

The end of music?

An anthropology of Japanoise

by Edouard Degay Delpauch

In the 80's, a peculiar genre of underground music emerged: Japanoise—or Japanese Noise. Based on feedback, without melody nor structure, this genre is often perceived as the end of music. Drawing on the tools of media anthropology, David Novak traces the history of the construction of this genre.

This interview is published in partnership with *Volume! The Journal of Popular Music Studies*. A longer version of this interview will be available in French in the next issue of the journal¹, to be published on 11 December 2018.

Books & Ideas: In *Japanoise*, you describe the specific condition of Noise as not only distinguishing itself from other musical genres, but also as constantly opposed to music itself. Can you tell us a bit more about these dialectical oppositions surrounding Noise, and about the way they are manifested in particular experiences of sound?

David Novak: I often give talks about Noise in academic centers or in universities. I'll talk first about the globalization concept, about my ethnographic fieldwork. At that point, most people will be nodding their heads, to show that they understand. Then I'll play a Noise track. I usually don't play it very loud. But still, most people will back off, cover their ears, frown or grin. I'll be watching all the faces and I usually see the same kinds of reactions. At the end of my talk, there are usually two kinds of persons

¹ Volume, *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 15-1, "Varia", Ed. Mélanie Seteun, December 2018.

coming up to talk to me. The first type will come out and say, "You know, there's something I have to confess: I really don't like that sound. I'm open-minded, I listen to John Cage and everything, but I really can't listen to this." This reaction is resonant with the culture of listening in that context and the ways we are trained to appreciate sound. Noise destabilizes these norms and positionalities of listening, very viscerally. The second type of person are those who say, "I just want you to know that this sound changes my thinking and I really like it." Both types of people might be asking the same question: "What's going on with these artists that they would do this?" Whether they are interested or not, there is this sort of intense feeling of doubt and wonder: "Do people really listen to this?!" They'll say, "I never knew about this before." So the presentation of Noise here is about exposure to an emergent and unknown form of music, specifically as a new musical genre, but it is felt as a personal reaction to sound as much as a conceptual historical mode. They have just found out that, even if they hadn't heard of it, it exists: it is something real in the world, and as difficult as it may be, they begin by attempting to understand it as a musical form.

So if Noise really exists, how is it Music? There is a deep contradiction between the functional terms of genre used to describe it, and the excessive embodied reactions to the sonic experience. Merzbow, for example, is now usually described as a harsh noise artist and, in the program of the sound conference², Romain Perrot was described as a pioneer of the harsh noise wall. Using this vocabulary means adopting the ideology of genre: there are subgenres and pioneers of these specific subgenres. I do think that harsh noise wall is an identifiable sound within Noise, and that people can identify between kinds of Noise sounds. So, in terms of the larger discourse, these classifications allow us to refer to Noise as a musical genre, because people can identify a specific artist, or a specific sound; from there, they can say that this particular Noise is good or bad, and reintroduce all sort of questions that are essentially musical. But if Noise is just music, just another musical genre, why is it so special that it would create these kinds of extreme reactions in listeners? You know, if you are doing theoretical analysis of a musical style, in most Noise there's no rhythm, no melody, no structure of any kind. Any listener can immediately recognize the challenge that Noise represents to the fundamentals of stylistic progress in musical composition. And these structural absences are the ultimate features of the avant-garde ideology of modernist music. But I would say it's also almost impossible to take Noise seriously as a mode of

² This interview was conducted during the conference "Spectres de l'audible. Sound studies, cultures de l'écoute et arts sonores" (<https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/fr/activite/colloque/20161-spectres-de-laudible>), 8-9 June 2018.

art music. It is like the end of the line. In Alex Ross's book about 20th century music is called *The Rest Is Noise*³—though it doesn't touch on Noise as a genre per se—the word “noise” is used as a metaphorical dead-end for the advancement of musical history. In some ways this is a terribly romantic idea, very brutalist, very totalizing. That's why it's so broadly appealing as a concept—the end of history. And in many ways it is what postmodernists have been saying about the progress of music composition throughout the 20th century: that it is a progression toward noise, and that to invoke noise is to invoke the end of musical discourse.

David Novak

David Novak is Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His work draws on the tools of media studies, anthropology, ethnomusicology and cultural studies to explore the relationship between modern cultures and the circulation of musical media. He is the author of *Japanoise. Music at the Edge of Circulation*, an ethnography of the Japanese experimental scene. In this landmark book, he explores the way media circulation—cassette tape trades between Japan, Europe and North America—in a globalized context has shaped what has come to be known as a specific genre, Japanoise.

Books & Ideas: Japanese Noise is a very spectacular performance style, yet it was received in the United States almost exclusively through recordings. In Japanoise you refer to a North American Noise fan listening to the first Merzbow *harsh noise* classic, *Venereology*, saying that “[the album] was so loud [that], it produced a sensation of total panic when you put it on”. Is there an affect specific to Noise? And how can a recording be responsible for creating such an affect?

D.N.: Noise provokes a very visceral, emotional, raw and reactive mode of listening. So how can people have such an experience with just a recording? I wanted to ask that question in a way that broke away from the typical dialectic of musical expression, in which first you have the “real” live context, as opposed to the recording, which is relegated to a secondary level of materiality, a mimetic phenomenology. Because of what I was observing in this highly creative media circulation, I wanted to return the authority to the recording and look at the way recordings were primarily responsible

³ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise. Listening to the Twentieth Century*, Picador, 2008.

for creating the affect of Noise in live performance, and also for provoking an entire social imaginary of Japan among listeners who really had very little access to that culture. And then, of course, these foreign reactions to both mediated and live sounds fed back into the creative conditions of these media producers in Japan, who were now working with a new genre concept (Japanoise) and found themselves embedded in a new circulatory relationship.



Incapacitants vs. the crowd at 2007 No Fun Fest in Brooklyn (photo: David Novak)

I began to understand the sound of Noise as a relational phenomenon of circulation, which fed back between experiences of “liveness” and “deadness”. For me, deadness was a specific mode of mediated materiality that is clearly exemplified in Noise, but it is also something I wanted to show was general to the whole social uptake of musical media. First, liveness is something that can be inscribed in recordings, and listeners do perceive as a sonic quality of space, because the representation of space is a very important way in which cultural origins were communicated through recording. When you listen to recording, you can imagine a space and you can imagine the social and historical context in which it was recorded. And the imagination of other places, people, and times is facilitated by this. On this point, I was very influenced by Louise Meintjes’s discussion of liveness as a mode of representing social space in sound recordings, as well as Philip Auslander’s conceptualization of mediatized performance.⁴ Field recording is a powerful example of the mediation of liveness and its power to realize cultural imaginaries in the mimesis of recorded sound: the “field,” of course, must come before the recording, and then, after you record the field you can recreate it, reimagine the space, come into new contact with the sound as a social environment. In contrast, when you describe a sound as “dead”, it’s a technical, not an

⁴ Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa. Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*, Duke University Press, 2003. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Routledge, 1999.

aesthetic or a moral assignation: it means that this recorded sound doesn't carry information about a spatial source or performance context of the recording. And as Noise is the opposite of music, deadness is the opposite of liveness, in terms of communicating about spatial and social origins. This was a form that wanted to be experienced outside of history, outside of place, and which deliberately made it difficult to attach to a social imaginary.

And technically, on the level of sonic production, deadness means that the sound is in a different relation with place because there is no reverberation. Most Noise recordings at the time were made through what they called “direct injection”: the electronic source—a contact microphone or some output like a feedback loop from a mixing board—was plugged directly into the recorder; there was no microphone capturing vibrations in the air, no ambience. Even with an uninterrupted live performance captured in situ, a dead recording doesn't sound live: it feels like your senses are interfaced with a technological system. This deadness cultivates a different mode of listening, where your senses are in direct contact with the sound. Talking with Noise listeners, I heard that feeling described a lot. When asked “how does this recording sound?” people would relate their physical response when listening. “I felt my teeth were crunching”; they tell us something about their body reacting to sound. It was more as if they were describing being electrocuted than being in a dialogue with an artwork. So that feeling of deadness is the affect that surrounds the perceptual interface with music technology, as remote listeners try to create a point of direct phenomenological access to sound experience in a transnational field of recorded media.

Books & Ideas: The concept of feedback is central in your work, and is used both as an acoustic notion—the sonic phenomenon, also called “Larsen effect”, that occurs when an audio output is fed back into the input—and as a way to describe subjectivity within a global communication system. Could you explain how these two aspects of the same word describe the ways Noise is created and circulates?

D.N.: When I started doing fieldwork, I recognized immediately that feedback was central to the sound making practices of Noise musicians and that as a sound, feedback was both a tool and a core signifier in this art world. Of course when you hear the sound of feedback, you imagine a failure or breakdown of some sort. But it also seemed to be a good metaphor for the creative subjectivities generated by these complex networks of musical globalization, and the ways in which these miscommunications

and misrepresentations of musical forms became productive of new transcultural scenes and relations. But first I had to tie this broader framing to the specific uses of sound. I could only think of feedback as a theoretical mode once I had understood how it was felt and used in the technical systems of Noise: as a sound that comes from the output of a mixer, fed back into the input ad infinitum, until the sound of a feedback loop emerges, and is then manipulated by different modulators within this feedback circuit.

Feedback, like musical or social expression, is usually considered communicational. I give a paper, you give me feedback on my paper; my presentation is the thing, you give your feedback “on” it. That's not necessarily a dialogical model of communication, but it is a model based in the presumption that communication is the main goal of connection. I was interested in that idea that feedback starts with the potentials of connection, but that there are also some problems with the equality of the communication built into the system, which reveal how the failure of dialogue becomes central to the whole network. I wanted to show that these “productive miscommunications” could be fundamental to the way we think about dialogue and intercultural communication on a global scale. In the rubric of feedback I was looking at the way misinformation also generates something and enables contact despite a lack of mutual understanding, which is a different and perhaps more diffused point about sources and original meanings. So *Japanoise* is of course a very clear-cut case of cultural miscommunication and contested representations of musical history, but I found it also to be a generative situation that pointed to new forms of global culture, and new ways of being musical within a mediated network. The ethical problems and ironies within this situation were obviously compelling and important to understanding the conditions of intersubjectivity and global relationality in such a disjunct field as “*Japanoise*.” But as the ethnographic work kept cycling back to these radical encounters with feedback in the experience of Noise, I couldn't give up on recognizing the creative power that burst forth when a sound was separated from its source, or when a sign submerged in one context appeared elsewhere in another loop, without translation or explanation.



Cassette from Generator Sound Art archive (photo: David Novak)

Books & Ideas: For Noise performers, technology is important in the sense that Noise is often built on the sonic accidents created by misusing machines. Can you tell us a bit more about that relation to technology in Noise music?

D.N.: What I found to be general to Noise musicians in all cultural contexts was that, even if they used technology all the time, the musicians were very hostile to the idea that they were “electronic” musicians, even if some of them loved electronic music. There is a sort of “soft” knowledge of Noise’s technological production, where performers don’t want to know how the technology is working. In a modernist sensibility, technology is generally perceived as a source of dehumanizing violence that art must resist, even as people inevitably absorb its effects. Of course, Japan is not the only country involved in this dialectic— Americans, Europeans and many others invested in the ironic cultural projects of global modernity that demand resistance to their own techniques and procedures. This created a fertile ground for some kind of transnational subjectivity to form around Japanoise despite few other resources for intercultural communication. The aesthetic came from a shared technocultural critique —the idea that the things people create with technology are somehow supposed to be radically disconnected from our humanity. All of these are very general principles for modernist societies and not just found in Japanese modernity, although Japan’s postwar history might have helped crystallize some of these problems. Among Noise musicians, I found that fear and desire around technology to be incredibly universalistic, humanistic, and more or less typical of an emergent global aesthetic, but

ironically, it was being called “Japanese” all the time. Japan is supposed to be hyper-technological, and technology is supposed to be beyond culture, so much so that Japan was often considered as an ideal and inauthentic postmodern society that has no historical memory. So Japanoise was “good to think with” in terms of these meta-problems of globalization, but also on the ground of local culture, since with the foreign framing of Japanoise, many musicians had to treat themselves as Japanese for the first time.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 29 November 2018.