

## The Splinter in Your Ear: Noise as the Semblance of Critique\*

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**Abstract** *Noise appears to critique the prevailing cognitive and social habits of modernity by providing concrete and particular art objects that demand attention and jar us from one-dimensional life. Noise sounds, for a moment, like a true alternative not only to contemporary music but to a whole way of thinking through abstract generalisation and living through commercial mediation. Understood in this way, noise makes sense. Once noise is no longer inscrutable, however, it is assimilated into popular culture and becomes a commercial novelty. The blatant contradiction of the commodification of noise gives rise to a second order of critique wherein noise parades its uselessness and occasions reflection on the tortured existence of art in modernity, the ubiquity of identity thinking, and the relation between use and exchange value. This ironic endgame for noise, however, is itself absorbed by consumer culture and noise lives on as but another cool, extreme product. The cultural reception of noise thereby demonstrates the mechanism by which modernity absorbs artistic attempts to critique it, and noise is ultimately understood as a desperate but spectacular failure.*

### I. The scene

Noise, from the Latin *nausea*, suggests an unpleasant disturbance lacking musical quality. Strange forces must be at work, however, because noise has arguably become the most interesting development within the cultural structures ordinarily occupied by music. Consider the breadth of brands of noise currently on the market. In Boredoms' 1992 *Pop Tatari*, noise was ebullient as it played with the history of music, frustrated its tropes, and assembled a pastiche of Rube Goldberg rock with goofy non-sequitur Japanese vocals. For the nature lover, Tribes of Neurot's *Adaptation and Survival* consists of actual recordings of insects, solo and en masse, looped and processed at high intensity. It sounds,

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as one would expect, like bugs swarming in your ear. The artists encourage 'active listening', which entails playing both pieces in the set simultaneously in different combinations and at various speeds so that each listener can create 'their own unique insect experience'. If the drone of a locust plague is not for you, Autechre's *Confield* initially seems to offer techno dance music. Clubbers will find this disorienting, however, because the majority of tracks deliver what most would consider but the semblance of danceable beats. Among hundreds of others in the genre, these projects attest to the diversity of noise available for all stripes of consumers.

This paper will focus on the work of Maso Yamazaki, otherwise known as Masonna. A descendant of heavy metal and based in Osaka, Masonna creates the brutal high-volume nearly-white noise that has become increasingly characteristic of the movement known as noise music. It can be described as sounding something like nails-on-a-chalkboard with the force of a jet engine. Whereas bands like Boredoms are fun, Masonna is certainly not. Masonna performances can last only a few minutes, with Yamazaki jumping on his gear in tantrums and flicking effect switches until he injures himself. In most situations, playing Masonna will cause people to hold their ears or wrestle the DJ for control of the sound system. Unlike bands that offend with nasty narrative content, such as Anal Cunt, or physical assault, such as G. G. Allin or the Dwarves, Masonna repulses with nothing but noise. Masonna challenges us *formally*, and this partially accounts for the increasing theoretical attention lavished on him in journals such as this and at the astonishingly well-attended conference on noise at Middlesex University in March 2004. To those outside of noise circles, our genuflection before what sounds to them like utter tripe will seem to be the very worst in affected academic culture. In this paper I hope to make sense of why noise garners such theoretical interest.

My argument is as follows: in order for music to be dissonant with contemporary consumer culture, it must risk its very identity as music. Noise makes this sacrifice in order to be heard as art rather than mere cultural commodity. Noise appears to critique the prevailing cognitive and social habits of modernity – what T. W. Adorno named identity thinking – by providing concrete and particular art objects that demand attention and jar us from one-dimensional life. Noise sounds, for a moment, like a true alternative not only to contemporary music but to a whole way of thinking through abstract generalisation and living through commercial mediation. Understood in this way, noise makes sense. Once noise is no longer inscrutable, however, it is assimilated into popular culture and becomes a commercial novelty. The blatant contradiction of the commodification of noise gives rise to a second order of critique wherein noise parades its uselessness and occasions reflection on the tortured existence of art in modernity, the ubiquity of identity thinking, and the relation between use and exchange value. This ironic endgame for noise, however, is itself absorbed by consumer culture and noise lives on as but another cool, extreme product. Masonna's cultural reception thereby demonstrates the mechanism by which modernity absorbs artistic attempts to critique it, and noise is ultimately understood as a desperate but spectacular failure.

Due to the nature of this argument, the essay runs the risk of appearing to argue with itself. I first forward what might be considered the highest

ambitions for noise. At root, I believe I share these hopes with many noise theorists despite our differing approaches to the subject. I devote most of the paper, however, to explaining why I suspect such optimistic readings of noise are no longer justifiable.

## **II. The naïve hope: noise as concrete particular**

Although I am reluctant to grind noise through Adorno's aesthetic theory, it offers undeniable explanatory power regarding the relationship between the aesthetic, cognitive, and commercial life of noise. For Adorno, all cultural analysis must begin with an account of abstract identification, which specifies an individual thing in the world, picks it out as a member of a group, and places it under a concept. Regardless of whether I understand the thing as an instantiation of a Platonic form or an example of a scientific class, what matters is that the object is no longer a unique and strange thing but is rather a member of a category that makes sense to me. This process, which Adorno names 'identity thinking', causes a belief that concepts fully capture the objects to which they refer (Adorno 1992). When we consistently disregard particularity while reinforcing similarity, we forget the notion of something genuinely concrete, particular, unique, non-fungible, or incommensurable. The material world is made to fit the abstract idea and actual things are seen as nothing more than exemplars of their concepts. Abstract classifications do not, however, inhere in objects but, rather, are artefacts of intellectual organization. My classifications are merely constructs of convenience. Because identity thinking pretends that concepts exhaust their objects, the particularity of things will remain overlooked and in reason's blind spot. When Adorno claims that the 'splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass', the splinter marks precisely this blindness to particularity (Adorno 1974: 50). The notion of aura, which Adorno shares with Walter Benjamin, preserves concrete particularity against identity thinking and its practical apotheosis in universal commodification.<sup>1</sup>

In a world deeply suspicious of religious doctrine and universal truth, capitalism has, by default, become the primary lens through which we interpret the world. From within the profit-driven perspectives of capitalism, a world-view more widespread than any other in history, all things are squeezed into financial concepts and therefore look like exchangeable commodities. Under this view, the idea that things have auratic individuality – meaning because of their very particularity – is written off as morally puerile. Just as everything has an adequate concept, everything has a price. Noncommodifiable things that cannot or should not be subjected to economic discourse are either distorted to fit market analysis or are altogether forgotten. Thus the common declaration that one 'believes in the market' is as ungrounded, and often as zealous, as premodern religious faith. Adorno traces our deepest social problems to these modes of cognition. As our most basic form of understanding, identity thinking is born not in the search for

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<sup>1</sup>For a more thorough discussion of negative dialectics and the ethical theory arising from it, see (Smith 2003).

objective truth but rather in egoistic instrumentality. With cognition bound in this way to use, a direct causal relationship can be traced between conceptualisation, instrumentalisation, commodification and domination. Because the degradation of reason into identity thinking is the root of the problem and theory is contaminated with the sickness of reason, theory cannot point the way to a better, non-instrumental life. Enlightenment reason stalls when corrupted in this way, and Adorno looks to modern art for an alternative mode of discourse.

At each critical moment in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant draws our attention to how aesthetic experience tests and exceeds the limits of abstract understanding. The beautiful, for example, transcends any conceptual blueprint, and the work of the artistic genius does not unfold like scientific discovery. Likewise, within Kant's primary claim that 'beauty is an object's form of purposiveness in so far as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose' lies the assertion that something could be ultimately meaningful without regard to its instrumental value. Because it was the least objective of Kant's three critiques, philosophy ghettoised aesthetics. This denigration of art, however, left some distance between it and the apogee of identity thinking found in epistemology and ethics. While art's lack of certainty caused philosophers to look elsewhere for truth, now 'art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering' (Adorno 1998: 27). 'As the real world grows dark', Adorno claims, 'the irrationality of art is becoming rational, especially at a time when art is radically tenebrous itself' (Adorno 1998: 27).

As objects that appear to harbour their meaning in their very concreteness and particularity, art became the focus of Adorno's critique of identity thinking. Attempts to conceptualise a work will run up against an excess of indexical meaning that cannot be explained but rather requires a direct experience of the work. This inability of thought demands reflection on the gap between conceptualisation and experience, and we must then theorise the limits of theory. Adorno's claim that '[o]nly what does not fit into this world is true' dramatises the recognition that what overflows our knowledge actually presents us with a truth about the limits of our understanding (Adorno 1998: 93). The remainder to conceptualisation now becomes an enigmatic object of study rather than being denied or ignored. Art forces thought to think about its limits, and the success of avant-garde art can be measured by how forcefully it presents such questions.

Herein lies the hope for Masonna: by denying all musical form, his works confront us with raw concrete particulars. When Masonna hits our ears, we struggle to understand it just as we would attempt to identify the source of any noise roaring towards us. We ask the most basic ontological question born of self-preservation: *what is that?* Ordinarily, once we know what something is, we know what to do about it and with it. But with Masonna, all interpretive strategies stall and the noises remain ahead of our conceptualisations. At points in Masonna's *Super Compact Disk M.A.S.O.N.N.A. Numero 5*, for example, the noise clears to silence for a few moments. Like the vertical zips in Barnett Newman's otherwise monochrome paintings that for him represent the very origins of the universe, the quiet

moments in this Masonna piece seem to provide an interpretive key to the work. This hint of structure teases us: if we can identify one structural element, there must be an entire musical edifice beneath awaiting excavation. But the tip of the iceberg is a decoy. Knowing that we will scramble for any interpretive foothold, Masonna appears to reach out with what sound like familiar tropes of repetition and a screeching human voice, but then withdraws the hand just as we lunge for it.

Without a ready-made musical framework to render the work sensible, we must take this thing on its own terms. We can hear only one noise at a time, and each noise exists not for the purpose of the larger work or to represent anything external to the work. The noises simply are.<sup>2</sup> While sound has lived as classical music's servant in that each note existed solely as a cog in the composition, Masonna structures the duration of the works to amplify the significance of each singular element. The 'work' of the piece consists of presenting these noises in a way that allows us to hear the concrete material struggling against its abstraction into notes. The art provides the medium for the material, rather than the inverse, and the medium overtakes the art. As it is said that opera and poetry are best appreciated in a language foreign to the listener because alienation from content heightens awareness of form, alienation from form heightens awareness of material. Masonna denies even rhythm, the simplest musical form grounded in the representation of the basic animating principles of nature: the beating of the heart or the motion of the planets. Every noise takes on a specifically strange meaning, and no clear hierarchy exists between them. Each noise, just as Adorno described each sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*, is equally close to the centre. Yet equality does not slip into interchangeability, for each noise remains painfully particular. Thus we find a possible exemption to Adorno's claim that the 'history of music at least since Haydn is the history of fungibility: that nothing is in-itself and that everything is only in relation to the whole' (Adorno 1998: 27).

The source of the new aura of the work of art, rather than unblemished Romantic beauty, is now its sheer irreconcilability. The strangeness of the object evokes a response not like the fawning admiration of the beautiful but more like the suppliant terror of the sublime. 'Shudder', Adorno's shorthand for this aesthetic fear, elicits 'responses like real anxiety, a violent drawing back, an almost physical revulsion', and this description captures the common reflex among those uninitiated to noise to turn off Masonna as soon as it reaches their ears (Adorno 1998: 26). Shudder horrifies us by inducing 'a sense of being touched by the other', and the point of contact reaches us not in a long awaited embrace, but in a harrowing shock (Adorno 1998: 455).

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<sup>2</sup>Greg Hainge has made a similar claim:

The sound of scratchy vinyl coming from a brand new compact disc (as frequent a trope as it has become) instills in us a sense of the uncanny that is not comprehensible. The sound of a deliberate CD skip pattern used to create a rhythm similarly effects us on a level which is not intellectual and which cannot be controlled. Walls of white noise just are. (Hainge 2002: 56)

Unlike the angelic offering of the beautiful, the hand that grabs us from behind in shudder will be disfigured by ‘the scars of damage and disruption...’ (Adorno 1998: 34). When we encounter the possibility of a suffering, gasping breath beneath a cacophony of unnerving noise, we feel offended, afraid, and complicit. Just as J. M. Bernstein argues that a work of art expresses meaning like a body suffering expresses meaning, so when confronted with such an object we feel the need to assuage the suffering and fear being overtaken by whatever has inflicted the pain (Bernstein 2001). The very distinction between witnessing suffering and undergoing suffering is threatened.

Although this ‘truth’ of noise cannot be distilled down to philosophical premises because its very claim oversteps concepts, it nonetheless offers a cognitive insight. Once disenfranchised from truth claims, the sensuous and particular experience of art now reveals a form of knowledge more complex than philosophy can contain. Enlightenment, facing this new order of truth, must reflect on the relationship between its estranged categories of thought. The work of art is cast back into a relationship with philosophy, and philosophy now needs the work of art to undertake this investigation. Bernstein explains in *Why Rescue Semblance*,

If rationalised concepts can be shown to require the non-discursive resources of object and image, and if aesthetic particulars thrown up by artistic modernism can be shown to suggest meaning and cognitive significance, then concept and object belong together in a manner not recognised by the regimes of enlightened reason and rationality at work in contemporary discursive practices. (Bernstein 1997: 179)

Albrecht Wellmer corroborates this reading of Adorno, explaining that ‘[j]ust as a moment of blindness adheres to the immediacy of aesthetic intuition, a moment of emptiness adheres to the ‘mediacy’ of philosophical thought; only in tandem can they approximate a truth which neither of them can express’ (Wellmer 1994: 32). I must, therefore, be careful using Adorno to ‘explain’ noise because these explanations cannot convey the full meaning of the art. An experience of the works, supplemented by underdeterminate concepts, is the closest we can come to this. In this sense, noise is not merely grist for the Adorno mill but rather demonstrates the limits of critical theory. The entirety of *Aesthetic Theory* is devoted to mapping these limits and narrating how art embodies what philosophy cannot translate into conceptual knowledge and how art depends on philosophy to interpret its non-paraphrasable claims.

Any critical power of noise, like that of all art, is itself conditioned. Despite the veracity of Kant’s central claims regarding aesthetic judgment, Adorno believes they are true for sociological rather than metaphysical reasons. He demonstrates this in ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society’. Here he exposes the pretensions of lyric poetry to transcend the ‘weight of material existence’ and ‘evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, utility, of the restless pressures of self-preservation’ (Adorno 1991b: 39). Adorno breaks lyric poetry’s illusion, explaining how the hunger for transcendence is already a by-product of dissatisfaction with modernity. Like

those who retreat to fantasy novels when disenchanted with reality and longing for a meaningful, ordered, and magical world,<sup>3</sup> lyric poetry

implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work. [Therefore] the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronymous and constituting itself in accordance with its own laws. [Lyric poetry thus provides] a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life. (Adorno 1991b: 39–40)

As with lyric poetry, noise generates its meaning only in response to its culture. Noise would not resonate if the world were not fully instrumentalised and if we were not so desperate for alternatives. In a world filled with the sounds of means, creating the noise of ends-in-themselves becomes the task of the sound artist.

Rather than basking in individualist rock-and-roll quests for otherworldliness, successful noise engages its own dialectical relation to society. While Adorno makes clear that ‘the free floating subject is an illusion, because the social totality is objectively prior to the individual’ (Adorno 1991a: 225), and that therefore ‘we must concede the object’s dialectical primacy’, this primacy must be genuinely dialectic (Adorno 1982: 505). Adorno does not simply convert idealism (the generation of object by subject) into materialism (the generation of subject from object), but instead draws out the relationship. The subject, while itself a cultural product, is the vehicle of cognition and therefore must remain operative in Adorno’s theory. Indeed, the very viability of Adorno’s project, as outlined in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*, depends on the possibility that he might ‘use the strength of the subject to break out of the delusion of constitutive subjectivity’ (Adorno 1992: xx). As Simon Jarvis explains this interdependence, ‘the only way to do justice to the priority of the object is by pushing subjectively mediated identifications to the point where they collapse’ (Jarvis 1998: 184). Susan Buck-Morss makes further sense of the subject–object dialectic by describing the poles

as necessary co-determinates; neither mind nor matter could dominate each other as a philosophical first principle. Truth resided in the object, but it did not lie ready at hand; the material object needed a rational subject in order to release the truth which it contained. (Buck-Morss 1977: 81)

This ‘truth’ is ultimately a cognitive, and as such it must pass through the individual subject. The task Adorno sets of comprehending the incomprehensible

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<sup>3</sup> See philosopher and fantasy writer R. Scott Bakker’s discussion of the relationship between fantasy and modernity (Bakker 2002).

is to be undertaken by a cognitive being certain of neither its subjectivity nor its humanity. Works of modern art 'cut through this illusion of subjectivity both by throwing the frailty of the individual into relief and by grasping the totality of the individual, who is a moment in the totality and yet can know nothing about it' (Adorno 1991a: 225). Unlike the temperament of most machismo metal where one confirms one's ego against the world by 'raging against the machine', noise only compounds uncertainty.

This reading of noise suggests our highest aspirations for it, where it presents something like a confrontation with the non-identical. As Greg Hainge has claimed that John Cage has 'arguably, succeeded in creating an areferential expression, an art of sensation which breaks with all transcendental and representational forms and bypasses the intellect' (Hainge 2002: 50), noise might be thought to provide a primal experience of an object that hits us before we can raise our conceptual guard. As a splinter in the ear, noise punctures our aural relationship to the world wherein we hear all things as abstractions. By disrupting our auditory habits, noise challenges our cognitive habits. Because of the causal relationship between identity thinking, conceptualisation, instrumentalisation, commodification and domination, these noises appear to offer a critique not only of music but of everything wrong with modernity. Art's assertion that 'undamaged experience is produced only in memory' springs not from the discursive message it carries or the intent of the artist, but from the very 'truth we gain through the medium of art' (Adorno 1991c: 317). 'The mark of authenticity of works of art', for Adorno, 'is the fact that their illusion shines forth in such a way that it cannot possibly be prevaricated, and yet discursive judgment is unable to spell out its truth' (Adorno 1998: 191). Thus noise 'cannot escape the hypnotic suggestion of meaning amid a loss of general meaning' (Adorno 1998: 221). Rather than denouncing the world in its lyrical content, noise points toward a better world by modelling a non-instrumental relationship with a thing. This is a lot to say for something defined by its inarticulacy.

### **III. The failure: noise as the semblance of critique**

These high hopes for noise are unfortunately unsustainable. As Adorno was aware, a number of problems impede art from levelling a cultural critique of this kind. From the outset, we must recognise that noise presents but a semblance of a sensual particular. Rather than provide a genuine pre-conceptual experience of a thing-in-itself, noise projects a 'second order modified existence to something which [it] cannot be' (Adorno 1998: 160). Art 'can no more achieve the identity of essence and appearance than can knowledge of reality', for in it the 'essence that passes into appearance both shapes and explodes the latter' (Adorno 1998: 160). Subject to all of the usual obstacles preventing concepts from realising the non-identical, art never really enjoyed privileged access to particularities. In the end, art is just another piece of art. We know art only with our instrumental concepts, and it never actually sneaks past our intellect to reach us directly. Noise is no exception, especially as it comes to us swathed in such thick preconceptions. Masonna, for example, works in a defined and narrow palette of auditory techniques and his

sound is readily identifiable. The works are predictable to a familiar ear: start with high-tempo abrasive technological noise, introduce distorted screaming, contrast some slow, eerie chiming, and synthesize these elements. While the works may seem initially unusual, to describe them as rupturing or transcending cognition overstates their force.

Although I am wary of conflating all instances of the avant-garde, Beckett's *Endgame* faces the same problem. *Endgame*, Adorno writes citing Beckett, 'is a "desecration of silence" wishing it were possible to restore that silence' (Adorno 1998: 195). Hamm and Clov speak in the second language of those who have fallen silent, an agglomeration of insolent phrases, pseudo-logical connections, and words galvanised into trademarks, the desolate echo of the world of advertisement [where] human beings' words and sentences have swollen up within their own mouths (Adorno 1991d: 262). But these attempts to render language mute fail:

even where language tends to reduce itself to pure sound, it cannot divest itself of its semantic element, cannot become purely mimetic or gestural, just as forms of painting that are emancipated from objective representation cannot completely free themselves of resemblance to material objects. (Adorno 1991d: 262)

When we watch ordinary language struggle in this way, we understand what it is not able to accomplish. While comprehending this failure is already of some critical value, to attribute pre-conceptual powers to words in a play or bits of feedback is to infuse them with magic.

Our theoretical treatment of Masonna further neutralises the work. At its highest vocation, noise presents us with a meaningful art object because of its prima-facie inscrutability. As we decipher, classify, and explain noise, we render it sensible and meaningful. The brute materiality of the thing can then be integrated into the prevailing conceptual and economic system. Regardless of any insight enabled by the conceptualisation, the very process of making sense of noise sterilises it and escorts it into the market when academics stamp it with cultural legitimacy. While the relationship between theorisation and commodification is dialectical and we should not overestimate the cultural authority of theory, theorists do give the impression that noise is something of an alternative for those who reject mainstream prattle. Whether consumers find our analyses to be pedantic puffery, initiations into otherwise inaccessible art, or a confirmation of their sophisticated tastes is an empirical question I cannot answer here. But as Clement Greenberg did for Jackson Pollock, we surely contribute to the legend and sales of noise under any of these scenarios.

Noise artists already lead us toward their theoretical integration with their own nomenclature. Merzbow takes its name from Dadaist Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Boredoms' *Chocolate Synthesizer* alludes to Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder*. Noise advertises its relation to the history of modern art as if to grease its cultural acceptance and pre-empt charges of vapid meaninglessness. Popular musicians have also used this ploy to add high-brow meaning to club music. The pop band Art of Noise takes its name directly from the title of Russolo's futurist manifesto. ZTT Recording, which enjoyed

considerable success during the 1980s with *Art of Noise*, *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*, and *808 State*, takes its name from 'Zang tumb tumb', a line in Marinetti's sound poem cited in Russolo's essay. Masonna admits that he derived the name from Madonna, which suggests a jibe at pop culture in the manner Marilyn Manson parodies the worship of pop idols and serial killers with his moniker. Although to my knowledge they have never acknowledged this inspiration, Boredoms' very name states the affliction of modernity that Russolo expected noise to cure:

[E]veryone will acknowledge that all musical sound carries with it a development of sensations that are already familiar and exhausted, and which predispose the listener to boredom in spite of the efforts of all the innovatory musicians. We Futurists have deeply loved and enjoyed the harmonies of the great masters. For many years Beethoven and Wagner shook our nerves and hearts. Now we are satiated and we find far more enjoyment in the combination of the noises of trams, backfiring motors, carriages and bawling crowds than in rehearsing, for example, the *Eroica* or the *Pastoral*.... Let us now, as Futurists, enter one of these hospitals for anemic sounds. There: the first bar brings the boredom of familiarity to your ear and anticipates the boredom of the bar to follow. Let us relish, from bar to bar, two or three varieties of genuine boredom, waiting all the while for the extraordinary sensation that never comes. (Russolo 2001: 70)

Boredoms, we can assume, aspire to provide a panacea for boredom. Noise artists call attention to their intellectual and artistic heritage and in doing so they quicken their acceptance into that culture. Even if one had never heard these noise artists perform, one would have a sense of what they were up to from the cultural references provided just as one can predict with some accuracy that Napalm Death or Cannibal Corpse will be heavy and morbid before hearing a note.

Our desperation to break the spell of instrumental reason can lead us to fetishise art. We want to believe that art has power, and this desire becomes another trap that Adorno cautions against: 'art – the imago of the unexchangeable – verges on ideology because it makes us believe that there are things in the world that are not for exchange' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 158). Much of noise theory flirts with this false hope, as we are tempted to attribute heterogeneous, differential or excessive qualities to what is now wholly circumscribed by a commercial culture that corners the market in all appearances of alternativeness. But what exactly does noise transgress besides a few heavy metal clichés? Can we seriously, for example, claim that Masonna generates an experience of the sublime?<sup>4</sup> And is it not hyperbole to describe art noise as horrifying or terrorising? Noise interests some of us and annoys others, and the intensity of effect seems more or less within this range. While it may at first present a curiosity, how deeply does noise challenge my world-view or identity? Here we should be alert for the 'pseudo individuality' of which

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example Reynolds (1990: 57).

Adorno warned, like 'the standardized jazz improvisation [or] the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her individuality' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 154). This appearance of difference proves 'no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such' and demonstrates that the 'defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimetres' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 154). Categorical differences remain between Masonna and most popular music, but the distinctions between metal and noise continue to blur. For example Meshuggah, known for its intricately structured math metal, frames its 2004 release *I* with segments of noise and innumerable 'new metal' bands pepper their tracks with just enough noise to flirt with the avant-rock designation. Merzbow has been crossing over at will for some time. Noise's status as more-alternative-than-thou is increasingly suspect.

The assimilation of noise is typical, as the avant-garde historically progresses from incomprehensible to canonical. Whether Beethoven, Schoenberg, Cage, Pollock or Mapplethorpe, it has been customary for such works to be initially denied status as art, then to be recognised as art due to their transgressions of the perceived limits of the boundaries of their media, and then to slip into cliché. What we see now, however, is that dissonance itself has become cliché. When the act of transgressing becomes 'hot', transgression no longer stands in a critical relation to culture. Art used to enjoy a life between its inception and its co-optation, but in this global information age the progression from outside to inside is instantaneous. For this reason, successful contemporary art works to stall its recognition as art and builds its integration into its meaning. But here again, the culture industry understands the allure of this cat and mouse game and sells this struggle to us as well. The alternativeness arms race escalates, and we buy the resultant annihilation of music in the form of noise.

As contradictory as it may seem, for Adorno the commodification of art enables it to reach its full potential as a critic of universal commodification. Capitalism liberates art from its duties as a vehicle for religious and political propaganda, and a market in art frees it to assume a critical relationship to instrumental life. Art, in other words, is only free to be useless within the space carved out for it by fully administered society. Art appears autonomous not because it rejects commodification, but because it embraces it so completely. Art embodies the excesses of capitalism by providing a thing of commercial value – often extreme commercial value – that has no use. By divorcing exchange value from use value so definitively, art becomes what Adorno calls the 'absolute commodity'. The absolute commodity appears to float above the world when it actually exemplifies the most condensed by-product of modernity.

Take, for example, the *Merzbox*, a collection of fifty compact discs of Merzbow noise packaged with an interpretive *Merzbook*, a t-shirt, poster, medallions, stickers, and postcards. Marketed as a limited edition collector's item, it has sold for upwards of two thousand US dollars. While such a quantity would be a monumental purchase for any musical collection, the fact that this buys a case-full of noise adds to its conspicuousness. And as several reviewers of the set have noted, the noise contained in the set can be so trite

that we must wonder if Merzbow generated it for the sole purposes of filling the advertised 'unique black fetish-rubber case'.<sup>5</sup> Rather than entering the market kicking and screaming, noise plays along as well as Pokémon cards and Beanie Babies. We are surprised, as Adorno wrote of art generally, 'not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one; that art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods constitutes the charm of novelty' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 157). Whereas other consumer goods claim to be necessary for a better life, noise can cut to the chase and declare itself nothing but noise. Here noise flaunts the absurdity of its condition, exaggerating its commodification to call attention to the swindle at work. Thus noise brings into contrast the contradictory state of all art in modernity: 'Art must, through its form [as absolute commodity], on behalf of the unexchangeable, conduct the exchangeable to a critical self-consciousness' (Adorno 1998: 123). Whereas rock and roll has lived a long and profitable afterlife with a counter-cultural image projected by a corporate reality, noise pushes this illusion so far that its commodification itself becomes spectacular. Nowhere have I seen this more explicitly than within the *Merzbox*, where the *Merzbook* assures the proud owner of this stack of highly stylised goods that Merzbow 'ought to be the ultimate anti-commodity in music, never in danger of commercial recuperation' (Woodward 1999: 37).

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<sup>5</sup> For one reviewer's comments on all fifty disks, see Burns (2005). Kieran McCarthy's (2004) review for allmusic.com merits citing in its entirety:

It is common for critics to resort to hyperbole when outlining the salient traits of mid-level artists. By overstating their noteworthy characteristics, one can draw attention to even minor or tepid figures, and make them seem far larger than they actually are. In the case of Merzbow's release, the *Merzbox*, this could not happen. No matter how overblown, no matter how shameless or self-indulgent the criticism, it is not enough. No matter how rabid or scathing the review, it pales in comparison to the art itself. The *Merzbox* defies simple description, and so it defies traditional notions of criticism. One cannot exaggerate the ridiculous, the obscene, and the mind-blowingly abrasive nature of the *Merzbox*. With 50 CDs and over 40 hours of unapologetic sound experimentation, Masami Akita demands a response that goes above and beyond the normal protocol. No number of stars could summarize the emotions that well up when listening to the incessant yelps, interminable screeches, and directionless feedback of the *Merzbox* for days on end. Fundamental descriptors such as 'good' and 'bad' don't capture the spirit of the endeavor any more than a slide rule could be used to measure the size of the universe. Akita's audacity is unparalleled, and the existence of this most brazen of box sets raises many questions. Does Akita honestly believe that these two full days of unedited noodling are worth a serious listen? Is he toying with gullible listeners? Is the ultimate conclusion he wants us to reach that, in the end, after enough time, all music sounds like the same old processed crap? It will never be possible to understand his intentions. When all is said and done, though, the *Merzbox* belongs in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, and not in your record collection.

This endgame, however, runs the risk of having its very irony absorbed by the culture industry. The paradox of noise's injunction to 'buy more to resist commodification' may be lost on a culture accustomed to hearing 'Need is a Very Subjective Word' to pitch the \$100,000 Hummer military as the latest suburban sport utility vehicle on the US market. Like our sport utility vehicles, our music becomes more extreme, useless, nonsensical, and expensive. Within these cultural conditions, noise could become nothing more than another cool product, another fleeting consumer itch to scratch. Noise could become a musical pet rock. At a recent New York performance of Finnish noise band Grunt, one could not help but be struck by the juxtaposition of the anti-commercial aesthetic of the bombed-out industrial space and the cool kids who cultivated an anarcho-chic image smacking of a disdain for global consumerism with what was really going down: young white men buying expensive tickets, t-shirts, recordings, videos, and drinking alcohol while perusing fetish magazines.

Consider also how Masonna is marketed as an 'extreme noise artist', bringing him near the commercial realms occupied by the X Games and rest of the ubiquitous extreme alternative culture sold to teenagers. Russolo understood the developments and increasing complexity of music as a quest to 'excite and exalt our sensibilities', and as our ears become 'educated by modern life' we 'are not satisfied merely with this, and demand an abundance of acoustic emotions' (Russolo 2001: 70). Again, noise was for him an antidote to boredom. His call for noise to jolt the senses reads like a Mountain Dew commercial mocking tiresome classical music:

We cannot see that enormous apparatus of force that the modern orchestra represents without feeling the most profound and total disillusion at the paltry acoustic results. Do you know of any sight more ridiculous than that of twenty men furiously bent on redoubling the mewing of a violin. (Russolo 2001: 70)

This surely resonates with the typical noise consumer, desperate to find something to arouse their jaded and tired ears. In this context, Masonna can be understood as the newest flavour of adrenaline music, whether for teenage boys to use to get 'amped' while destroying or jumping over things or for those of us who no longer get a rush from hackneyed metal. This places noise directly within the rather mainstream lineage of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Slayer, Pantera, and all of the supposedly more radical forms of metal now on the market. Noise has become a mildly masochistic curiosity in the USA, sharing audiences with entertainment like *Jackass*, *Faces of Death* and *Ultimate Fighting Championship*. While I cannot provide any serious sociological data for this, many of my seventeen-year-old students at a New England state university own a larger noise collection than I do. Candiria and Dillinger Escape Plan have long been favourites on my University's illegal downloading server, but now Melt Banana, Boredoms, and even Masonna are gaining popularity. Admitting that noise has little more critical import than soundtracks to extreme sports or video games can make theorists, myself included, feel sheepish, but it does explain the popularity of noise within certain demographics.

Theorists are complicit in the demise of noise not only for decoding it, but also because we exist within the culture industry and are not immune to its temptations. I know I enjoy telling stories of Yamatsuka Eye destroying a club with a bulldozer during a performance in part because I become associated with something terribly cool. Publishing essays on noise and speaking at international noise conferences is also, for now, quite cool. Considering how many noise theorists are also practising noise artists or DJs, we must be mindful of the distinction between analysis and self-promotion. Alternative music scenes and ideological movements have a history of generating delusional subcultures which stake out their territory and go to great lengths to defend their borders from attacks against their status as unique and liminal long after the gig is up. Intellectual danger is a holy grail for contemporary theory as well as art, and this search can be disorienting. This is not to berate those of us working on noise, but instead to try to make honest sense of a truly complex predicament.

Discussions of noise often describe it as not only aesthetically radical, but also as somehow socially and politically progressive. For Jacques Attali, noise resists totalitarianism because it 'betokens demands for cultural autonomy' and provides 'support for differences and marginality' (Attali 1985: 7). Attali thus claims that noise undermines the authoritarian 'concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody' and countervails its 'distrust of new languages, codes or instruments, [and] refusal of the abnormal' (Attali 1985: 7). Hainge likewise suggests that '[n]oise may announce a shift in the operations of global capitalism' (Hainge 2002: 56). Similarly, Simon Reynolds claims that noise 'occurs when language breaks down' and is 'a wordless state in which the very constitution of our selves is in jeopardy'. 'The pleasure of noise', he continues, 'lies in the fact that the obliteration of meaning and identity is ecstasy' (Reynolds 1990: 57). But when noise becomes ensconced within commercial culture, it presents only an illusion of freedom and difference. As Adorno warned, where 'the public does – exceptionally – rebel against the pleasure industry' it can only muster 'the feeble resistance which that very industry has inculcated in it' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 145). Crippled protests are integrated in the system and the status quo 'embraces those at war with it by coordinating their consciousness with its own [because] what subjectively they fancy as radical, belongs objectively to the compartments reserved for their like' (Adorno 1974: 46). What appears to be critical merely diversifies the products bought and sold. The culture industry deceives alterna-consumers into believing that their undertakings are socially transformative, when in actuality the industry has merely changed the colour of its products from khaki to black. The illusion of negativity provides a placebo that causes critics to believe they are treating their condition when in fact the dose of consumerism coated with false negativity further constricts their existence.

Moreover, the same issue haunting most discussions of the political relevance of difference arises here: difference is not always good and therefore it has no necessary relation to justice. Instead, these vague claims for the political relevance of noise appear to map noise onto some version of inclusive multiculturalism. While a consideration of the merits of multiculturalism and its unsatisfying relationship with continental philosophy are beyond the

scope of this paper, we can note that the original intentions of noise do not neatly line up with pluralistic politics. Russolo declared in 'The Art of Noise' that the 'limited circle of pure sounds must be broken, and the infinite variety of noise-sound conquered'. By 'selecting, coordinating and dominating all noises', he continues 'we will enrich men with a new and unexpected sensual pleasure' (Russolo 2001: 80). Here the art of noise sounds like an extension of the conquest of man over nature wherein instrumental rationality, egoism and hedonism are privileged. In other words, noise can be enlisted to promote the very authoritarian values Attali claims it undermines. This should be an unfortunate side-effect for those claiming that noise denies all representational content.

Even if noise does advance a consistent and desirable political agenda, according to the above theory noise occupies a critical position because of its non-instrumental nature. As Kant claims that 'beauty is an object's form of purposiveness in so far as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose' (Kant 1987: 84), Adorno makes the parallel assertion that 'in so far as a social function may be predicated to a work of art, it is the function of having no function' (Adorno 1998: 336). If we enlist noise in the campaign against instrumental rationality, however, noise itself becomes a tool. Noise only appeared to offer critical resistance because it presented a rare glimpse of a thing existing for its own sake, and therefore understanding it as a means to a social end strips it of even this value. As just another instrument, it can no longer model a non-instrumental relationship with an other.

It could be argued that noise has nothing to do with politics or critique. But this position would return us to two entwined questions: why do we listen to noise, and why do we theorise about it? I suspect we cannot answer these questions to any degree of satisfaction without invoking the idea of critique. Noise can critique theory just as theory critiques noise, but we cannot assume that noise currently holds any such power over theory. Doing so would revert to dogma, which is why I insist on the relevance of Adorno to these arguments. Adorno's studies of the non-identical begin with the drive to stay alive, follow the economy of ritual sacrifice into universal commodification, and land in the modern work of art. Adorno charts the movement of the non-identical through its historical conditions, so that even the dialectical method itself must lay its origins bare and 'in one final movement turn itself even against itself' (Adorno 1992: 406). Any philosophy that fails to do so 'will always sound to the subject like a transcendent dogma' (Adorno 1992: 406). The crises Adorno diagnoses arise historically, creating a sociological rather than a transcendental dilemma. Adorno's responses to concrete situations, namely negative dialectics and its preoccupation with the non-identical and the work of art, operate only because of and within this historical framework. As Peter Dews argues, 'pure singularity is itself an abstraction, the waste product of identity-thinking' that is only of philosophical value as a corrective counterpoint to modernity (Dews 1994: 109). The value of the other, the sublime, the negative, or the beautiful can only be meaningful within its context, and therefore formal deconstructive conceptions of these terms stand on tautologies. As Bernstein has written, 'conceptions of non-identity that forswear dependence on a sociologically informed analysis of modernity, that refuse the burden of self-reflection and the sacrifice of innocence', actually aggravate the situation since they become

'complicit with capital's sublimity in a way modernist art was not' (Bernstein 1992: 266). And as Adorno admonishes: 'Expressions of life that seemed exempt from the responsibility of thought, not only have an element of defiant silliness, of callous refusal to see, but directly serve their diametrical opposite' (Adorno 1974: 25–6). Thus we must theorise noise. The domination of all things by the pressure of instrumental reason causes us to crave the various forms of its opposite: freedom, non-violence, or particularity. A critical response does not consist of religiously looking to an unthinkable, but in questioning everything.

Noise is but one case demonstrating the crisis of modern art. The fact that art can criticise culture is itself socially determined, and therefore art's capacity for critique could have been lost. Art plays a critical role only because it offers a thing beyond concepts and free from desire to a world lacking these qualities. Considering the advance of capitalism and its tightening grip on culture, even the semblance of emancipatory potential Adorno attributes to art may be a thing of the past. Adorno himself noticed that art had 'grown old' (Adorno 1998: 476), and Bernstein has announced that '[o]ver the past two decades, art's liquidation has led to its critical moment to pass to philosophy' (Bernstein 1992: 263–4). But now even this second death of art is made glossy like Hollywood versions of disaster and apocalypse. The culture industry sells these death twitches of art to us as well. The death of art, like screaming Japanese musicians, is extreme and therefore cool.

Whether art can resist the commodification of particulars even from its enfranchised position will depend on the force of the objects produced more than the theories receiving them. It is possible that a new sound could strike our ear like a rumble of thunder to the pre-scientific mind. Regarding this, however, I am even less optimistic than even Adorno.

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