia [. . .]

Frost in Music

Both "strategies" are alike in one thing—they demand from the listener an immobility—one stunned, the other spellbound. Unlike the soulboys or decent songwriters, resistance does not take the form of becoming a subject, but through becoming an object. Refusing (at least in the domain of leisure) to deploy power over the self; to escape, for a few blissful moments, the network of meaning and concern.

11

The Beauty of Noise: An Interview With Masami Akita of Merzbow

Merzbow is the recording name of sound artist Masami Akita (1956–), the most well known of the Japanese noise artists that also includes Boredoms, Ruins, Fushitsusha, Masonna, and Melt Banana. The name Merzbow is taken from the *magnum opus* of German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, who called his architectural installation the *Merzbau*. Inspired, on the one hand, by Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism, and, on the other hand, by the Japanese strain of sado-masochism exemplified by the writer Yukio Mishima, Merzbow has been continually fascinated by noise as both sonic detritus and vehicle for spiritual ecstasy. An astonishingly prolific artist, the Australian label Extreme recently released a 50-CD retrospective of Merzbow's vast output over his 20-year career. The following interview was conducted by Chad Hensley for *Seconds Magazine*.

What first attracted you to Noise?

I was influenced by aggressive blues rock guitar sounds like Jimi Hendrix, Lou Reed, Robert Fripp and fuzz organ sounds such as Mike Ratledge of Soft Machine. But the most structured Noise influence would have to be free jazz such as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and Frank Wright. I saw the Cecil Taylor Unit in 1973 and it was very influential. I was a drummer for a free-form rock band in the late '70s and I became very interested in the pulse beat of the drums within free jazz. I thought it was more aggressive than rock drums. I also became interested in electronic kinds of sounds. I started listening to more electro-acoustic music like Pierre Henry, Stockhausen, François Bayle, Gordon Mumma and Xenakis. Then I found the forum for mixing these influences into pure electronic noise. I was trying to create an extreme form of free music. In the beginning, I had a very conceptual mind set. I tried to quit using any instruments which related to, or were played by, the human body. It was then that I found tape. I tried to just be the operator of